

Be Kind to Your SBIR/STTR Proposal Reviewer; Formatting Matters

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While quality content and impactful science is the basis of a strong SBIR/STTR proposal, one of your primary goals in putting your proposal together is making it easy for the reviewer to read. You want the reviewers reading your proposal to be happy, yes, *happy*. Happy reviewers are more likely to review your proposal favorably. One way to make that happen is to ensure that your proposal is readable.

Here are some basic tips based on the formatting changes that I recommend most when I review proposals:

- **Left-align your text.** Always. Left-aligned text (with a ragged right margin) is much easier to read than justified text (straight right margin). Actual science has shown this. Check out the difference:

JUSTIFIED TEXT:	LEFT-ALIGNED TEXT:
Note the variations in spacing between words, as well as the differences in overall readability.	Spacing is consistent from line to line. It's easier for your eye to go from one word to another.
In the end, unlike a book, there is no way to control the experience a user has on the web.	In the end, unlike a book, there is no way to control the experience a user has on the web.
On any particular site, there could be anywhere from 4-8 (generally speaking) different column widths. And each of those groups will have varying lengths in both characters per line and word amount in paragraphs. It would be more difficult to apply justified alignment without causing <u>variation in word spacing</u> . Those variations make it very difficult to read and understand, especially for the blind and viewers with conditions, like dyslexia.	On any particular site, there could be anywhere from 4-8 (generally speaking) different column widths. And each of those groups will have varying lengths in both characters per line and word amount in paragraphs. It would be more difficult to apply justified alignment without causing <u>variation in word spacing</u> . Those variations make it very difficult to read and understand, especially for the blind and viewers with conditions, like dyslexia.

- **Use headings and sub-headings.** Saving space by not using headings is a big mistake. Headings do several things:
 - They help you to remember to put everything into the proposal.
 - They break up the text to make it more readable.
 - They make it easier for the reviewers to find information.
 - All of the above make reviewers happy.
- **Use spacing between paragraphs and sections.** Remember: "White Space is Your Friend". Don't try to squeeze your text into what is essentially a page-long paragraph. You should break it up. Indenting at the start of a paragraph is messy and doesn't break up the text enough to improve readability. Instead include a space of 4 or 5 points between sections and paragraphs. It is much better to cut your text by a few lines than to squeeze it all in and make reviewers squint! If you don't believe me, read this: [White Space Explained](#)

- **Don't underline anything ever.** Underlining was invented as a form of typography when it was the only way to emphasize text. Thankfully those days are gone and now we have many other ways to do this. Bold. Italic. Bold italic! You can bullet or indent. But do not underline. It is ugly, makes text really hard for reviewers to read!

Underlining is another dreary TYPEWRITER HABIT. Type-writers had no bold or italic styling. So the only way to emphasize text was to back up the carriage and type underscores beneath the text. It was a workaround for shortcomings in type-writer technology.

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- **Use numbering sparingly.** This is, I know, contradictory to the way many people are used to writing NIH grants. There are no rules that you *have* to use any numbering in your proposal. It's fine to use some if it's helpful to lead the reviewer through the proposal, but often people get hung up on numbering and it becomes confusing and sometimes absurd. When you have to go beyond two levels of numbering, please stop and consider other ways to mark the hierarchy of your text. In other words, don't follow this example.....

In summary, after 12 years of reviewing SBIR/STTR proposals, my formatting recommendations for an NIH SBIR/STTR proposal are as follows:

1. 0.5" margins all sides
2. Arial 11 point
3. Single-spaced
4. Left-aligned
5. 4 (or 5) pt. spacing between paragraphs, and
6. Never, ever underline.

Follow these guidelines for happy reviewers!

- 5. Stories of Dessert**
- 5.1 Pineapple Cake
- A. What You Need
 - B. Directions
 - C. Story: Brian's
 - a. Figure 1
 - b. Figure 2
- 5.2 Cherry Cobbler
- A. What You Need
 - B. Directions
 - C. Story: Grandma Flora's
 - a. Figure 1
 - b. Figure 2