

Brief: How to Write a Concept Paper

Funders often ask for brief 1- to 5-page concept papers (also called “white papers” in the government contracting sector) prior to submission of a full proposal. This helps them save time by eliminating ideas that are not likely to be funded.

Applicants may use concept papers in any of the following ways:

- to interest potential funders
- to develop potential solutions or investigations into project ideas
- to determine whether a project idea is fundable
- to serve as the foundation of a full proposal

Funders that request concept papers often provide a template or format. If templates or formats are not provided, the following can serve as a useful concept paper structure.

The Five Elements of a Concept Paper

1. The first section, the **Introduction**, identifies how and where the applicant’s mission and the funder’s mission intersect or align. It addresses the reasons why the funder should support projects in the given general area. It also introduces the applicant’s partners and shows why the partners want to participate in the project.
2. Second is the **Purpose** or **Need** or **Rationale**, which outlines what others have written about the general topic and focuses on the gap in knowledge to be filled, the problem to be solved, or the need to be addressed by the applicant’s proposed project. Similar to a literature review, this section allows the applicant to state the purpose or need in such a way that the applicant’s project is the best possible solution to the problem. Also, it often provides statements addressing the significance of the project (showing why the project should be supported).

In some cases, these first two sections are merged into a **Background** section that both introduces the alignment between the two organizations’ missions and provides the need statement.

3. Third is the **Project Description**, functioning as the solution to the problem, the answer to the need, or the investigation that will fill the knowledge gap. In this section, the applicant addresses the unique, unusual, distinctive, innovative, and/or novel aspects of the approach, showing why the applicant’s team has the best solution and presenting a compelling case for funding.

The project description includes the project’s **Goals** and **Objectives**. A goal is an abstract state of being, a condition, an end, or an aspiration while objectives are statements of measurable outcomes that, collectively, will help the applicant measure progress toward

accomplishing the project goal(s). For example, a goal might be to improve student academic performance via a structured professional development program for teachers, while an objective might be to offer a specific kind of workshop or seminar on a particular topic for a defined set of teachers in a K-12 school district.

The project description also includes an overview of the project's **Methodology** (sometimes called **Project Activities** or **Action Plan** or **Approach**). The goals, objectives, and methods (or activities) will need to align closely with each other and will need to be accomplished within the proposed **Timeline**, expressed in either months or years. The methods or activities will need to be congruent with or based on what has been tried in the field in the past, they must be based on empirical evidence, and they will need to be both reasonable in cost and complexity and accomplishable within the proposed timeline.

The project description typically concludes with a statement of **Benefits** (or **Anticipated Outcomes**) along with a description of who will benefit and how.

4. The fourth section, **Support** or **Budget**, contains either (1) an outline of the main budget categories for the requested project support or (2) a single bottom-line amount of the request and a brief discussion of how that amount will be used. Some concept papers may not even include an amount requested.
5. The fifth and final section provides the **Contact Information** of the applicant organization's chief executive or his/her designee authorized to make funding requests.

The above is a suggested general outline for a concept paper. Ultimately, if a given funder provides a specific template or format, the applicant must use the prescribed structure.