

01 Module

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE RFP

About This Module

This module's purpose is to provide guidance on what to look for when you read a Request for Proposal (RFP). Carefully examining the RFP before you decide whether to write a proposal will help you:

01. make an informed decision about whether to pursue the opportunity; and
02. write a proposal in response to that request.



What Is An RFP?

An RFP is a document issued by a company, organization or government agency that seeks applications, or proposals, from vendors, contractors or service providers for a specific project. It may describe the scope of work, requirements, objectives and scoring criteria for the project, any contractual terms and conditions, and the instructions for submitting proposals. It may also include information about the organization issuing the RFP, such as its background, mission and goals. In the context of research funding, RFPs are issued by a funding agency or institution seeking proposals from researchers or organizations to conduct research on a particular topic or address specific research questions. Researchers and organizations interested in securing funding for their projects typically respond to RFPs by submitting detailed proposals outlining their research plans, methodologies, timelines, budgets and expected outcomes.

Reading Process

As you read through the RFP, note the specific information requested in each section of the proposal. The checklist tool in [Appendix 1-1](#) can help you record and track each component requested in the proposal as well as the submission instructions. This tool can help you communicate the details of the proposal with your project team, leadership and external partners throughout the decision, writing and review process without searching through the RFP. Once you have a draft of the proposal, you can use this checklist to make sure you have included each of the requirements in the RFP.

Tip: Try to use similar language to that used in the proposal when you are making your notes. Research proposals often include all elements requested in the RFP using the language and terminology included in the funding request so that they can be easily identified by the reviewers. Look for terms describing specific activities and project components, particularly those that are repeated more than once in the RFP. If you include one of the requirements using very different language to describe it, the reviewer may not view it as equivalent.

Tip: Organize the proposal so that it is easy for the reviewers to understand your research project and how you plan to execute it.



Purpose Of The Funding

The first thing to identify in the RFP is what the funding is intended to support. It will begin with a description of a health problem or need. Below are questions to consider as you read through this section:

QUESTIONS

What is the public health problem the funding is intended to address?

What is currently known about this issue?

What are gaps in the field that this funding is intended to address?

Scope Of Work

The scope of work will also be described in the first few paragraphs of the funding announcement. It will indicate the kind of projects that the funder is interested in. For example, it may be a funding opportunity to conduct academic research, or it may be a research opportunity only for community-based programs. The scope of work may be fairly broad or the funder may include specific research questions and specific populations that must be included.



Requirements

Next, look for the components that must be included in the proposal.

Examples of required components might include:

- Research hypothesis and/or research questions
- Goals and objectives; end points
- Target populations
- Timeline and budget
- Data collection plan
- Communication plan (i.e., how the findings will be shared with or used by the community and other stakeholders)

The RFP will identify who is eligible to apply for the funding.

Take note of the following:

- Can organizations apply for the funding, or must it be an individual?
- Does the RFP state requirements for the population the organization must serve or the services it must provide to be eligible for the funding?
- Does the funder require that the applicant be new to them or will the funding opportunity be open to applicants who have been funded in the past?
- Are there geographic location restrictions on the funding?
- Are there requirements about the size of the organization or how long it has been in operation?
- Are there any staffing requirements?

Budget



The RFP will specify the amount the funder will award to an organization. Your budget demonstrates to the funder that you have a realistic plan to implement the project you have proposed within the amount you are requesting.

When reading the budget section of the RFP, note any activities or expenses that the funding cannot support. For example, often the funding can be used for research or program costs but not direct services (e.g., counseling, case management, healthcare). Typically, the funding announcement will state whether overhead costs are included in the budget and what percentage of the budget can be allocated to overhead.

Application Process And Key Dates

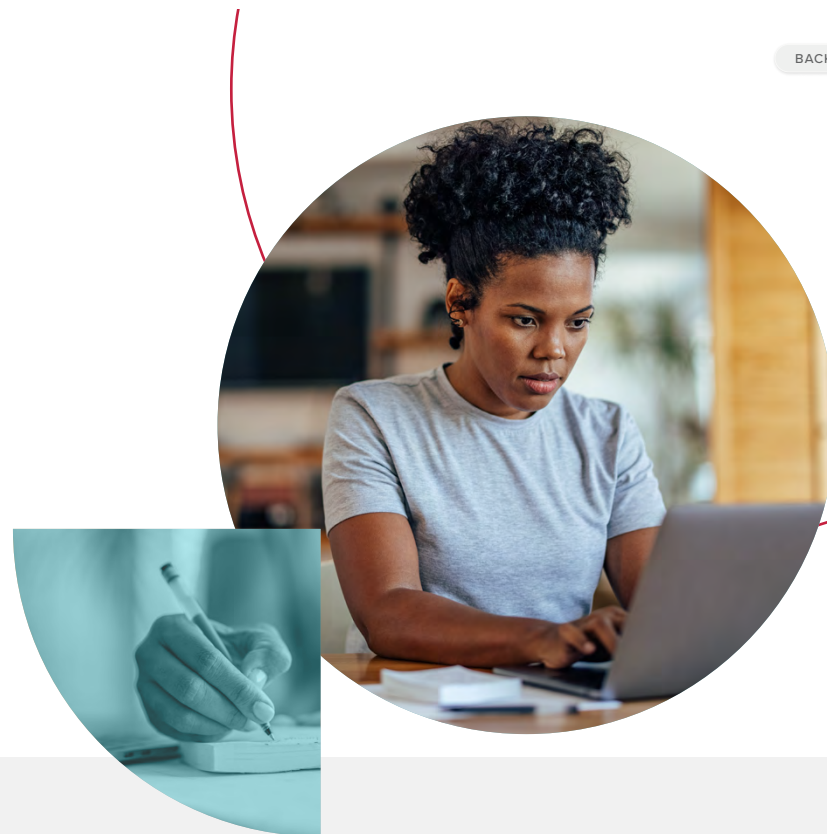
The application process section will provide detailed instructions for submitting the proposal. First, note the submission parameters and logistics.

- On what date, at what time and in what time zone is the application due?
- What is the medium or platform for application submission?
- What are the guidelines for the application format? Is there a page limit? Is there a font size or font guideline? Are there line spacing requirements? Are there specified margins? Is there a word count limit?

Next, determine whether any supplemental materials are required or recommended along with the proposal.

- Are Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or Letters of Intent or Interest (LOIs) recommended or required from partners?
- Are resumes/curriculum vitae (CVs) to be included?
- Does the FOA or RFP supply a budget template or any other template for supplemental information?
- Are appendixes and supplemental materials included in the page limit?

In some cases, funders may hold a question and answer (Q&A) webinar or offer applicants the opportunity to submit questions by a specified date. If so, they may also state when the questions and responses will be posted, or you may only be able to see the responses to the questions that you submit. Other RFPs will state that you can submit questions any time during the application period. Other dates to look for in the RFP are when you are expected to start the project and when it should be completed.





Scoring System

Each RFP should describe how the funder will be evaluating responses and when. Some RFPs have hard deadlines, while others are set up to accept proposals on a rolling basis.

Reviewing the scoring criteria helps you to understand what's important to the funder so that you are sure to include those elements in your project plan and in your proposal. Often, the scoring system will emphasize clearly stated objectives, a feasible implementation plan and the sustainability of the project. Develop a list of the scoring criteria while you are reading through. You can use it to review your proposal before you submit it.

Terms And Conditions

Funding announcements will usually include a contract that should be reviewed by your contract officer or legal team. They can determine whether you can comply with the contract exactly, or if you will need to request some exceptions or modifications to the language in the contract. Some RFPs will state that they will not grant any exceptions. Adjusting the contract can cause delays in submitting your proposal, so it is important that you send it to your legal team early in the proposal development process. If your organization does not have legal or contract staff, ask your board members if they have expertise in this area or if they can help locate free legal services in your area.

Appendix 1-1- Sample Checklist

| Name Of RFP | |
|------------------------|--------|
| REQUIREMENTS | YES/NO |
| Cover letter | |
| Research questions | |
| Population of interest | |
| Scientific objectives | |
| Hypotheses | |
| Outcomes | |
| Data Collection Plan | |
| Data Analysis Plan | |
| Communication Plan | |
| Sustainability Plan | |
| Timeline | |
| Budget | |
| Resumes | |

| Application Instructions | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Deadline | Enter date. |
| Submission guidelines | Enter all submission instructions. |
| Process for questions | Date, email and any other information provided. |
| Supplemental materials | Are there any supplemental materials required? Staff resumes? MOU or any other letters of commitment from partners? |
| Review contract | Has your legal team or contract officer approved? Are there any exceptions? |

Proposal Requirement Checklist

As you read the RFP, you can develop a checklist to cross-reference the proposal you write with the requirements in the funding announcement. This tool will help ensure that your proposal complies with the RFP requirements and you have not left anything out. The checklist also has space to include the application processes. It will help you quickly communicate the instructions, guidelines and requirements of the RFP with others in your organization and your partners. The terms in the checklist are hyperlinked to the sections of the toolkit where they are described in detail.

