

Rhetorics of Proposal Writing: Lessons for Pedagogy in Research and Real-World Practice

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Abstract

Proposals are ubiquitous documents with challenges beyond the writing task itself, such as project management, strategic development, and research. Reporting on proposal instruction research in other fields and the results of an interview study with proposal writers, this article argues for a shift in how proposals are taught and conceptualized. By coaching students on the wide range of rhetorical practices that proposals require rather than how to produce proposal documents, technical and professional communication instruction can better prepare future communicators to manage and produce competitive proposals and more actively participate in these important efforts in the community, industry, and academy.

Keywords

proposal writing, pedagogy, professional communication, technical communication, rhetoric

Introduction

As three professionals who all consider ourselves as proposal writers, we have all written proposals for a range of purposes in recent months: a proposal to fund a research study, a proposal to win new business with a government agency, and

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proposal to sustain an existing community engagement project on a university campus. Although we all produced the same deliverable—a proposal that outlined a plan for action, a cost for that plan, and an argument about why it should be funded—all three of those documents served and were produced as a part of entirely different rhetorical situations. Sometimes, the proposal resulted from a sole proposal writer's effort. Sometimes, the proposal writing happened in a large team where "writing" was a relatively narrow task, confined to editing and connecting solicitation requirements to themes and strategies developed by non-writers. Sometimes, proposal writing was rushed, frantic, and completed at the last minute. At other times, it was slow and methodical and completed in shared documents with collaborators in other locations over the course of many weeks or months. Furthermore, none of the documents looked, worked, or behaved the same way within their organizational contexts. Some guidelines were strict and fixed, and the actual work, service, or product being proposed lived within a complex package of ancillary materials. Others were open, amorphous, or creative.

This range of experiences reflects what we observed time and time again while we conducted the research for this project: As ubiquitous as proposals are, they are rarely completed the same way twice, and more significantly, the role of writing and the writer is always shifting throughout the development process—sometimes exhaustive and extensive, sometimes relegated to "translating" requirements, and sometimes sidelined entirely as an afterthought. Yet as we compared these experiences to information from textbook materials on proposal writing, we noticed a disconnect between what we typically experienced as writers and the scenarios presented in instructional materials for students in technical and professional communication classes.

In this article, we argue for a shift in how teachers and researchers in technical and professional communication conceptualize proposals, offering strategies for moving away from form-based discussions toward more productive rhetorical ones. Our research finds that the majority of textbooks and scholarly publications in technical and professional communication conceptualize the proposal as a distinct *document*—that "proposal writing" is a part of a tangible, material practice of producing text, often compliant with a solicitation or Request for Proposals (RFP). Although the field of technical and professional communication has long moved away from form-based definitions of technical, professional, and workplace documents, our research found that formal instruction and conceptualization of proposals continue to reify primarily form-based practices associated with proposal writing. Although many of these practices and tactics are important and useful, our findings demonstrate that new approaches to the teaching of proposal writing can offer students a more realistic, rhetorically informed approach to proposal writing that will serve them in the workplace. As such, the recommendations in this article seek to transform the tacit knowledge of experienced proposal writers into explicit, actionable learning opportunities.

We begin by reviewing the current literature on proposal writing in technical and professional communication research and textbooks as well as research and findings from other fields that write proposals. Then, using evidence and discussion from a study of practicing proposal writers, we identify some key gaps between how proposals and proposal writing are understood in technical and professional communication materials versus how they operate in real-world environments. Finally, we identify ways to address the gaps between real-world practices and pedagogical materials on proposal writing through research and pedagogy moving forward.

How Is Proposal Writing Studied and Taught?

Proposals, and the funding they mediate, drive many parts of the corporate, academic, and nonprofit worlds. Success in this arena can promise wide-reaching opportunities, heightening the stakes when it comes to training competent, ethical, and expedient proposal writers. Understanding how we teach, study, and assess our teaching of proposal writing as technical and professional communication scholars is essential for understanding current practices, outcomes, and needs. In our discussion to follow, we review recent scholarly literature and textbook instructions on proposal writing, assessing themes and gaps across these approaches.

Technical and Professional Communication Research on Proposal Writing Instruction

Proposal writing (or grant writing, as it is often termed) is often part of a larger course in technical and professional communication (Kimball, 2017; Ross, 2014; Spilka, 2009). Research on course design finds that there are not many courses solely dedicated to teaching this important area of technical and professional communication (Blankenship, Jones, & Lovett, 2010; Walsh, Bonner, Springer, Lalasz, & Ives, 2013). Technical and professional communication researchers have analyzed course syllabi and assignments and have articulated the need to redress the limited spaces in which proposals are taught by ensuring courses more fully explore proposal writing through active and practical experiences. The importance of realism in the teaching and writing of proposals is a focus of research conducted by Wahlstrom (2002), Cargile-Cook (2014), and Ding (2008), particularly in her article “The Use of Cognitive and Social Apprenticeship to Teach a Disciplinary Genre: Initiation of Graduate Students into NIH Grant Writing.”

Ding’s (2008) work offers one of the most useful sustained discussions on the practice and pedagogy of proposal writing. In this study, Ding examines not a writing course, but a course designed for scientists to become initiated into grant writing. In this setting, “grant writing” is not the singular act of producing a

deliverable; rather, grant writing is a general indoctrination into the process of developing research and documentation for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). This study reveals two important findings for proposal writing: First, that apprenticeship and mentorship are key to developing proposals and learning the proposal process, and second, that a genre-system approach, rather than a genre-only approach, is a more comprehensive way of studying the proposal and thus teaching it in other environments. Crucially, Ding's findings offer a set of possibilities for studying and teaching the proposal in technical and professional communication classrooms based on an apprenticeship model activity and a genre-system approach to understanding proposal writing as a process rather than document-based outcome.

Instructional Material and Textbooks in Technical and Professional Communication

For this component of our study, we conducted a close analysis of six technical and professional communication texts: *Technical Communication* (four texts, all with the same name, by Anderson, 2010; Lannon & Gurak, 2013; Markel, 2012; and Pfeiffer & Adkins, 2013), *Technical Communication Today* (Johnson-Sheehan, 2012), and *Writing That Works* (Oliu, Brusaw, & Alred, 2013). We also examined the book *Writing Proposals* by Johnson-Sheehan (2002), because it is written specifically for students of technical and professional communication and designed to teach proposal writing and development. Overall, we found two themes across the textbooks we analyzed.

1. Textbooks offer *rhetorical advice* about proposals, describing them as persuasive documents that must be attentive to the audience and the need the proposal is meant to address.
2. Textbooks offer *practical advice* about proposals, which emphasize the multiple modes of communication required in a proposal as well as the basics of proposal components and the proposal process (identifying, reading, and responding to a solicitation; modulating texts and projects to an audience; and producing ethical, impactful results or changes).

All of the textbooks described the rhetoric of proposal writing in terms of its persuasive functions, exemplified in this definition from Lannon and Gurak's (2013) *Technical Communication*: "Proposals attempt to *persuade* an audience to take some form of action: to authorize a project, accept a service or product, or support a specific plan for solving a problem or improving a situation" (p. 582, emphasis original). The textbooks also discussed how proposals function across various spaces, from basic requests for workplace policy change to business and sales development tools. Each textbook provided full example proposals, typically for research projects or campus-based change initiatives

(building parking structures and funding student newspapers). These texts also emphasized the proposal's complexity, range of purposes and audiences, and how such distinctions relate to its persuasiveness.

Technical Communication by Anderson (2010) offers perhaps the most rhetorically focused proposal chapter. Anderson's reader-centered approach encourages the writer to think about what types of questions the reader will have and how to answer them in each section (rather than focusing on typical guidelines about "following RFP rules" or other instructions). The chapter also notes that there are various types of writing situations, including situations that involve competition or government regulations, and that these shifts in situation shape the rhetoric of the resulting documents. These discussions highlight the rhetorical complexity of proposals in terms of their situations, purposes, and audiences.

The textbooks we studied also provided a set of practical recommendations and guidelines for proposal development. For example, all of the texts emphasized the multiple modes through which communication occurs in proposals, including visual communication, multimedia graphics, and oral presentations. The texts emphasized key features of the proposal process, such as drafting a clear statement of the problem, carefully reading the requirements and background on the issue, crafting a realistic scope for the project, and creating a corresponding budget that funds the work proposed. Sample proposals demonstrated the variability in form and outcome for proposals. The practical instructions in these texts offer actionable tasks and examples that students might follow in classroom or real-world situations where they are writing proposals. The texts also communicate to students that proposals are multifaceted documents that may not necessarily look or work the same way twice. In this way, the textbooks reflect the need for students to consider audience widely and communicate using the methods, means, and standards expected of the audience and situation specific to the proposal situation. Although these texts offer broader rhetorical lessons, such as processes for audience analysis, there is less specific instruction on how students might assess audience and situational needs. That is, these tasks are not articulated with any specificity to the proposal situation itself.

Richard Johnson-Sheehan's *Writing Proposals* emphasizes a wider range of purposes for the proposal while also discussing its role as a persuasive document. Johnson-Sheehan's text offers a sustained discussion of proposals, demonstrating the ubiquity and uniqueness of proposals as documents that are written for a wide range of purposes, including business, community development, and research. The text refers to two different types of proposal examples throughout: one proposal for grant funding for a campus development project, and one proposal written by a company in response to an RFP issued by another company. Such different examples allow readers to see how proposals take on different types of tasks using some of the same rhetorical strategies, like using statements of qualifications to distinguish your approach and capabilities among your competitors. Most uniquely, Johnson-Sheehan encourages

conducting analyses of competitors' strengths and weaknesses as a means for identifying your proposal's discriminators and addressing competitors' needs.

All of these texts offer important lessons for students and a good starting place for understanding the proposal form, some of its basic rules, and some more advanced genre and rhetorical requirements. However, when compared with the pedagogical findings in Ding's (2008) study, the findings from our research of real-world proposal writers (reported later in this article), and our own experiences as proposal writers, a significant gap between how technical and professional communication students are taught proposal writing and the more expansive roles and tasks of proposal writing and writers emerges. To gain additional insight into approaches to proposal writing and instruction, we researched proposal writing across other disciplines to seek out other pedagogical models and research approaches.

Proposal Writing Across Disciplines: Practices Across Fields

The perspectives on proposals and proposal writing that we found published in fields outside technical and professional communication offered insight on not just how to teach proposals but how they operate as genres in different spaces. Primarily, the role of proposals—to generate funding—features more prominently within literature in other fields. Rather than characterizing proposals as documents that “produce change” in a broad sense, as textbooks in technical and professional communication tend to do, proposals are characterized as the mechanism for maintaining an organization's operations. Therefore, proposal writing was not, in some of these texts, approached as a document to be produced but rather as a means for modifying larger exigencies that require funding. In these texts, proposals are necessary to continue the work of the field or to gain ethos for the work and the researchers doing it by acquiring funding from prestigious sources or agencies.

As such, many of these publications stress the importance of becoming familiar with funding agencies' priorities and interests, and a common recommendation for gaining this familiarity is to contact funding agencies' program officers. For example, in Porter's (2009) article “Can We Talk? Contacting Grant Program Officers,” he explains that speaking with program officers is helpful, and at times, essential, for writing a successful grant proposal. A program officer can help a grant writer understand what an agency will or will not consider funding, even providing the writer with specific guidance on how to scope the project, increasing the proposal's chance of success. This conversation with a program officer can significantly influence what a grant writer proposes and how. Another common recommendation is to volunteer to sit on a review panel for an agency you plan to apply to, such as National Science Foundation (NSF), NIH, or National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) (Braithwaite, 2007; Ding, 2008; Eadie, 1994; Markin, 2008; Morgan & Brashers, 2008; Porter, 2005).

Sitting on a review panel enables proposers to know what is going on in their field of study, make connections with the people who review the proposals, and further understand what makes a proposal desirable and fundable.

Given all of this information and the variety of grants and associated processes, the question remains: What are the best practices and tools for teaching students about proposal writing? Focusing instruction on the basics of proposal processes and writing generally seems to be a step in the right direction, one that allows students and practitioners to adjust to the many forms proposals may take without teaching an exhaustive list of every possible incarnation. However, there are still a range of rhetorical needs and complexities not addressed by existing pedagogy, as revealed in our interview study and discussed further in the subsequent text.

Next, we discuss findings from our research that further complicate how current instructional materials model proposal writing. We also posit ways in which more expansive roles and tasks might be operationalized pedagogically when proposals are taught in technical and professional communication classrooms.

Experiences and Practices of Proposal Writers

To widen the scope of current knowledge and understanding of proposal writing and proposal writing instruction, our research team conducted an interview study on proposal writing practices to find additional spaces where students might gain useful learning experiences writing proposals. The findings of Ding (2008) demonstrated that students learned proposal writing best by participating as a member in the activity system in which proposals operate; yet our review of additional research and instructional materials offered few specific pedagogical models for engaging students in the kind of approach offered in that article. Our research began as an attempt to locate such an activity system on our university campus. Our study investigated whether there was an opportunity that would both aid researchers with their proposal development and also provide our graduate students with real-world proposal writing experience. What we found were some significant discrepancies in the ways that we—as technical and professional communication researchers—were approaching and understanding the issue, revealing important implications for technical and professional communication pedagogy, research, and practice about proposal writing moving forward.

In June 2015, we began to study the motivations for and barriers to grant proposal writing from the perspective of successful, unsuccessful, and prospective grant proposal writers among the faculty of a research institution. From June to September, we conducted four 45- to 60-minute formal interviews with four faculty members, one in science, one in engineering, and two in humanities disciplines. Subjects reflected a random sample of faculty who responded to a recruitment email. The interviews were semi-structured, following an

institutional review board (IRB)-approved interview protocol that included four sections: Background questions (about department affiliation, graduate training, etc.); current research (methods used, topic areas covered, etc.); grant application experience (How many grants have you applied for? What type of funding have you sought? What resources would be most useful to you in applying for a grant?); and concluding questions (What other thoughts or opinions do you have?). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, before we began the semi-structured interviews, we conducted informal interviews with university administrators involved in the preparation and submission of research grant proposals. These informal interviews helped us determine the appropriate content and phrasing of our formal interview questions and, as we will discuss further, provided some unanticipated insights about varying perspectives of the proposal writing process.

Three research questions guided the study and interview conduct.

1. To what extent does the use of existing on-campus resources improve a proposer's chance of award?
2. What advice can previous grant proposers and winners offer first-time proposers to improve their chance of award?
3. What are the differences in how researchers with different levels of experience and in different disciplines perceive the grant proposal process?

We hypothesized that regardless of discipline or level of proposal experience, every proposal writer needed some level of help with writing, and we intended to find a way for students in technical and professional communication programs to fill that need, for the benefit of both the faculty researcher and the students in need of proposal writing experience.

After interview transcription, the research team read the transcripts and analyzed them for answers to research questions and themes across the interviews. We found that the interview responses varied greatly, occasionally with direct contradiction. For example, one interviewer remarked that the institution's grants office was the most helpful resource on campus, and another remarked that the same office was the greatest barrier to proposal writing. However, the interviews did share one common theme: None of the interviewees expressed a need or desire for any level of help *writing* grant proposals, despite wanting proposal support more generally.

Finding One: "Proposal Writing" Does Not Mean "Proposal Writing"

Across the formal and informal interviews conducted for this research, participants expressed that their greatest challenges associated with what we were calling "proposal writing" were tasks that did not necessarily involve writing. These tasks included finding a source of funding, conceptualizing a fundable

research project, and demonstrating enough expertise in a particular research area to gain the confidence of the funding source.

We first encountered this de-emphasis on the “writing” in proposal writing during three preliminary informal interviews that we conducted with university administrators. Because of their roles in the university, these individuals were deeply involved in the process of identifying and applying to calls for proposals, although they were neither proposal writers nor researchers themselves. When conducting these interviews, the authors found that even the term *proposal* caused significant confusion (to the extent of having to repeat one of the interviews with a different interviewer). We found that *application* was a better understood and accepted term to describe the product that includes a research plan, budget, biographical sketches, and associated administrative materials. For these interviewees, “the proposal” just included the description of the project being proposed, not the entire package of material required to make a complete, compliant submission. With this insight, we revised the protocol for our formal interviews to refer to “applying for grants” instead of “writing proposals.”

Interviewees in our formal interviews readily understood and responded to questions about “grant application” experience, and one of the interviews revealed an additional benefit to distinguishing “grant applications” specifically from “proposals” generally. The one interviewee with no prior grant application experience had, in fact, prior “proposal” experience. This interviewee, a physicist, described his experience applying for time allotments on major telescopes to conduct specific astronomical observations, something called an “observing proposal.” Unlike a typical grant application, the end goal of an observing proposal is not funding but access, which is awarded as one of the varying levels of priority. Therefore, the approach to writing and submitting an observing proposal is very different from a proposal for grant-funded research. Despite these differences in the proposal writing approach, however, this interviewee’s successful and unsuccessful experiences proposing for observing time revealed a commonality with other interviewees’ successful and unsuccessful research grant application experiences: Being able to demonstrate expertise about a particular research problem, and effectively and persuasively appeal to audiences, increases the likelihood of success. Although writing an observing proposal presents different challenges than writing a funding proposal, from the perspective of a researcher, the challenges of preparing for either type of proposal can actually be quite similar.

These differences in terminology and perspective are significant because they highlight how the different actors in the proposal development process perceive the activities and functions involved in “writing a proposal,” “proposing a research idea,” or “applying for a grant.” Although the research and instructional material currently available in technical and professional communication emphasizes the *participation in a genre* and *crafting of a document*, the

practitioners we interviewed emphasize the *development of a research project*, and associated administrative personnel emphasize the *acquisition of funding* for the institution. This often involved the process of searching for funding, adjacent writing tasks like invention (by coming up with terms to use to search for opportunities), and interpersonal communications skills like networking to conduct outreach to potential funders. As working proposal writers ourselves, the emphasis on these activities matched our own experiences writing proposals in commercial and nonprofit environments, where proposal writing involves fostering business and community partnerships and agreements, developing teams of writers and experts, and working with clients and funders as recursive steps in the proposal writing process.

This finding suggests that when researchers in technical and professional communication contribute to the literature on proposal writing, they must take into account the varying but coordinating perspectives, requirements, and language use of the different actors involved in the proposal development activity. Similarly, instructional material that focuses narrowly on the reading of RFP requirements or even on rhetorical activities like tailoring documents to the audience might not be accounting for the full range of the practices that proposal writers engage in. Proposals are not single products developed solely by writers, and “proposal writing” does not signify the entirety of the process. Rather, writing is just one part of a complex of events, written documents are just one part of a complex of items submitted, and those involved in the writing process may not even perceive their task as “writing” at all. This finding dovetails with Ding’s (2008) conclusions about activity systems with two important additions: First, for pedagogy, by offering even more surrounding activities in the process of proposal writing unrelated to writing, and second, for researchers, by offering insight into additional terminology and tasks that might be analyzed when researching proposal writing practices.

Finding Two: Proposals Are Part of Multifaceted Funding, Competency, and Research Efforts

The second finding of this study revealed another major difference between the practices of proposal writers and how those practices are characterized in technical and professional communication: The exigence for designing and writing proposals varies greatly between proposal writing practices and proposal writing pedagogy. For example, in these interviews, we found that the exigence for writing grant proposals typically develops in one of three ways.

- A researcher seeks funding to continue an existing project. Existing data are required to make a compelling case for continued research, to establish the credibility of the researcher, and to demonstrate the viability of the methods.

- A researcher identifies a solicitation relevant to the researcher's current pursuits. The researcher develops a research concept and methodology, conducts preliminary research and data collection, and if necessary, forms a team of researchers to collaborate.
- A multidisciplinary group of researchers identifies areas of similar interest and seeks funding opportunities. When an opportunity is identified, the group works to develop a research concept and methodology, conduct preliminary research and data collection, and write the proposal.

Despite their differences, each of these methods expands upon a previously established concept: The researcher proposes an idea that builds off her previous research, or she responds to a need that was identified and solicited by a funding institution, and this need expands upon her existing research interests and leverages her subject matter expertise. The idea driving the proposal—whether it came from the researcher or the funding institution or both—has been growing for months or years, and if awarded, is expected to continue growing.

Drawing from our experience as proposal writers, we contend that the exigence for writing proposals for government contracts is similar to that of grant proposals. A company responding to an RFP has usually started preparing for the RFP months or even years in advance. This involves meeting with the Contracting Officer, analyzing the competition's strengths and weaknesses, developing "win themes" to emphasize strengths and counter weaknesses, and as necessary, recruiting team members and personnel to staff the contract. Sometimes, of course, it does not work that way at all—a company may decide to respond to an RFP once the RFP is released, completing the entire proposal process in a short (14-day, 30-day, or 45-day) period, forgoing conversations with the government, which are forbidden after an RFP release. Again, whether the concept driving the proposal comes from the proposing company (which happens rarely in government contracts, except for special projects) or from the funding organization (which can come from as far up as a Presidential Directive), the concept has been in development for months, years, or even decades in advance of the RFP release.

This lead time for proposal development is critical to the rhetorical decisions involved in writing grant or federal contract proposals, and it is missing from the literature on proposal writing and proposal writing pedagogy. In the typical university course, the exigence for writing a proposal is an assignment due to the instructor by a specific date. Few students have 1 to 2 years of preliminary research—that is, data collection from an existing project and knowledge of the funding institutions' wants or needs—to leverage. Furthermore, few courses incorporate the identification of funding opportunities; we found no reference to this laborious process in the texts we studied and no discussion of this process in available literature. Given that practitioners find this preparation to be the most difficult and critical aspect of proposal development, we conclude that the

pedagogy on proposal writing is not adequately preparing students to write proposals in this regard.

Both of these findings suggest some important implications for how we might address these gaps in technical and professional communication research and pedagogy, which we discuss in our conclusions.

The Rhetorics of Proposal Writing: Conclusions and Opportunities for Technical and Professional Communication Pedagogy

As we stated at the outset of this article, rhetorical-, genre-based approaches to the teaching of technical and professional communication have been a long-held standard of the field. Yet we maintain that our research finds some gaps between how we talk about proposals as a field of technical and professional communication—as evidenced in our research and pedagogical materials—and how practicing proposal writers use writing, communication, rhetoric, and technical skills to operate in environments where proposals are produced.

The information in Table 1 attempts to codify these gaps by distinguishing between four proposal project types, examining how the role of the proposal writer is typically characterized in each project and the role that funding plays in shaping the resulting proposal. In this table, we compare three proposals typical of those produced by ourselves and our research participants as well as the classroom-assigned proposal as articulated in technical and professional communication textbooks.

Comparing these four proposal project types demonstrates how these nuanced real-world experiences contrast with the relatively narrow existing approach to teaching the proposal. In the case of proposals for real-world projects, proposal efforts often require networks of personnel, an external requestor, a wide range of resources and objects beyond those explicitly involved in writing, and time—time to develop projects, relationships, and conduct research. The proposal writing assignment in a university course can be limited in replicating the rhetorics of proposals in other environments. Again, although we may know, acknowledge, and strive to approach the proposal as a genre, our current resources for instruction and research continue to reflect a form-based conceptualization. Proposal writing instruction and research must emphasize the differences in the rhetorical situations in which proposals are written in order to equip student writers and researchers with a wide set of rhetorical tools for analyzing and understanding the writer's role, audience, resources, limitations, and intended proposal action in the development of a proposal.

In our concluding remarks, we offer three main recommendations and corresponding actions for instructors and researchers in technical and professional communication, to help our field enhance proposal instruction, expand our existing knowledge of how proposals operate as genres in workplaces, and

Table 1. Comparison of Four Proposal Project Types.

Proposal project type	Role of writer in proposal	Audience	Resources	Limitations	Proposal actions
Research grant application	Researcher; working alone or on a team, operating within institution of employment	Government or commercial entity soliciting research	Services provided by institution of employment (e.g., to locate funding opportunities or develop budget plans)	Compensation: Researchers must apply for grant funding simultaneously with other duties (e.g., teaching courses), at least until they successfully secure grant funding	Secure funding to conduct research
Private sector contract proposal	Writer; receiving direction from a manager	Government or commercial entity soliciting a product or service	Corporate resources, in terms of personnel (e.g., subject matter experts, financial analysts), supplies (e.g., standard templates), and compensation	Time: Solicitation releases are unpredictable, and response time is 14 to 45 days Power: Writers are responsible for "bad" proposals, but many decisions (e.g., pricing) are outside their control	Secure funding to provide a product or service
Nonprofit grant proposal	Writer; working alone or on a team, either receiving direction from a manager or identifying prospect via research	Government, commercial, foundation, or individual entity identified as a match to nonprofit's mission	Tools provided by the nonprofit organization (e.g., access to funding databases) and staff to handle requests	Time, other competitors for same funds, ability to make personal connection with potential funder	Secure funding for general operations or to fund a specific project
Technical and professional communication course assignment	Student; receiving assignment from instructor	Instructor or imagined audience	Instructor feedback; potential peer review or group work	No legacy: Students are assigned to propose a concept that neither is solicited nor continues upon previous research Time: Students have one semester or less to develop and propose a concept	Enhance and expand student's written communication skills; improve rhetorical skills; contribute to the final grade of the course

Note. These data represent the typical scenario for four proposal project types to highlight similarities and differences among the four types.

open up new opportunities for students of technical and professional communication to enter and engage in proposal efforts. These recommendations are informed by the experiences and expectations of proposal writers as expressed by the participants in our research.

Teach “Proposal Writing,” Not “the Proposal”

Reorienting instruction toward teaching the proposal as a genre while retaining important instruction on form can involve instructing students not just in producing proposals but rather in how to act as a proposal writer. This requires that students engage in projects where they can come to learn not just how to produce a proposal document compliant with an RFP, but more nuanced rhetorical concepts and connections, including the relationships between the proposal writer, the intended audience, available resources, and the actions that the proposal—and its resulting funding, if awarded—drives in an organization, for a team, or even for an individual researcher.

This change can be implemented in undergraduate classrooms with a variety of assignments and modifications.

- By applying rhetorical practices of inquiry, including research methods like interviewing, observing, and context analysis, instructors can assign students in technical and professional communication to interview practitioners about proposal writing practices. By partnering with proposal writers across campuses and communities, instructors can invite writers with varying proposal experiences to speak to classes, and instructors can assign students to observe the activities of proposal writers and writing teams. This type of research will give students firsthand access to the varied environments in which proposals are written, so that students can observe the wide range of tasks associated with proposal writing and development aside from the production of compliant text.
- Perhaps the most direct way for students to understand the experience of applying for real funding is through tasking them to actually apply for it, rather than just writing proposals to submit for hypothetical RFPs or assignments in a classroom setting. Undergraduate grant funding is available through national organizations like NSF and NEH, and many campuses offer opportunities to apply for small amounts of funding. As our respondents reported, even if a grant is not awarded, the process of assessing priorities, finding funding, writing the proposal, and making the rhetorical choices necessary to balance needs with constraints for a real, firsthand funding opportunity offers valuable rhetorical knowledge to take forward into future proposal writing environments.
- Instructors can ask students to search for funding opportunities, analyze and understand RFPs, and study the sources of funding and how they shape resulting proposals, contracts, and grants. Knowing where to look, how to

search, and how to evaluate and make these decisions involves important rhetorical skills of invention and analysis that are currently underrepresented in instructional materials on proposals.

Involve Students in Real-World Projects Where We Write Proposals for Funding

Instructors of technical and professional communication undoubtedly can benefit from the experience of applying for funding and writing our own proposals as well. It is of significant benefit to our students to reflect on our own proposal writing experiences or include our students in our proposal writing and development processes firsthand. Such experience gives students immediate access to a real-world proposal writer and can potentially involve students in a real-world funding opportunity. Given the time constraints we all experience and our already taxed schedules and teaching loads, we acknowledge that this is not a simple task and may involve lobbying our departments and administrators for time and resources that will allow us—and by extension, our students—to gain this direct experience and thereby improve instruction in this area.

Technical and professional communication instructors might also consider building long-term relationships to involve students in projects that drive proposal development. Involvement in these projects allows students to experience the various types of documents and tasks that proposal writers use and develop. In addition, students can see how their work contributes to the trajectory of a project over time. To facilitate such a process, instructors might involve students in ongoing research groups and projects that support funded efforts across a campus or community, such as research centers with a consistent flow of research projects, on-campus proposal centers that assist with a wide range of proposal efforts and tasks, university–community partnerships, or industry partnerships that allow students to engage in the various stages of project development.

Research Proposal Writing Across Other Industries and Spaces

These classroom opportunities lead to important new needs in technical and professional communication research as well. To de-emphasize the proposal document as the primary output of a proposal assignment in a classroom setting, our field needs two things: First, more knowledge about the primary outputs of real-world proposal practices, and second, a reorientation of assignments and related assessments to capture and evaluate proposal work. To emphasize that *the proposal* is not a singular document but rather a reflection of an activity system—which includes research, documents, interpersonal communication, collaborative writing, and management—instructors must use more process-based models for assessing work and progress. That is, our expectations for the output

of a proposal writing assignment must shift as we assign and evaluate things like coordination, rewriting, and making contacts that are valuable to the project or research. To do this, researchers must continue to examine and analyze various proposal writers and proposal writing spaces so that we might find new methods and modes for understanding how real-world proposal processes work and how classrooms might better prepare students for the rhetorical tasks ahead.

Although it can be difficult to capture many of the exigencies and specifics of proposal writing within a classroom setting, offering students access to a wide range of proposal writers and proposal writing experiences can help complicate students' notions and understandings of what proposal writing entails. Such a learning opportunity requires both relationship building with people who actively write, manage, and work with proposals in the academy, nonprofit sector, and various commercial environments as well as collecting and researching proposal writers' experiences in qualitative studies and publishing that research. By examining how diverse these experiences are, we can begin to understand more deeply how the rhetorics of proposal writing work in many forms, to include actual writing as well as the rhetoric of related processes and tasks. Giving students access to practicing proposal writers allows students, even within the limitation of a traditional classroom setting, to begin to model the cognitive apprenticeship practices emphasized and endorsed by Ding's work, and we open up the technical and professional communication research lens to new types of workplaces, writers, and practices. By conducting research in proposal writing and within a variety of workplaces, we grow our connections within professional communities and offer students evidence-based learning opportunities for developing the skills necessary to become proposal writers.

Overall, this research demonstrates how important it is that technical and professional communication pedagogy and research more comprehensively address proposal writing if we are to continue to make it a topic of our courses and textbooks as a future professional opportunity for our students. Researchers, instructors, and students of technical and professional communication are well poised to contribute to proposal development efforts across a wide range of spheres because of the skills and capabilities that our field has historically encompassed. However, rhetoric, too, offers an important set of guiding principles and theories that can improve proposal processes across academics, nonprofit work, and industry. Rhetorics of proposal writing could—and should—expand to not only engage the nuanced processes, audiences, and tasks as discussed in this article but also to complement the larger range of ethical concerns that proposals for funding include. These ethical concerns not only include ensuring that proposals outline work that can and will be completed as proposed but also include how much the work will cost, how payment and fees are determined, power structures and dynamics within proposal teams, and how ethics might inform project development and management. The entire proposal and funding process is imbued with questions about how power and

compensation are ethically managed and divided. Incorporating concepts from within rhetoric about ethical appeals and communication is perhaps one of the most important ways that technical and professional communication can impact proposal writing as a process across various spheres.

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