

Writing Proposals & Letters of Intent

Whether you're applying to grad school, to a gallery, or for a Canada Council grant, your writing will have to be concise, persuasive, creative, and sometimes extremely practical: some proposals will require that you put forward a budget, explain in detail the kinds of materials you'll be working with, etc. If you can think of a proposal as a document with a specific purpose and audience, it may help. The audience is usually a graduate committee, a review panel, curators, adjudicators, a granting jury: in other words, a group of people who are there to pass judgment on your work and your ability to communicate your ideas about this work in writing. The purpose is pretty much the same in any situation: you want to convince your audience that you have something to offer which the other applicants do not. You want to provide them with a good sense of who you are, what you want to do, and how and why you want to do it.

STRATEGIES, OBJECTIVES AND EXAMPLES

Although every proposal should specifically address your own work, objectives and intentions, the following ideas and key phrases may help you get started. None of these are meant to be prescriptive, but it's a good idea to think of your proposal as a story with a beginning, middle and end: in the beginning, outline where your project comes from—what motivated or influenced it? in the middle, identify what you want to do and why; in the end, support your proposal with evidence from your past experience and education. If this seems overly formulaic, feel free to develop a structure that better suits your purposes, but remember that while you want your proposal to stand out from the others, your primary objective is to be clear and concise.

1. If it's relevant to your work, try beginning with a summary of a methodology or historical model that you are currently challenging, deconstructing, or working toward understanding further. This usually works fairly well when you are applying to grad school or for a fellowship. Isamu Noguchi's proposal to the Guggenheim Foundation provides a good example of this tactic.

It has long been my conviction that sculpture has been too consistently employed as a medium for the idealization and glorification of man, and while it may be granted that the interpretation of the human figure will always remain its chief objective, I am nevertheless of the opinion that nature offers many another subject which would lend itself to some strange and exquisite sculptural treatment...

2. As early in your proposal as possible, communicate directly and immediately with what it is you want to do:

I intend to create a work with video, installation, photography and painting that will speak about men's experience with cosmetic surgery.

The work that I propose to explore while in grad school revolves around...

I intend to produce a body of work that will speak about the way images are manipulated to create a fiction, and how this fiction impinges on our experience of reality. I'm particularly interested in...

3. Explain why you want to do this project or why you think this project is important:

The marginalization and invisibility of Aboriginal faces and images make this project particularly important in this cultural moment...

Historically, women have been greatly underrepresented in filmmaking: both on and behind the screen. In my project, I hope to make visible the conditions and prejudices that discourage and even prevent women filmmakers from participating equally in film production.

4. To support your proposed project, highlight any relevant past or present experience or projects, so that you have a foundation on which to build your discussion of your present and future work:

For the past two years my work has centred around...

Since the beginning of my ceramic education, I have been interested in exploring...

From the first time I walked into a darkroom...

I am currently interested in/working on/working towards...

These points are generally necessary for any proposal. The following sections identify additional areas that you may want to highlight for different types of proposals.

EXHIBITION PROPOSALS

In the case of exhibition proposals, you may want to consider what kind of space you will need, how you will utilize that space, and what kinds of materials you will use in that space. It might help to do some research into what kinds of work the gallery has shown in the past, who the curators are, who is on the review panel, and so on. Then think about how your work might appeal to that specific audience and the gallery's clientele.

GRADUATE SCHOOL

When applying to grad school, it is important to explain why you have chosen that particular school and/or program. If possible, do some research to determine who you would like to work with and why. Find out as much as you can about the programs being offered and perhaps mention briefly how and where you think you will fit in. How will your work or the project you envision fit with the overall mission or values of the school? And how do the theories and methodologies that influence your work fit with the theories and methodologies promoted by the school or program?

Applications to grad school take many different forms. Sometimes you will only be asked to write a short letter of intent (a kind of proposal), for others you may be asked to write a mini-essay about a specific topic related to your work. You will need to pay careful attention to the criteria outlined in the application package: make sure that what you write very directly and explicitly responds to any questions or requirements in the instructions. This will probably mean writing a different letter or proposal for each grad school application you prepare. For a step-by-step guide, refer to the Writing Centre's handout called Writing Letters of Intent For Grad School.

PROPOSALS FOR GRANT APPLICATIONS

Like applications to grad school, proposals for grants take many different forms. One of the keys to writing a successful grant proposal is to research the types of projects that have received funding from this granting body in the past and ensure that your proposal communicates a project appropriate to this area. Your well written proposal for a community-based arts project, for example, will likely not be effective if you are applying for a grant specializing in health research, unless you explicitly connect your project to this research area. You will also need to pay very close attention to the instructions in the grant application, as these are often very particular about the types of information you will need to include in your proposal.