



Tips for Proposal Writing

A well-prepared written proposal is the key to documentary financing. You need to make sure your reader can visualize your project as a completed film. A proposal does its job when it includes a strong narrative and clear visual approach. It should also provide a detailed description of the film's protagonists/subjects and subject matter. But how can you ensure your proposal is as effective as it can be?

This handout is intended to give you some pointers on how to write your proposal. It also poses some questions that you can ask yourself during the writing process. Please note that there is no one way to write a documentary proposal. What's most important is that you get your message across and make the reader both understand and feel what kind of documentary you want to make.

Synopsis

Give a clear and simple description of your project. What is it about? What is the film's subject (person, group, environment, social issue, etc.)? Keep it short and sweet.

Project Description

A project description can include background information, story outline, visual approach, main protagonists, access to protagonists/subjects and director's note.

Try to capture the essence of your story in a couple of sentences. Provide a clear overview of what's going to happen (or what you think will happen), use the abovementioned elements and link them in such a way that the tone and style of your story are palpable.

Background information: information on the background of the story and where it will be set.

Story outline: Making a documentary is unpredictable, so good research is essential to getting ideas on where your story can go: possible narrative trajectory, conflict, likely outcomes and events that may occur along the way. Where does your story start and where does it end?

Visual approach: Describe the mood and feeling of the documentary. How will you tell the story? You can think about the use of sound, pacing and rhythm, interviews or not, is the story character driven, etc. Don't forget that the most important goal here is to help the reader to visualize your documentary.

The right combination of story outline and visual approach makes your film come to life. Is it poetic, a piece of art, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, or a mix? Don't be vague, but aim for accuracy and simplicity.

Subjects/protagonists: Describe the main characters in your documentary. Who is in front of the camera and why are you sure they're going to work on camera? Why is their story so special?

Access: For most projects, access is crucial to get to the story. Describe the access you have to subjects/protagonists and/or organizations included in your story.

Director's note: Explain the unique selling point of your film. What makes your film different from other projects, and why will international audiences want to see it? Why should this documentary be made? Then provide your own motivation for making this documentary. Explain why you want to make it, and why you're the right person for the job.

Visual Material

A clip can make or break your project. Be critical about the clip/trailer or research material you choose. Show it to others before sending it with your proposal. Make sure the clip is representative of the final film you have in mind and that the visuals synchronize with the written proposal. Otherwise, the viewer will get lost and the project will lose its power.

For **project development applications**, we recommend sending selected research material or a short clip of your main subject or subject matter. Make sure to explain what kind of material you are sending.

If you have easy access to your subject or subject matter, try to shoot some footage or take some pictures. If this isn't possible, don't forget that you are applying for financing to develop your documentary. This means that your proposal has to make your subject come to life.

Questions to ask yourself while writing your proposal:

1. Is this a film or a radio show?
2. What is happening onscreen in addition to the historical context?
3. What's the film's style? How is the story told?
4. Who are the protagonists/subjects?
5. What are they going through? What journey are they going on?
6. What changes take place over the course of the film?
7. What makes your viewer want to keep watching?
8. What does the film tell us that we didn't know before watching it?
9. How does the film touch us?

10. What makes this film unique?
11. Is the story strong enough to succeed in different places/environments?
12. How is it relevant now?
13. Is the proposed length appropriate for the narrative?
14. Why is will it be 90 minutes and not 20?
15. Is my use of language simple and clear?

This document has been compiled on the basis of information obtained from various sources, including the experiences of members of the IDFA Bertha Fund selection committee, presentations made by industry professionals and information on the websites of partner organizations. See also:

http://britdoc.org/uploads/media_items/writing-a-proposal.original.pdf

https://tribecafilminstitute.org/blog/detail/pro_tips_how_to_succeed_at_grant_proposals

https://tribecafilminstitute.org/pages/gucci_tribeca_documentary_faq