

CHAPTER 4

WRITING THE *EXECUTIVE SUMMARY* OF YOUR GRANT APPLICATION

Introduction to the Executive Summary. At the very outset of this section of the Workbook, we need to emphatically underscore that the *Executive Summary* section of your grant application is the key to writing a truly first-class proposal. It is our conviction that, if this section works well, the rest of the proposal will fall naturally into place. It is, therefore, one on which you should spend considerable time in order to get it right. Remember that this is the very first, or almost the first, part of your application that reviewers will read as they begin the process of reviewing and evaluating the relative merits of your grant application. It must very quickly engender enthusiasm and advocacy for your ideas. Therefore, the *Executive Summary* section must be something that can be read and understood easily and quickly. The flow of logic must be unassailable and absolutely compelling, such that it leads the reviewers to a position of advocacy for your application — without their knowing that they have been led.

It is important to recognize three key points about your *Executive Summary*. First, this section of the proposal may be called by different names, depending upon the specific funding agency. For example, in an application to the National Institutes of Health, this section would be the Specific Aims page. If this were an application to the National Science Foundation, this section would be the first part of the Project Description. For U.S. Department of Agriculture grant applications, this would be the first part of the Introduction of your proposal, plus a specific section on Rationale and Significance. In the U.S. Department of Defense (DARPA) proposals, this section is actually termed the *Executive Summary*. For foundations, this is often the ‘Preproposal’ that is often submitted, and from which an invitation to submit a full proposal will be based. In the event of that the application format of the funding agency from which you are seeking support does not specifically provide for an *Executive Summary*, we suggest that you use the opening section of the Project Description as a place to insert this section (unless, of course, there is a precise format for presentation of the information requested that does not allow for flexibility).

The second key point that needs to be kept in mind regarding your *Executive Summary* is that, as pointed out above, this will be the first part of your grant application that will be read by the reviewer. *It is highly likely therefore that, by the time of the reviewer has finished reading this 1 to 1½ page document, he or she will have made an ‘executive decision’ about whether or not this is an application that will be enjoyable to read or painful to read.* Obviously, having the reviewer reach the former conclusion is infinitely preferable to having that reviewer reach the latter conclusion. But in order for this to happen, the reviewer must be capable of grasping all of the essential elements that make any grant application successful — and that means that the significance, the approach, the qualifications of the applicant, the appropriateness of the environment and institution, and something that distinguish this application from all others (novelty/innovation) must be readily apparent to the reviewer. To assemble all of this information in a relatively short document is not easy.