# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: Staying Within Page Limits

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So you’ve drafted your SBIR/STTR proposal, and the technical file comes to 17 pages. Too bad the agency to which you are applying has a 15 page limit on that file. What do you do?

Some proposers would decide to just send in the proposal with the page limit exceeded. Their attitude is “they can stop reading after 15 pages if they want to.” We don’t suggest this, for two important reasons. First, many agencies bluntly tell you that they will reject such proposals, without technical review (i.e., no consideration for award), because they don’t comply with the rules. Second, even if agencies don’t reject the proposal for this page limit indiscretion, their reviewers may be instructed to stop reading when the page limit is reached—you not only have wasted text that will go unread, but if mandatory sections of the proposal are in the ignored portion of the text, then your proposal will be downgraded for not being complete.

So what are some better options on how to handle a draft proposal that exceeds the agency’s page limits?

First, before you draft the proposal, give yourself a page budget for each section and subsection. For example, if we are submitting to Phase I to National Institutes of Health and know there is a 6 page limit on the Research Strategy section, we will give ourselves a budget of 1.5 pages on the Significance subsection, 1 page on the Innovation subsection, and 3.5 pages on the Approach subsection. If you will set a budget before you start writing, you are more likely to stay within (or at least stay closer to) the budgeted amount as you outline and draft each subsection.

Second, look for widows. This refers to those paragraphs that end with a line that has only 1 or 2 words on it. Find such paragraphs, then go back and do a little editing to shorten the paragraph text until the widow(s) is pulled up to the preceding line. Doesn’t sound like a big deal? If you can eliminate one widow per page of your 17 page document, then that means you have shortened your document by 17 lines. Depending on your font size and line spacing, that could shorten your proposal by about ¼ to ½ page—that’s not an insignificant savings!

Third, word wrap around figures and tables. We see proposals, for example, where a graphic that is perhaps 2 inches tall and 2 inches wide is stuck in the middle of a paragraph, with no text on either side of it. That white space is wasted space. Move the graphic to the left or ride side (not centered), then use word wrap to bring text up beside the graphic. This will save you several lines of text in the document which, again, can make a big difference, especially if you have several such graphics in your proposal.

Fourth, make sure you are not including anything in the text that isn’t needed. An example is biographical information on your principal investigator and other key persons. In the case of NIH, “bio sketches” are permitted, don’t count toward the 6 page limit on the Research Strategy, and each can be up to 5 pages long! Therefore, if you are going to say anything about your team’s qualifications in the Research Strategy, keep it very brief because you know the bio sketches are where the reviewers will learn the most about your folks.

Fifth, get someone to go over the draft text with an editor’s eye. This ideally is someone who has not been involved in drafting the proposal, and who has strong editing skills. They can take statements like ““*Reviewers often consider brevity and clarity in the presentation to be indicative of a principal investigator’s focused approach to a research objective and ability to achieve the specific aims of the project”* and rewrite them to something like “*Reviewers prefer short, concise proposals.”* See how many words they just saved you, which will cut the proposal length so you will be closer to your page limit?

In closing, be sure to draft your proposal far enough in advance so you have time to make the adjustments needed to reduce what you have written down to the agency’s page limits. If your proposal is due in 30 minutes and you are just now discovering that you are 2 pages over the limit, then you don’t have an opportunity to make intelligent adjustments.