

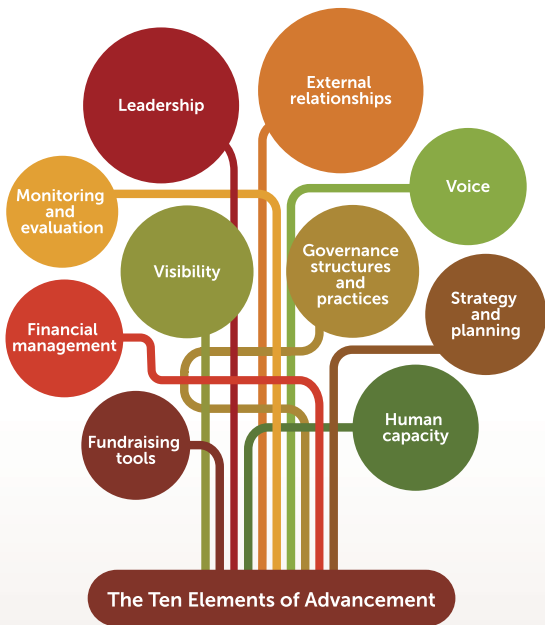


ASK Inyathelo Pocket Guide

# Proposal Writing

by Shelagh Gastrow

# Inyathelo's Advancement Framework



Inyathelo defines Advancement as a systematic and integrated approach to building and managing external relationships with key constituencies and stakeholders in order to attract support.

# Introduction

Experience has shown us that a proposal does not stand on its own, but is part of a wider process that involves building relationships with potential supporters.

**A proposal submitted to a donor without any prior connection to the organisation; knowledge of its work; or relationship with its leadership is not likely to gain financial support.**

Sending proposals to a list of donors with whom the organisation has no pre-existing relationship is often referred to as “spray and pray” and is considered the least successful way to fundraise.

- The proposal should be **part of a wider process of relationship-building** and should only be submitted when there has already been some contact with the potential donor.
- The organisation should **research which donors share its concerns**. For example, a donor that is interested in environmental issues may not necessarily be receptive to a proposal about a feeding scheme.
- Once the organisation has identified possible donors that share its concerns, it needs to develop a plan for **creating awareness about the organisation’s work**. Awareness of its work can be raised in various ways, such as sending the annual report to the donor; arranging to meet the donor; or inviting the donor to visit a project.

**It is only when there is some kind of relationship with a donor that a request for support is likely to succeed. The donor needs to feel confident that the organisation shares its values, that there is common ground in what both are trying to achieve, and that the organisation has the ability to deliver on its promises before it commits funding.**

## **Know where the proposal fits**

- **The best time to send a proposal is after a donor has asked for it.** By this time there should have been some contact with the donor and discussion about the organisation's work and its projects.
- **The donor should have indicated its areas of interest and concern.** For example, how long the proposal should be; the budget that it can afford; the date of any relevant events such as board meetings; and any other important technical matters. Such knowledge greatly assists with the writing of the proposal as **the document essentially should be a reflection of the relationship between the prospective donor and the organisation and its expression of interest in building a partnership between them.**

## Make sure each proposal is donor-specific

- While it is useful for an organisation to have a general fundraising proposal available that outlines its projects clearly and details its plans and budget, **each proposal sent out should meet the specific needs of the target donor.**
- It is important therefore to **find out from each donor exactly what format it requires for the proposal.** For example, some donors want to receive proposals online, others have specific questions, headings and budgetary formats that they want followed. It is imperative to **meet the donor's exact specifications to ensure funding success.** A donor is less likely to read a general proposal when it has requested that the organisation answers specific questions and is therefore less likely to give it funding.

**While most of the organisation's fundraising proposals are based on similar information, each should be adapted to suit the specific interests and requirements of the target donor.**



Each proposal should meet the needs of the target donor

## What to do if there are no guidelines

- **When no guidelines have been provided, it is best to develop a short, succinct proposal.** Be clear about what the organisation plans to do and what it expects to achieve. A proposal can be as short as a simple letter or as long as an Olympic bid, but donors do not wish to pore through unnecessary pages of detail. Be aware that the organisation is probably competing with many others who will state their intentions precisely.
- **The proposal should be written in a formal way that is user-friendly and easy to read.** Rather than long, rambling sentences, the writer can use bullet points which are easy to scan, or graphs to show statistics rather than writing out long explanations.
- **Each section should have a clear heading so that the reader can check quickly what is in the document and focus on any particular aspect that they want to read.**
- **Most importantly, the proposal should reflect the passion that the organisation has for its work.** There should be some sense of urgency and excitement about what it can achieve.

## USER FRIENDLY PROPOSALS



Use bullet points which are easy to scan, or graphs to show statistics

## What most donors want to know

- The **need that the organisation is meeting** in society and how it intends to meet this need (“statement of need” or “problem statement”).
- The **overall aim** of the organisation/project.
- The specific objectives of the organisation’s work.
- **A description of the work:**
  - What it will do (outputs)
  - What it expects the result of the work to be (outcomes)
  - How the results will be measured
  - The likely long-term impact of the work
- **Timelines.**
- **Personnel.**
- Whether there are any **partners**.
- The **history of the organisation**.
- How the project will be **evaluated**.
- Whether there are any **other donors**.
- **Budget.**

**Sometimes donors may ask for other documents so that they can be sure that the organisation is a legal entity and sustainable.** These could include:

- The organisation's general budget;
- The Non-profit Organisation (NPO) registration;
- Founding constitution or trust document;
- Tax exemption certificate from the South African Revenue Service (SARS);
- Audited financial reports;
- References from beneficiaries.

**The most important parts of the proposal are the statement of need/problem statement; the aims and objectives of the project; and the planned outputs, outcomes and impact of the project.**

**These components will indicate to the donor whether the organisation has a good grasp of the problem it is addressing and what it plans to do.**



**Does the organisation have a good grasp of the problem it is addressing and what it plans to do**



## Key points to explore before writing the proposal

- Check what format the donor requires.
- Check that the prospective donor is interested in the work that the organisation does.
- Check with the prospective donor when the deadline is.
- Make sure that the proposal writer is clear about what the organisation plans to achieve and its aims.
- Confirm the deadline for the proposal with the prospective donor.

## What is a statement of need?

- This part of the proposal is the most important for the organisation to conceptualise and write. It comes first in the proposal and is the key sales pitch. **It is a description of the need that the organisation is meeting in society. It is the central matter of concern and it is the main issue that will attract donors who have been identified as being interested in the same problem.**
- **When the statement of need is drafted, it should preferably include some key facts and statistics such as “There are 500 homeless children in the streets of Cape Town”.** This will catch the attention of prospective donors. Even better is if you can add information from authorities such as “According to the Department of Social Development, there are 500 homeless children in the streets of Cape Town.” As this is your sales pitch, you could add

more passion to the statement by stating: “According to the most recent research undertaken by the Department of Social Development, there are 500 malnourished and homeless children in the streets of Cape Town who suffer from a range of infectious diseases, abuse and the risk of rape.” Your organisation could then add a brief description of how it plans to meet the identified need: “In order to meet this need, XYZ organisation’s acclaimed programme will offer these children the opportunity of safe havens during the night including ablution facilities; a nutritious daily meal; medical evaluation and treatment and, where possible, reintegration into their families and the schooling system.”

- **Once an organisation is clear about the problem it is addressing and what it plans to do, this statement can be used in all its documentation** such as its plans, proposals, letters, brochures and annual report.
- **This is essentially a strategic statement – it gives the basic reason why the organisation exists and what it intends to do to manage the external environment; for example what interventions it seeks to put in place for it to change society.** It is therefore critical that the organisation is clear about its purpose or strategy and that the statement of need emerges from such strategic thinking.

**Sometimes people confuse the solution with the need. For example, some proposals might state that the need in the above case is for a shelter. However, shelter is a solution to the need to**

address the social problem of homeless children.

It is important to understand that donors are more likely to make a contribution to solving the problem of homeless children than to providing a shelter for its own sake. This connection has to be made in the opening statement of your proposal.

## What is the difference between an aim and an objective?

- Aims and objectives are **sometimes described generally as “goals”** and some donors will ask about the goals of a project or organisation. It is best to describe both so that there is clarity about what the organisation does and how it does it.
- Most organisations have gone through some form of “strategic planning” and have developed **a vision and a mission** for the organisation.
- The **vision** is generally related to the long-term aims of the organisation: for example, “A world without poverty”.
- The **mission** generally gives some idea of how the organisation plans to achieve the vision: for example, “By feeding children properly”.

The same applies to aims and objectives.

**Aims** are the overarching goals and are usually abstract and conceptual and **relate to the vision of the organisation**. They deal with the **big picture and what change in society or the world the organisation would like to see**. For example the aim of a project could be **“Improvement of school nutrition”**.

**Objectives** are **more specific, measurable** and **within a timeframe** and **generally relate to the organisation’s mission**. For example objectives could be “(a) Establishment of a school feeding programme at three early childhood development centres in Stellenbosch; and (b) Training programmes for mothers relating to good nutrition.”

**The objectives should state the specific activities that the organisation has planned to achieve its goals and precisely how these will be implemented. The tangible and specific outcomes of these action plans should be stated.**



*They are the overarching goals and are usually abstract and conceptual*

## What are outcomes and outputs?

Every donor would like to know exactly what the organisation will do with the funds they are contributing.

**Outputs and outcomes are what the organisation expects to happen as a result of the funding.**

- **Outputs describe exactly what the organisation achieved**, such as “Daily provision of milk and peanut butter sandwiches to 280 children at three early childhood development centres in Stellenbosch; six parent workshops attended by 43 parents in Stellenbosch.” **Outputs are immediate, specific and measurable products.**
- **Outcomes are less tangible and more long-term.** If the example above is used, the outcomes of the feeding scheme and the associated workshops are likely to be better nourished children and better informed parents. **Often systems for monitoring outcomes need to be created so that the organisation can describe the effect of its activities to donors.** For example, monitoring of the nutritional status of children can provide specific indicators that can be reported to donors.

## What is impact?

- Donors sometimes ask what the expected impact of the organisation or project will be on the beneficiary group or community. **The impact is directly related to the aims of the project and is linked to the big picture and changes in society that the organisation is trying to achieve.**
- In the case of the feeding scheme, the impact would be how the project has contributed towards poverty alleviation. Has it made a difference to the families involved?

**Impact is generally a long-term assessment and often a consulting evaluator is brought in to assess it. However, in the proposal the organisation should indicate what long term impact could be expected from its intervention.**



Impact is linked to the changes in society that the organisation is trying to achieve

## What are indicators?

Some donors may ask the organisation to supply indicators against which they can *measure* its success. Some of the indicators that they may ask for in a report on the funding are as follows:

- **Output indicators measure the number and details of the activities that have taken place.** If the organisation commits to running ten workshops and then only delivers five, this shows that it did not achieve its commitments.
- **Outcome indicators measure the extent to which the objectives have been met.** In the case of the feeding scheme, these indicators would show how many children were healthier as a result of the milk and sandwiches. It is important in this case to monitor how many children received feeding and link this to their school records.
- **Impact indicators measure the extent to which the aims of the project have been achieved.** These are the longer-term aims and are broader than the outcome indicators.

(FORD FOUNDATION: A FEW TIPS ON "BENCHMARKS")

## Tips on budgeting

The most important thing about budgeting is that the organisation must accurately account for real organisational costs, or the real costs of a project, or both. Sometimes the budget looks very high, but it is important to be realistic and not to underestimate the real costs. At the same time, it is important not to claim large amounts that are clearly unlikely to be required.

- **The budget should have clear line items that reflect all expected expenditure.** It should show the donor how much funding is required and how much is already raised.
- **To avoid having the donor come back for more information, it is useful to attach notes to the budget that explain exactly how its sums were calculated.** For example, if there is a line item called “Air Travel”, then it is important to explain how many flights are required, what they cost and how many people will be travelling. For example:

***Air Travel:* This is calculated at R2000 a flight x 6 flights for 3 people = R36 000.**

For further information, see pocket book on *Budgeting for Sustainability*.



## What are logical frameworks? (Log frames)

- There are donors who may ask the organisation to complete a log frame. **This matrix gives a quick outline of what the organisation commits to achieving with the funds available.**
- While it can be a useful tool, it unfortunately **measures only the minimum value of the programme as it cannot reflect the passion, commitment, social capital, and community values** that are essential contributions to work in the non-profit sector. However, it is important for every organisation to understand what is expected in a log frame. The example below offers a simple outline of the kinds of information that may be required in a log frame.

Objectives	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes
To provide nutritious food to school children	Train teachers and mothers	Trained 18 teachers and 43 parents at six workshops	Greater understanding of nutrition among parents and teachers
	Provide daily meals to schools in Stellenbosch	Daily meals provided to three schools on daily basis : Total 600 meals per day x 200 days = 12 000 meals	Improved school performance among 37% of students receiving feeding

## Some tips on proposal writing

- **Be positive: state clearly what the organisation will do** and avoid negativity.
- **Make the proposal user-friendly** by employing the following devices:
  - **Graphs** can show in a quarter of a page what it would normally take a full page to explain.
  - **Bullet points** are easy to scan and the reader can quickly pick up the point of the paragraph.
  - **Clear headings** lead the reader's eye to the critical paragraphs in which they are interested.
  - **Space between paragraphs** makes the different thoughts in the proposal easier to understand. Too many lines of print on top of each other is tiring and confusing for the reader.
  - **Number the pages** for easy reference.
- **Give precise facts and figures.** Rather than saying "Many people", write "Four hundred people" OR rather than saying "Substantial effect", write "50% of school children (200 children) will be better fed."



**PRECISE  
INFORMATION**  
Provide exact facts and figures

## What is an executive summary?

The executive summary is the most important page of the whole proposal. **It records in brief (not more than one page) a summary of the proposal.**

It is the organisation's key sales pitch and the page that most donors will look at first, before deciding whether to read further.

It is therefore critical that the organisation is very clear about its **aims and objectives so that they can be summarised succinctly in the executive summary.**

The executive summary **should be written after the contents of the proposal have been carefully considered** and the document has been completed.

**It should contain, in brief, the following key elements of the proposal:**

- The basic **statement of need/societal problem** that is being addressed
- How the organisation **plans to address the problem**
- Who the **organisation is (short history and achievements)**
- **Why the donor is the right partner**
- **Budget summary**

As a reference for the reader, it is useful if the key points in the executive summary are written in the same order as they are in the proposal. The writer could ask someone who is not involved with the organisation for their opinion of the executive summary, to check whether it is likely to attract the donor to continue reading the proposal.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*It records in brief a summary of the proposal*

## Does the proposal need a covering page?

- It is useful to have a covering page to the proposal that can provide a quick reference for the potential donor.
- The page should be neat and professionally laid out with a clear title.
- Clip art and fancy borders only confuse the reader, so should be avoided.

An example of a cover page is as follows:

Organisation

Logo

### **XYZ FEEDING SCHEME**

Proposal to

**ABC FOUNDATION**

For support for

Nutrition Programme in Stellenbosch

1 July 2011

Contact

Executive Director: Jane Nkabinde

XYZ Feeding Scheme, 23a Smith Street,  
Stellenbosch 8010

PO Box 439, Stellenbosch 8011

Tel: +27 21 888 4559 Fax: +27 21 888 4558

[www.xyzfeed.org.za](http://www.xyzfeed.org.za)

email : [jnkabinde@xyzfeed.org.za](mailto:jnkabinde@xyzfeed.org.za)

## Tips for completing the proposal

When the proposal, executive summary and covering page are complete, the writer should check for any errors or changes that need to be made. The following steps are helpful:

- **Spell check** the document
- **Proof read** the document. Sometimes the spell-check tool in word processing programmes doesn't pick up errors. For example, it cannot tell the difference between the words "from" and "form".
- **Check grammar and tense.** Sometimes people confuse the past and present tense in proposals.
- **Look again at whether the document is user-friendly** or is it still too complicated and confusing.
- **Can the organisation deliver on all it says it can?**
- **Is the format appropriate** for the needs of the donor?
- **Is the budget accurate?**
- **Are all the required attachments available** as requested by the donor?



## PROPOSAL COMPLETION TIPS

The writer should check for any errors or changes that need to be made

## Is a covering letter necessary?

It is very important for a covering letter to be written to the potential donor. It provides proof that the project is supported by the leadership of the organisation. This letter should be written on the organisation's letterhead.

The letterhead should include:

- The organisation's address
- The organisation's telephone and fax numbers
- A list of the organisation's trustees or directors
- The organisation's NPO registration number
- The trust or registration number of a non-profit company

**The covering letter should be written by the Executive Director of the organisation or the Chair of the board. It should contain on one page:**

- Summary of the proposal with a focus on the statement of need and what the organisation plans to do to meet that need.
- The amount requested.
- Email details of the Executive Director in case the donor would like to contact him/her for more information.

**It should not be too formal and should refer to any connections that the organisation may have previously had with the donor, especially if the proposal has been requested by the potential donor.**

## Sending the proposal

- **It is important to find out from the donor how they would like to receive the proposal.** Some donors only work electronically, so it is important to email it to them. Others like to receive hard copy documents. If a hard copy is requested, it is best to hand-deliver or courier the document so that the organisation can be sure that it is delivered.
- **Always make sure that the organisation retains a copy of what was submitted** so that it can serve as a reference if there are queries, or can be used later to guide the implementation of the project as necessary.
- **The proposal is the basis for the organisation's agreement with the donor** and is a key reference document.



*It is important to find out from the donor how they would like to receive the proposal*



## Conclusion

**The proposal is the written manifestation of your relationship with a potential donor. It should respond to agreements and discussions the organisation has had with the donor.**

When it is written without any prior contact, it is important to ensure that all the required information is included.

The proposal is the most important document in securing the organisation's funding and the process outlined above should ensure that it gains attention and attracts the donor, while reflecting accurately what the organisation would like to do in order to effect social change.

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