

Editing Grant Proposals

How to Reduce Length Without Sacrificing Content

Stan J. Backs, MSc, PChem, CPE
SynchroComm Inc.

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 1

Two stories

- ▶ A Department Chair with no time applying to the Basic Innovation Generational Equipment and Educational Development (BIGNEED) Fund
- ▶ And...

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 2

Two stories

- ▶ The new Assistant Professor with no money applying to the Pre-Tenure Development and Qualification (PDQ) Fund

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 3

The pain points

- ▶ Both proposals have come in too long, and these grant proposals have strict length restrictions:
 - Page limits (all attachments)
 - Word limits (the BIGNEED forms)
 - Character limits (the PDQ forms, and the limits included spaces)

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 4

The pain points

- ▶ Both proposals also have major problems with formatting and readability

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 5

The pain points

- ▶ The Chair is an expert at writing proposals but has no time to fix it herself
- ▶ The new professor is a rising star and his English is good, but he is still learning how to write winning proposals and needs help

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 6

What to do?

- ▶ Call in the grant editors!

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 7

The grant editors' checklist

- ▶ These editors use a checklist (Table 1):
 - The first column lists the methods used
 - The other three columns show the targeted length limits

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 8

First of all...

- ▶ Read the instructions!
- ▶ Ask for access to the forms

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 9

Page layout

- ▶ Check paper size
- ▶ Adjust margins and gutter (cm vs. inches?)
- ▶ Add temporary line numbers?

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 10

Headers and footers

- ▶ Include required text only
- ▶ Limit to a single line
- ▶ Adjust white space
- ▶ Remove text boxes (for page numbers)
- ▶ Use contrasting font and font size
- ▶ Check for consistency across all sections

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 11

Hidden characters

- ▶ Headers and footers:
 - Remove blank lines
 - Remove extra line spacing
- ▶ Remove blank lines in body text and use styles instead
- ▶ Remove white space after page breaks

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 12

Hidden characters

- ▶ Add blank lines in forms (for readability)
- ▶ Check page breaks and section breaks
- ▶ Delete extra hard or soft returns (from emailed text)
- ▶ Delete extra spaces and tabs

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 13

Styles

- ▶ Apply consistent formatting using “a family of styles” (Appendix)
- ▶ Remove unwanted remains (Styles pane)

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 14

Styles: Fonts

- ▶ Choose a common compact font: Times New Roman?
- ▶ Change bold to italic
- ▶ Reduce the use of italic?
- ▶ Avoid using all caps

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 15

Styles: Fonts

- ▶ Convert raised or lowered characters
- ▶ Eliminate reduced font sizes and condensed fonts (not allowed)
- ▶ Convert “decorative” fonts to normal fonts (with caution!)

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 16

Styles: Paragraph formatting

- ▶ Use:
 - Left-justified text (ragged right edge)
 - Paragraph indentation
 - Run-in headings

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 17

Styles: Paragraph formatting

- ▶ Check uses of “Keep with next” and “Keep lines together”
- ▶ Turn off “Widow/Orphan control”?
- ▶ Use single line spacing, not the minimum allowed line spacing

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 18

Styles: Lists

- ▶ Favour bulleted lists over numbered lists
- ▶ Delete terminal punctuation and “and”
- ▶ Reduce the widths of indents
- ▶ Avoid Roman numerals: use letters and Arabic numerals
- ▶ Minimize the punctuation of list numbering

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 19

Styles: Equations

- ▶ Convert display equations to in-line?
- ▶ Convert stacked fractions to in-line?
- ▶ Close up common short equations?
E.g., $N = 10$ to $N=10$

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 20

Styles: References

- ▶ Use numbered reference lists and superscript numerals for in-text citations
- ▶ Delete spaces before citation lists
- ▶ Delete spaces and brackets in citation lists
- ▶ Use ranges of numbers in citation lists
- ▶ Use Vancouver style (Uniform Requirements or ICMJE) in reference lists

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 21

Abbreviations

- ▶ Minimize:
 - Honorifics
 - Periods in abbreviations
- ▶ Abbreviate:
 - University names
 - "University"

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 22

Abbreviations

- ▶ Abbreviate:
 - Multiples of money; e.g. \$3.5M and \$276K
 - Figure to Fig.
 - Terms used frequently in the proposal
 - Widely known abbreviations (without defining)

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 23

Other options

- ▶ Change "which" to "that" where possible
- ▶ Use shorter spellings: enrol vs. enroll
- ▶ Delete the serial comma

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 24

Objects: Figures, tables, and text boxes

- ▶ Optimize:
 - Positions on the page (margins; see Appendix)
 - White space below titles and above captions (proximity)
 - Text wrapping margins (e.g., "Tight")
 - Width of object vs. width of wrapping text
 - Contrast of font type and size vs. body text

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 25

Objects: Figures

- ▶ Optimize readability
- ▶ Group small figures and captions
- ▶ Reduce punctuation of figure numbering

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 26

Objects: Tables

- ▶ Use a minimalist table style
- ▶ Optimize full-width tables
- ▶ Optimize column widths

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 27

Objects: Tables

- ▶ Shorten column heads
- ▶ Reduce widths of tabs and indents
- ▶ Reduce interior cell margins

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 28

Objects: Text Boxes

- ▶ Reduce interior text box margins
- ▶ Optimize full-width text boxes

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 29

Hyphenation

- ▶ Insert:
 - Optional hyphens (bad line breaks)
 - No-width optional breaks (websites)
- ▶ Close up two-word phrases or hyphenated words (check current usage)
- ▶ Remove hyphens after most prefixes
- ▶ Turn on end-of-line hyphenation?

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 30

Stylistic editing

- ▶ Example tasks:
 - Reduce repetition
 - Fix bad line breaks
 - Target short final lines of paragraphs
 - "Omit unnecessary words."

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 31

Appendix: A family of styles

- ▶ Build a family of styles to
 - Make font changes quick and easy
 - Ensure consistent formatting
 - Minimize wasted space
 - Ensure good readability

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 32

Outcomes

- ▶ For both proposals, the editors
 - Managed to reduce the length (with room to spare for author changes) in all sections
 - Improved the flow and the logic (sometimes adding, rearranging, or deleting sentences and even paragraphs)
 - Improved the formatting and the readability
 - Fixed obvious errors and inconsistencies

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 33

Outcomes

- ▶ In addition, the editors
 - Queried all changes that might have changed the intended meaning
 - Commented extensively on their methods
 - And...

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 34

Outcomes

Met their deadlines

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 35

Real sources of research funding

- ▶ NSERC – Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council
- ▶ CIHR – Canadian Institutes of Health Research
- ▶ SSHRC – Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
- ▶ CFI – Canada Foundation for Innovation
- ▶ CRC – Canada Research Chairs
- ▶ CERC – Canada Excellence Research Chairs
- ▶ Various field-specific federal funding sources
- ▶ Provincial funding sources
- ▶ Numerous foundations

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 36

Questions or comments?

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 37

Thank You

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 38

Further information

- ▶ Stan J. Backs
- ▶ SynchroComm Inc.
- ▶ 13 Laydon Drive, St. Albert, AB T8N 2N1
- ▶ 780-908-8863
- ▶ stan@stanbacks.com

© SynchroComm Inc. 2018 39
