



The Proposal Narrative

Introducing the Characters and the Place

If a letter of inquiry is akin to a short story, then a proposal narrative is analogous to a novel. When I first started working in the nonprofit field nearly two decades ago, proposal narratives often were of epic length, some as long as fifteen, twenty, even twenty-five pages. Today, in response to changing funder requirements and the use of online submissions, we write slimmer stories that typically run between five to ten pages in length, occasionally even shorter. There's a lot of information that must be packed in these relatively few pages. For a proposal to rise out of the "slush pile" of other submissions, it must engage the reader by being well written and telling a compelling story. From the opening sentence, the narrative must grab the reader's attention and hold it through till the end. It's all about telling a good story.

OPEN WITH A "HOOK"

Outstanding storytellers engage the audience with that first word or sentence. It's the "hook" that pulls the reader into the story. The same is true in proposal writing. A talented proposal writer uses strong, not gimmicky, prose. Avoid openings that are too cute, too clever, or too cliché. For example, it is *never* a good idea to begin a proposal with the following: "No nonprofit agency is an island; no nonprofit agency stands alone. This is why we write to the XYZ Foundation." Ugh.

I also advise you to refrain from relying on what I call “comfort language” to begin your proposal. I am referring to those safe, polite, and inoffensive phrases and sentences we tend to fall back on when we’re not sure what to say—sentences like these: “We are pleased to respectfully submit this proposal to the Doyle Family Fund.” Yawn. I’m guilty of writing sentences like this myself, and although a plain-as-vanilla opening is serviceable, you run the risk of putting the reader to sleep and not engaging him or her in your story.

I recommend an alternative. I suggest that you be bolder and consider a more creative approach. When looking for an effective hook, I think about using one of three possible options: the attention-grabbing fact, the key question, or the quote from an expert. Here’s how each option might be used as the opening in a proposal requesting funds to support a breast cancer awareness campaign.

- One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in Marin County, which has one of the highest breast cancer rates in the country.
- Did you know that Marin County has one of the highest breast cancer rates in the country?
- “Marin County’s alarmingly high breast cancer rate is our number one public health issue,” says Isaac Roth, MD, oncologist and author of a groundbreaking study recently published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Each of these alternative openings fulfills two important objectives: each engages the reader, and each delivers key information. This is crucial when you have limited space in which to tell your story, either due to length restrictions or the constraints of an online application.

Keep in mind that whenever you present a fact, a number, or a statistic in a proposal, you should consider whether or not you also need to cite the source of the information. In the preceding example, you may want to cite the study or report that determined that one out of eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in Marin County. When including quotes, be mindful of the statement’s relevancy to the topic and the speaker’s credibility. Include a quote only when it is expressly to the point and supports your case. And the more credible the individual, the more credible the statement. As illustrated in the example, an oncologist-researcher-author is qualified to comment on the seriousness of breast cancer in a given community.

Time to Write!

Now it's time for you to try your hand at writing a new lead sentence for one of your proposals. See if you can use *each* variation—a key fact, a question, and a quote—in writing a “hook” for your next proposal. Consider which option best suits your particular needs.

Example 4.1 Intro for a Girls Sports Program

“Everything good in me died in junior high” (from *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, by Mary Pipher).

Despite advances in gender equality in the latter half of the twentieth century, American adolescent girls of all socioeconomic backgrounds continue to experience a steep decline in self-esteem in middle school and junior high. Studies link this decline to the epidemic levels of depression and eating disorders that we are witnessing today among adolescent and teen girls. These problems are in addition to alarming levels of substance abuse, violent crime, sexual risk-taking, lower academic achievement, and other social and personal problems.

According to Dr. Mary Pipher, clinical psychologist and author of the hugely popular recent book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, ours is a beauty-obsessed, media-driven, “girl-poisoning” culture that ultimately destroys girls’ self-esteem. More often than not, girls blame themselves or their families for their “failures” instead of looking at the world around them.

Remarkably, there is one activity that can greatly offset the emotional and psychological debilitation of adolescent girls—and that is sports. SportsBridge is one of a handful of organizations around the United States that is devoted to utilizing sports as a vehicle to build the self-esteem of adolescent girls.

Note: These are the opening paragraphs of a proposal for SportsBridge, a program that paired eighth-grade girls from urban middle schools with athletes and sports enthusiasts for a year of one-on-one mentoring and group activities, including outings to college and professional sporting events. This excerpt was contributed by Nancy E. Quinn, principal in Nancy E. Quinn Associates, a consulting firm specializing in arts management and fundraising.

Example 4.2

Intro for a Blood Bank

During the first two weeks of the year, the San Francisco Bay Area faced a critical health care emergency. Blood Centers of the Pacific's (BCP's) inventory of blood had fallen alarmingly low. Blood donations typically drop during the holidays. This decrease, coupled with a nationwide blood shortage that prevented importing blood into the region, created a perilous situation. On January 5, BCP asked local hospitals to cancel and postpone surgeries due to the acute shortage of blood, specifically Type-O blood.

With help from the local media, BCP sent out an emergency appeal for blood donations. Within a 14-day period, BCP collected 5,412 units of blood—an increase of almost 50% from the average collection of 3,700 units. By January 10, BCP was able to advise hospitals that they could resume normal surgery schedules.

What those two weeks illustrate is the challenge BCP faces in maintaining an adequate supply of blood. BCP seeks to reverse the trend of blood donations not keeping pace with the demand. Through broader community outreach and education efforts, we hope to recruit significantly more Bay Area residents to give blood in the coming years.

A strong opening sentence entices the reader to read the next sentence, the next paragraph, and so on. Subsequent paragraphs build on the foundation laid by those initial sentences. To show you what I mean, I've included three examples of powerful introductions (see Examples 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3).

PRESENT FUNDAMENTAL INFORMATION

Your proposal must not only grab the reader's attention with the first few sentences and paragraphs but should also provide the potential funder with some essential information. The majority of reviewers expect to see the following three questions addressed early in a proposal:

- What are the history and mission of the applicant agency?
- Who are the agency's clients?
- Where do the clients reside, and where does the agency do its work?

Example 4.3

Intro for a Wildlife Preservation Group

It was a classic “sting” operation. Two undercover law enforcement officers arrange to meet a buyer. At the meeting, they show the buyer the booty they have harvested in the remote reaches of Northern California. Once the buyer pays for the contraband and places another order for more of the same, the two officers reveal their identities, make the arrest, and seize key records that lead them to an extensive ring of deals.

This is an all-too-familiar scenario, but this “bust” is different. The harvest being offered for sale isn’t drugs, but animal parts. Bear paws and gallbladders. Mountain lion heads. And the two officers are game wardens posing not as marijuana growers but as commercial poachers. And the buyer is dealing in animal parts, which are then processed and sold as aphrodisiacs, medicinal potions, trophies, and gourmet cuisine.

Such poaching activity is a growing problem in wilderness areas across the country. It threatens to destroy a valuable natural resource—our protected wildlife.

The Mountain Lion Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of mountain lions and other wildlife and their habitats, plans to launch an antipoaching campaign to stop the slaughter of wildlife for illegal profit in California. With foundation and other private support, we plan to attack poaching at every turn, using skills and grassroots support built by the Mountain Lion Foundation over the years.

*Note: This highly creative opening was written by fundraising consultant Susan Fox, my coauthor for *Grant Proposal Makeover: Transform Your Request from No to Yes*.*

In fact, many grantmakers will specifically ask that the proposal answer these questions. Once again, it is beneficial if you can respond to these questions using an economy of words. Let’s look at how to address these three basic questions in more detail.

Introduce the Hero

One of the delights of proposal writing is whom and what you write about. The nonprofit sector is a noble one. People who have chosen to work in the field are

passionate, dedicated, intelligent, and creative. The people being served by nonprofit agencies are typically a rich cast of characters, and they are the primary focus of your agency's proposals. These are your story's main characters. Yet the first "character" introduced in the proposal narrative is generally not the clients your agency serves. In fact, this character is not a person at all. But it is the hero of the story.

Who, or rather what, is the hero in your proposal narrative? It's your nonprofit agency! Nonprofit agencies do heroic work, and they are the heroes in every proposal we write. Throughout the world today, nonprofits are working diligently to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, teach children, conserve the environment, save endangered species, and present music performances and art exhibitions, among other important activities. There is tremendous drama and excitement in stories from the nonprofit community. As grantwriters, we have an opportunity to tell others these amazing stories.

The reason we introduce the hero (the nonprofit agency) early in our proposal stories is to establish the agency's credibility with the funder. The objective is to demonstrate to the grantmaker that the agency has the ability to successfully do the work for which it is seeking funding. One of the best ways to do this is by describing the agency's most relevant and most outstanding prior achievements and accomplishments. The underlying message is that if the agency has accomplished great things in the past, it is likely to continue to accomplish great things in the future. The agency has credibility.

Consider a contemporary hero known to just about everyone on the planet: Harry Potter. In the early chapters of the popular Harry Potter books, the author, J. K. Rowling, places young Potter in situations where he demonstrates that he has courage, mental and physical strength, and fierce determination. Given Potter's innate abilities, readers are not surprised to see the boy (and later, teen) heroically, and ultimately successfully, battling dark forces at the end of each book. We've been given enough information earlier in the book to believe that Harry Potter is a credible hero and that he's up to the challenge of whatever perils he faces. If the author had not provided us with this information and insight into Potter's character and abilities, we'd be surprised, perhaps even disbelieving, of Potter's heroism.

How then do you apply the "Harry Potter principle" to a grant proposal? By showing early on in the proposal that your nonprofit agency has heroic qualities.

This is done in what is often called the “history and mission” or “introduction” section of the grant proposal. (In fact, expect to see the following question presented in one form or another in many grant applications and guidelines: What is your agency’s history and mission?) In the history-mission-introductory section you answer this question. (For simplicity’s sake, I’ll refer to this portion of the proposal as the introduction.)

This is the part of the proposal where you get to “toot your agency’s horn.” State when the agency was founded and by whom, what its mission is, what its major accomplishments and achievements have been, how many clients it has served, and whether it has received recognition for its good work through awards or acclamation. Resist the urge to provide a laundry list of achievements and accolades. Rather, curb this tendency by providing only the most relevant, current, and important information. Your task is to give the reader enough information to conclude that the agency is well qualified for the next task, the one for which you are seeking funding. No more is necessary.

How Long Should the Introduction Be?

The introduction section is not a lengthy one. Keep the introduction in proportion to the proposal’s overall length. I estimate that a typical introduction will comprise between 5 and 10 percent of the total proposal length. In a five-page narrative, this means a paragraph or two, and certainly no more than a half page.

What may be counterintuitive is the fact that the older your agency is, the shorter the introductory section needs to be; more recently established agencies (and grassroots agencies) require longer introductions. The reason is this: agencies that have been around for a while are more apt to be known in the community. For these agencies, their reputations precede their proposals. The most venerable agencies wear a halo of credibility, so less needs to be said to convince a funder that they will be prudent stewards of future grant funding.

In rare cases, however, being too well known can have a downside—for example, if the community holds negative misperceptions about a nonprofit agency. You will need to address and correct these misperceptions in the proposal narrative, and certainly this will lengthen the introductory section.

Similarly, new agencies, grassroots agencies, and agencies with low visibility are likely to need lengthier introductions in order to establish credibility.

Establishing Credibility for a Start-Up Agency

What do you do if your nonprofit agency is a brand-new start-up? In this situation, you establish your agency's credibility by presenting the qualifications of the nonprofit's founders. The educational backgrounds, professional expertise, and work experience of these individuals substitute for a well-established agency's accomplishments over many years. The more credible an agency's founders are, the more likely it is that the new agency will be able to secure initial grant funding.

Generally speaking, grantmakers are skeptical when they receive a grant request from an organization that has only one, two, or a handful of active supporters. The funder suspects it is being asked to support the pet project of an individual or a small group of individuals. Funders prefer to support nonprofit agencies that enjoy broad community support. Wider support indicates that the community need is great and demonstrates that several people are committed to addressing this need. If you're thinking about forming a nonprofit organization, make certain that others share your vision before you begin to seek grant funding.

Example 4.4

Introducing the Well-Established Hero: A Music School

Since its founding in 1920 by two dedicated piano instructors, the Zosseder Conservatory of Music has contributed to the rich musical life of our city, the state, and the world beyond. Today the conservatory is an internationally respected, fully accredited four-year college of music. We have an outstanding faculty and an exceptionally talented student body of 1,500 students who represent 50 states and 23 countries. Our graduates include numerous renowned performing artists and conductors, including Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The conservatory currently offers undergraduate degrees in fifteen major disciplines—from classical guitar to jazz performance. *U.S. News & World Report* recently ranked the Zosseder Conservatory of Music as the number one undergraduate music school in the country, topping the list of 50 other contenders.

Introducing the Hero: Examples

Examples 4.4 and 4.5 show how to introduce your proposal's hero—the nonprofit agency—in the proposal narrative. The first example is for a well-established, highly visible institution, and the second is for a brand-new grassroots organization.

The single paragraph in Example 4.4 is all that is necessary to establish the Zosseder Conservatory of Music's credibility. The school has been around for a

Example 4.5

Introducing a New Hero: A Youth Agency

Meditation for Minors is a new 501(c)(3) not-for-profit agency whose mission is to teach meditation and other relaxation techniques to young people who are either in juvenile hall or on probation. By voluntarily participating in our program, teens will learn peaceful alternative ways of coping with anger and stress. Meditation for Minors was founded by Dr. Clara Voyant, a highly regarded yoga instructor. Dr. Voyant is the founder and owner of Clara's Yoga School, where for the past 15 years she has taught thousands of adults and teens. She is also the author of *Yoga for Youngsters*.

Four years ago, Ted Johnson, sheriff of Juniper County, took one of Dr. Voyant's classes. After a few weeks of instruction, Sheriff Johnson commented to Dr. Voyant that many of the troubled youth he encountered could benefit from a program like hers. Dr. Voyant saw an exciting opportunity. Working with Sheriff Johnson, senior administrators at the county juvenile hall, and other police officers, Dr. Voyant created a pilot program to reach youth who were serving time in juvenile hall. The pilot program was successful, reaching some 50 young people. Last year Dr. Voyant received the Mayor's Award for Volunteerism, and the city's probation department asked Dr. Voyant to create a similar program for youth on probation.

To respond to the growing need, Dr. Voyant and five other community leaders, including Sheriff Johnson, formed the initial board of directors and established Meditation for Minors.

long time and is accredited. It has illustrious graduates, a strong faculty, and a geographically diverse student body. And it achieved the top spot in a popular ranking of U.S. music colleges. Given these credentials, it can be presumed that this institution is qualified to teach the next generation of music students.

In contrast, note how much more is needed to provide the qualifications and accomplishments of a grassroots agency, Meditation for Minors, in Example 4.5.

As you can see in Example 4.5, more detail is necessary when an organization is brand new. And because the agency itself is too new to have a track record, the proposal writer substitutes the founder's credentials as an established yoga teacher and author, as well as the credibility offered through the participation of Sheriff Johnson, to establish credibility.

Advice About Mission Statements

It is not unusual for a grantmaker to request that an agency provide information about its mission in the proposal. The question then arises as to whether or not to include the agency's actual mission statement. My advice is this: if your agency has a succinct and compelling mission statement, you probably can include it verbatim. For many nonprofits, the reality is that their mission statements are neither succinct nor compelling. Too often, the mission statements I see are long, vague, and uninspiring. These mission statements are not going to help advance an agency's case for support. When faced with this reality, I rephrase the deficient mission statement into language that is far more passionate and compelling while remaining faithful to the agency's mission.

Time to Write!

Whether you work for a large, long-established institution or a new, grassroots agency, the "history and mission" or introductory section in a proposal demonstrates that your agency is credible and capable. Write at least three facts or factual statements about your agency's history or its major achievements and accomplishments. If motivated, write an entire introduction. You'll get extra credit if you do!

INTRODUCE THE OTHER MAIN CHARACTERS

The best stories feature characters we want to read about. Stories, whether real or fictional, are most memorable when they present compelling, believable characters. Think of *Oliver Twist*, *Scarlett O'Hara*, and *Sherlock Holmes*. The authors who created these iconic characters (Dickens, Mitchell, and Doyle, respectively) made them fascinating by giving them vivid personalities and distinctive traits. These are such engrossing characters that we'd follow them through chapters of travails and triumphs. Similarly, grantseekers must also present characters who are engaging to the reader. But unlike fiction writers, those of us who write grant proposals do not need to create characters from our imaginations. Rather, the main characters in a grant proposal are the real-life clients served by the nonprofit agency. And these individuals are every bit as fascinating, complex, and engaging as Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Becky Thatcher.

Writing About the Other Main Characters

In addition to introducing the nonprofit agency early in the proposal, grantseekers should also give the reader a little information about the story's other lead characters, namely, the agency's clients. Consider this a bit of foreshadowing, because these main characters will be revisited as the proposal's plot progresses, specifically in the needs or problem statement section of a proposal.

At the beginning of your proposal narrative, it is important for the reader to know what segment of the population is principally served by the agency. Does your agency provide services for the frail elderly? Youth at risk? Gays and lesbians? Elementary school children? Recent immigrants? People with certain health care needs? In other words, how does your agency define its primary constituency? Would this population remain the same if the agency received the requested grant funding, or would the agency expand its services to an additional segment of the population?

It is a very rare nonprofit agency that can legitimately claim to serve everyone. The world and its population are too big, and there are too many issues to address. Defining the client population narrows the scope. It shows the funder that the agency has identified which specific characters, out of the larger global cast, it serves. Having a defined client population also further demonstrates agency credibility because only a naive nonprofit agency or a very unusual one can honestly boast that it offers programs to meet the needs of every single person in every single community.

Writing About Main Characters Other Than People

So far, I've talked only about clients (characters) who are people. Yet primary "clients" are not always limited to the human race. Clients can also be injured marine mammals, old-growth redwood trees, or coral reefs. As grantwriters, we nevertheless must relate the significance of serving animals or plants back to people. Why is it important for an agency to serve the needs of marine mammals, majestic redwoods, or colorful coral reefs? When you work with a non-profit agency that deals with rehabilitating wild animals or preserving natural habitats, your grant proposal must discuss the impact these creatures or the environment has on the human population. For example, what will be lost if the white rhino becomes extinct? Why should people care if the wetlands cease to exist? If your proposal doesn't address questions like these, it is too easy for the reader simply to shrug and say, "So what?"—and then go on to the next proposal. Example 4.6 illustrates how an environmental agency effectively deals with this issue.

Example 4.6 When Clients Aren't People: Excerpt from an Environmental Agency Proposal

For generations, Northern Californians and others from across the country and around the world have vacationed, recreated, and relaxed at Lake Tahoe. However, burgeoning development and certain land management practices are damaging the health of the Lake Tahoe Basin's pristine environment. The mission of the League to Save Lake Tahoe is to find solutions to these serious issues.

Our goal is to "Keep Tahoe Blue" for future generations of visitors. Yet time is running out. Studies indicate that lake clarity is declining at an alarming rate, currently losing an average of a foot of clarity each year. Because the reasons for the loss of lake clarity are complex, the League is involved in numerous activities, which include administrative advocacy, public investment, and grassroots education.

ESTABLISH A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE

Just as good storytellers do, grantwriters must become adept at establishing a sense of time and place.

Creating a Sense of Time

Unlike fiction writers, who can spin tales about the past, present, or far into the distant future, proposal writers always write about the relatively near future. This is a maxim in grantseeking. Why? Because grantmakers will not fund an agency's prior work or activities. Foundations and corporations award grants to support *future* programs. Grantseeking is prospective. Therefore, you write proposals to secure funding for programs and activities that will be undertaken six months, a year, or, at the outside, perhaps two or three years in the future.

For this reason, it is critical for nonprofit agencies to plan ahead. Those nonprofit agencies following "best practices" within the field will periodically undertake a strategic planning process and formulate a strategic plan. Having a written strategic plan makes grantseeking that much easier. Without a comprehensive strategic plan, an agency is more likely to launch one ill-conceived program after another, reacting to potential funding opportunities rather than developing well-conceived programs and then proactively seeking the grant funding to support them.

Foundation and corporate grantmakers generally award grants for a one-year period. Some grantmakers offer multiyear funding—for a two- or three-year period, but never longer. This means that the time period discussed in our narrative proposals is a relatively short one and corresponds to the likely grant period. If you're seeking one-year grant funding, then you describe the work your agency will be doing in that corresponding one-year period. For simplicity and accounting ease, I recommend using your agency's fiscal year. In other words, when requesting grant funds, tell the funder what your agency will be doing and how the funds will be used to do it during a specific fiscal year. If it is early in your fiscal year (within the first six months), you are likely to be seeking funding that can be applied to the present fiscal year. However, if you are midway or more through a fiscal year, you are likely to be requesting funds for the next one.

When doing any sort of financial and cash flow planning, remember that you need to allow time for funders to read and evaluate submitted proposals. A cash grant does not arrive a day or a week or even a month after you submit your request. The proposal review process can take anywhere from two months (very fast track) to twelve months or more (in rare cases, as long as eighteen months). In my experience, the average review time is four to six months.

Creating a Sense of Place

Location, location, location. Those are the three most important words in real estate. Location is also an important concept to convey in a grant proposal. If the location is aptly described, the reader visualizes where the agency is doing its work and clients are being served. In a well-written proposal, you can figuratively bring a potential funder to the community in which your agency operates its programs—whether it is an inner-city neighborhood or a sparsely populated rural setting.

For fiction writers, the setting can be a gritty urban neighborhood or a desolate mountain range. It can be a foreign land or a setting as familiar as our own backyard. Similarly, the locations of our proposal stories vary greatly. This leads to another maxim in grantseeking: it is essential for your proposal to state where the nonprofit agency does its work. Why? Because as we discussed in Chapter Two, the vast majority of grantmakers set geographic boundaries for their grantmaking and will fund only those agencies that work and serve clients in a defined region. A funder may limit its grantmaking to a specific neighborhood, city, a county, a few counties, a region within a state (such as Northern California), a state, a region within the United States (such as the Pacific Northwest), a country, or a hemisphere. There are extremely rare cases where funders make grants to nonprofit agencies operating in any corner of the world. Corporate grantmakers tend to be especially firm about funding in specifically defined geographic areas, usually in communities where they are headquartered, operate manufacturing facilities, or have significant business operations.

Because grantmakers often use geography as a criterion when making funding decisions, it is wise to establish a sense of place early in your proposal narrative. This is another key way you can demonstrate to the funder that your agency fits within the funder's giving standards.

Examples 4.7 and 4.8 do an especially fine job of describing location.

Example 4.7
Describing the Location of a Rural Retreat Center

We write to request grant funding for a special capital project—to help renovate and restore “Our Lady of the Oaks,” a family-friendly, affordable Catholic retreat center nestled in the Sierra foothills. The Province acquired the 360-acre Oaks Retreat in the mid-1950s and renamed the site Our Lady of the Oaks. For nearly 50 years, the Province has operated the facility as a retreat and conference center, serving predominantly Catholic and Catholic-affiliated groups. Our Lady of the Oaks, which is also known as Applegate Villa, is located an hour’s drive east of Sacramento, just off I-80. To maintain affordability, Our Lady of the Oaks is decidedly rustic, yet comfortable. Most bedrooms sleep two, and all have shared bathrooms. There are more than a dozen buildings on the site, several dating back to the early 1900s when the original Oaks Retreat was a popular getaway lodge. Current buildings include the rickety main “Old Lodge,” the Main Lodge, a half dozen rustic cabins, a serene chapel, a conference room, a kitchen/dining hall, and administrative offices. The site also features an outdoor swimming pool and volleyball nets. Meals are served family-style in the dining room.

But the real attraction of Our Lady of the Oaks is its natural beauty. The center is located among pines and oaks at about 2,000-foot elevation in the Sierra foothills. A short walk from the main lodging facilities is a tranquil pond. Our Lady of the Oaks provides an ideal location for personal reflection, spiritual renewal, and contemplation. It is a place where people can escape from the pressing demands of daily life and rejuvenate. The center enables groups to come together, to refocus, to reflect, and to plan. Departing groups emerge reenergized and better prepared for work and volunteerism.

Both of the excerpts in Examples 4.7 and 4.8 do a fine job of transporting the reader to a physical place. In the first example, it is a rustic retreat center nestled in the Sierra foothills. In the second, it is the inner city. Where do your proposals take the funder?

Example 4.8
Describing the Location of an Urban Social Services Program

For our city's homeless population, life on the streets is rough and downright dangerous. Drug dealing, prostitution, and other criminal activity flourish around those individuals taking shelter in doorways and under freeway ramps. There are no available bathrooms, no toilets, showers, or sinks. To get a daily hot meal, one must line up early in front of the soup kitchen on 6th Avenue. With winter approaching, for many homeless individuals there's a greater urgency to find one of the coveted spaces in overnight shelters. For others, the arrival of colder days and nights just means putting on more layers of clothes. From our bustling building on Chicago's South Side, Helping Hands serves more than 1,000 nutritious hot meals daily and shelters up to 75 men and 25 women each night.

Time to Write!

Do your proposals adequately describe the geographic location and physical surroundings where your agency does its work? Here's a writing exercise for you to once again flex your writing muscle. I ask you to write three to five short phrases that paint a vivid picture of your agency's location.

SUMMARY

Some grant proposals seem to almost jump out of the pile of submissions and grab the reader from the very first word. Here's a review of the main points covered in this chapter; they can help your agency's proposals have the same captivating effect:

- Use a strong hook to grab and pull the reader into the story.
- Consider leading with an important fact, a key question, or a notable quote.
- Establish the credibility of your hero agency by describing prior accomplishments and achievements in the proposal's introduction section (also known as the "history and mission" section).

- Remember that not every mission statement is ready for “prime time” publication in a proposal.
- Specifically define the population being served by your agency. Your clients are the main characters in your proposal story. Describe what they have in common.
- Tell the funder where your agency does its work. Paint a vivid word picture of this location.
- Introduce the hero agency, the narrative’s main characters (agency clients), and the physical setting early in your proposal story.

The Need or Problem

Building Tension and Conflict into Your Story



chapter
FIVE

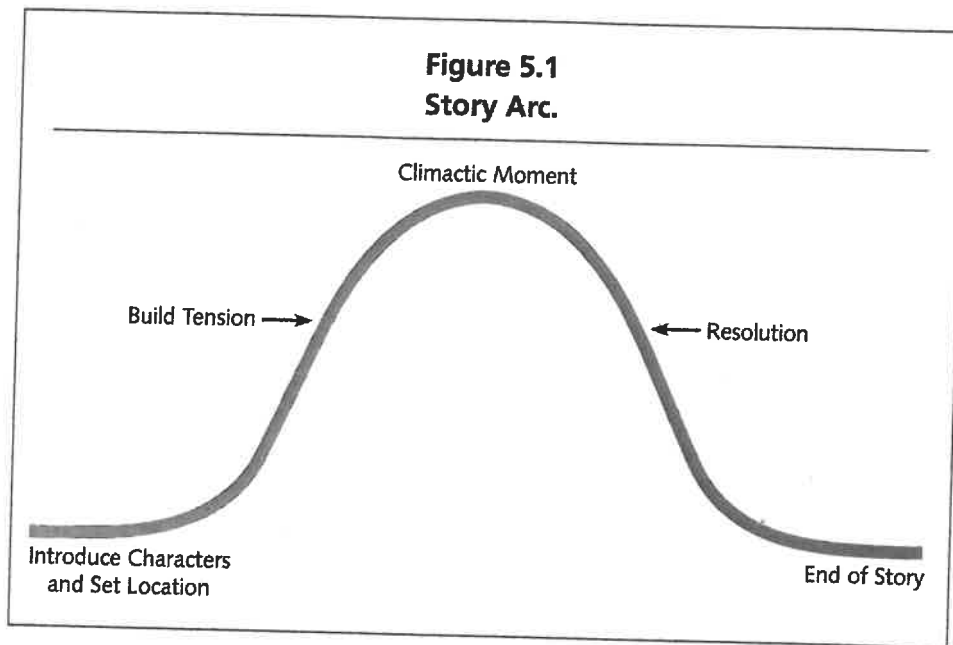
The plot thickens as we move further along in the grant proposal. Thus far, you've introduced the story's hero (your agency) and other main characters (agency clients). You've established the geographic setting. You may have foreshadowed that a problem exists. Now it's time to inject some real action into the narrative. This means unleashing the story's antagonist!

UNDERSTANDING THE STORY ARC

If one were to diagram a traditional story, the drawing would look a lot like a bell curve, a line gradually rising up, peaking, then falling back down. That would be a visual image of a story arc, which represents the unfolding of events (see Figure 5.1).

First, the storyteller invites the reader into the universe he or she has created. Characters are introduced. Time and setting are established. Then the story begins traveling up the arc with the introduction of conflict between the protagonist (the hero) and other lead characters on one side and the antagonist on the other. The drama unfolds. Tension begins to build. In the most compelling stories, the author brings readers to the edge of their seats.

Tension continues to mount until the tale reaches its climax. At this pivotal point, something significant, and usually dramatic, happens to one or more of



the main characters. Then the tension breaks. This is a cathartic moment, often for both the characters and the reader. What has occurred is so significant that the lives of one or more of the main characters will have changed forever. After this moment, the storyteller leads the reader back down the arc, providing a complete, satisfying resolution of the conflict and a wrap-up of the story.

In truly exceptional stories, something also happens to us as readers. Our view of the world changes. Outstanding grant proposals can have the same effect. They motivate a prospective funder to award a grant. And that's what it's all about.

In this chapter, I'll begin to describe the story arc in a grant proposal, showing how to build tension into your agency's proposal narratives. (In Chapter Six, I will deal with the story's actual climactic moment and demonstrate how to write a satisfying resolution.)

WHO IS THE ANTAGONIST?

Who is the antagonist in our proposal stories? Hint: it isn't a person. The antagonist is something larger than any single person. (Often something more diabolic than Sherlock Holmes's nemesis, Dr. Moriarty, and more terrifying than Harry

Potter's Lord Voldemort.) The antagonist in our proposal stories is the need or problem being addressed by our agency. The problem or need is frequently unwieldy and complex. And although we may have foreshadowed the problem at the beginning of our narrative (recall the important fact, key question, and notable quote from Chapter Four?), in this dedicated section in your proposal it is time to elaborate more fully.

If all were going well in our communities and if this were a perfect world, then there would be no reason for grantmakers and grantseekers to exist. Like dinosaurs, they would be rendered extinct. But everything is not okay in our communities. And this is not a perfect world. There are problems. Our communities have great, some would say overwhelming, needs. There are people who are homeless, hungry, and without employment. Others are afflicted with diseases like AIDS, cancer, and diabetes. Artists struggle to find places to perform their works or display their creations. Too many children do not get an adequate education. In many regions of the world the air, land, and water are polluted.

Funders understand that our society has numerous problems and that needs in our communities would often go unaddressed if it were not for the work being done by nonprofit agencies. Although most program officers try to keep abreast of the major social issues, the problems are complex, there is a great deal of information to absorb, and there are only so many hours in the day. We should not expect those individuals reviewing our grant proposals to understand every nuance of every issue. On occasion, they must be educated about the scope and breadth of community needs and problems in order to make informed choices about where to invest their organization's grant dollars. Even if funders thoroughly know of and understand a particular problem or issue, they want you to demonstrate that your agency does too. Program officers expect your agency's staff to be knowledgeable about the field (environment, education, health care, and the like) and the community where the agency provides its services. For these reasons, it is essential for our proposals to thoroughly answer the question, *What is the problem or need that's being addressed by the nonprofit agency?*

The section of a proposal where this question is answered is known as the problem or needs statement. Using the storytelling approach to grantseeking, this is the proposal section where you lead the reader up the story arc by showing the conflict between main characters and the antagonist. This is absolutely the most important, necessary section in your agency's proposal. Without a specifically defined problem or need, there is simply no reason for the funder to award

your agency a grant. And if there is no problem, then there is no reason for your agency even to exist.

It is my observation that novice grantwriters often gloss over or skip altogether this ultra-important section. They assume that funders are already fully informed about a problem or issue. And they do not realize how crucial it is to demonstrate the agency's knowledge. Too often, inexperienced grantwriters are in too big of a hurry to get to the project description or methods section. Yet a good, effective story cannot be rushed. It needs to unfold logically.

HOW LONG SHOULD THE NEEDS SECTION BE?

The proposal reviewer must understand the seriousness and urgency of the problem if he or she is to respond. In this case, responding means making a grant. This is why grantwriters must be articulate and persuasive. Because the problem or need is at the heart of your story, this section should be the lengthiest one in your narrative. How long should it be? In a five-page narrative, the needs section might run a page or a page and a half. A proposal twice as long—say ten pages—would merit a two- to three-page discussion of the need or problem being addressed. Remember, an accomplished author takes the reader on a long ride up the story arc, carefully building the conflict and layering the tension. This lays the foundation for everything else that is to come—namely, the climactic moment and the resolution. Take the proposal reader on a similar journey.

APPLYING THE STORYTELLING METHOD

To write a strong needs or problem statement, grantwriters must be especially articulate, persuasive, and thorough without overstating the problem or being overly dramatic. As a journalism major, I learned the “who, what, when, where, why” method of writing a lead paragraph. This approach applies very well to the drafting of the problem or needs statement. A proposal will have successfully described the problem or need if it has answered the following questions:

- *Who* are the people who have the need or problem?
- *Where* do the people with the problem or need live?
- *When* is the problem or need made evident?
- *Why* does the problem or need occur?
- *What* is the problem with the problem?

Many grantwriters, and you may be among them, find that these questions provide a solid skeleton on which to hang their words and build their narrative. Others may have difficulty applying this framework. In particular, grantwriters sometimes struggle to make sense of the subtle distinctions among the what, when, and why questions. Let me try to help you. My approach is to encourage you to think more like a storyteller when drafting the needs or problem statement. I've found that in doing so you are likely to answer these fundamental questions while weaving together a cohesive and persuasive story.

Presenting the Antagonist

To begin, think about those conditions, circumstances, or forces (collectively, I'll call these societal forces) in your community that are having a negative impact on a segment of the population, namely those people served by your agency. A good example of such a societal force is rampant unemployment and a lack of economic opportunities or jobs in a particular community or neighborhood. Consider the impact of this situation on the people living in this community, which we'll call Central City. When people do not have access to jobs or economic opportunities, there is apt to be poverty, homelessness, and crime. This is a serious situation in need of a response, a solution. Let's consider how the problem can be framed.

- Who are the people with the need, and where do they live? People residing in Central City.
- When is the problem or need made evident? When poverty rates, homelessness, and criminal activity are higher in Central City than in other neighborhoods. Incorporating relevant statistics will help make the case. (This topic is addressed in more detail later in the chapter.)
- Why does the problem or need occur? Obviously, this is a complex question with a complex answer. The lack of educational opportunities (good schools) and employment opportunities (factories, retail businesses, service and technology industries, and so on) are likely factors. A large recent immigrant, non-English-speaking population may be another. A failing infrastructure and an inadequate public transportation system may be additional contributing factors. (Once again, including data will support the case.)
- What is the problem with this problem? One can argue that continuing poverty, homelessness, and crime have higher and more long-term costs than the

costs of addressing and trying to fix the problem. There are also human costs in terms of lost opportunities and potential.

There you have it: a needs statement in skeletal form. A skillful writer, armed with more in-depth information and data, can expand on this framework and draft a compelling needs statement.

Now imagine a nonprofit agency working in the economically depressed Central City neighborhood, an agency whose mission is to provide job training and employment skills to community residents. The agency is the hero-protagonist in a proposal narrative facing off against a formidable foe, an antagonist, which is the very serious problem of high unemployment coupled with a lack of employment opportunities. Truly, this makes for a compelling story.

Time to Write!

Have a new request in mind or one that could use some fine-tuning? Create a framework for your need or problem statement by providing brief answers to the following questions:

- Who?
 - Where?
 - When?
 - Why?
 - What?
-

Examples 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 are three excellent, and very different, illustrations of how to describe the antagonist—the need or problem—in our proposal stories.

Telling the Back Story

Before writing a novel, an author needs to know everything he can about his characters: their strengths, weaknesses, motivations, family backgrounds, education, work experience. All of this information helps define the characters and make them more believable. In fact, some writers even write lengthy biographical sketches about their main characters, including details about their families, friends, and careers.

Example 5.1
The Proposal Antagonist: Describing the Need
in a Child Advocates Proposal

In 2005, 5,500 children in Bexar County were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect, representing nearly 10% of all confirmed child abuse victims in the state. Of these confirmed victims, 1,848 children were removed from their homes and placed in state care. Far from a haven from abuse, the overburdened and under-resourced state care system in many ways revictimizes an intensely vulnerable group of children.

- There are not enough foster homes and other temporary housing facilities for children in care in San Antonio, necessitating that siblings often be separated and placed in homes from blocks to hundreds of miles apart.
- There are not enough Child Protective Services caseworkers to diligently serve each child, ensuring that their needs are met while they are in the system. Even as reform measures are implemented, many CPS caseworkers are carrying up to 80 cases each. There are simply not enough hours in the day for caseworkers to attend to all of the children on their caseload.
- Child abuse legal cases are on the rise. According to Bexar County Courthouse statistics, Bexar County saw 1,416 cases in 2004 up from 884 in 2003—a 60% increase. Minimum requirements for court-appointed attorneys for children do not ensure effective advocacy for each child on these cases.

These factors add up to a painful and scary time for children. Abused and neglected children desperately need an advocate to be a consistent adult presence while they move through the system. They need an advocate to listen to their needs and concerns, to give them a voice in the legal process that determines their futures, and to be there for them as they grieve their losses and vent their frustrations and fears.

Note: This needs statement was written by Jennifer Yeagley, formerly with Child Advocates San Antonio (CASA) and currently the grants manager at LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, San Francisco.

Example 5.2

Describing the Need for Philanthropy By Design

Philanthropy By Design's (PBD's) work addresses two significant community needs. First, the vast majority of nonprofit agencies in our region do not have the financial resources to make interior improvements and purchase upgraded furnishings. Many agencies make do with drab interior spaces and/or with furniture that is damaged, dingy, or ill suited for its present purpose. For example, it is not unusual for nonprofit agencies to use old and outdated desks that were not designed for computer work and are therefore uncomfortable, and occasionally unsafe, for employees. Nonprofit agencies do not operate effectively and efficiently in such dreary environments. Annually, PBD receives between 30 and 40 requests—and this number is steadily growing—from nonprofit agencies that want our help in improving their interior spaces.

The second need addressed by PBD concerns the environment. Each year, hundreds of Bay Area businesses and hotels update and replace their current furnishings. Others simply close or go out of business. Sometimes unwanted or unneeded furnishings are sold to liquidators, but frequently these items—amounting to hundreds of tons annually—are destined for the landfill. PBD seeks to procure such quality furnishings and recycle them for reuse in local nonprofit agencies. During the past 11 years, PBD has recycled approximately 500 tons of furnishings, placing such items as desks, chairs, tables, sofas, and workstations with community nonprofits.

This material is referred to as the back story, the so-called story behind the story. Much of this back-story material never makes it into the novel itself because its purpose is really to serve the writer. Yet in grantwriting it is important for nonprofit agencies to include back-story information in the proposal. For example, in the problem or needs section, it is essential for the agency to acknowledge other nonprofits in the community that are working to address the same problem. Nonprofits typically don't work in a vacuum. Most likely, other agencies are also working to address the same problem or issue within the same geographic area, and the existence of these other nonprofits should be

Example 5.3
Describing the Need for The Other Bar

A man falls into a hole so deep he can't get out. A doctor walks by, and the man calls for help. The doctor writes a prescription, tosses it into the hole, and walks on. A priest walks by, and the man tries again. The priest writes a prayer, tosses it into the hole, and walks on. Finally a friend walks by, and again the man asks for help. To his surprise, the friend jumps in with him. "Why did you do that?" the man asks. "Now we're both in the hole." "Yes," the friend responds. "But I've been in this hole before, and I know the way out." (anonymous author)

Need for The Other Bar

There is an overwhelming need for assistance for those in the legal profession struggling with alcoholism and drug dependency. The American Bar Association estimates that 15 to 20% of attorneys and judges suffer from alcohol or drug addiction, a rate nearly twice that of the general population. As many as 50 to 70% of the lawyers who are brought before Bar disciplinary committees are chemically dependent. At any one time, approximately 34,000 members of the California State Bar are having problems with alcohol or drugs.

Substance abuse and recovery are difficult for legal professionals and their families. Yet there are others who suffer greatly from impaired lawyers: the clients relying on them. Whether involved in the courts because of civil or criminal matters or seeking private advice about a range of problems (housing, divorce, immigration), clients are victims of alcoholic or drug-addicted lawyers. Their cases may receive insufficient or incompetent attention, deadlines may be missed, and their best outcomes made impossible. Clients may wind up in prison, poor, or without custody of their children because of poor legal service rendered by counsel impaired by alcohol or drug addiction.

It is a failure of the legal profession and of this society's commitment to justice for clients to be victimized by reliance on impaired lawyers. There is a clear public interest in ensuring that lawyers avoid becoming impaired and, if they do succumb, that they get the speediest help with their alcohol or drug problems, so they can be worthy of the trust that their community and their clients place in them.

Note: This excerpt was written by fundraising consultant Judy Kunofsky.

recognized. By doing so, you demonstrate to potential funders that your agency is aware of what is happening in the greater community, and this in turn further demonstrates your agency's credibility.

And because other agencies are working to solve the same problem or unmet community need, your agency's proposal also should explain what specific niche its programs fill. How does its work differ from or complement work being done by other agencies? How is your agency distinguishable from all the others? Perhaps your agency uses different methods to confront the problem and serve clients. Perhaps the agency anticipates achieving different objectives or results. Perhaps it reaches a slightly different segment of the population that otherwise wouldn't be served. Or perhaps the problem is simply so big with so many unserved clients that several agencies in a given community can work on the same issue, each striving to find a solution.

The reason this back-story information is important is that grantmakers want to avoid funding duplicated services. They want to invest their money with agencies that are most likely to have the greatest impact on society. Example 5.4 shows how to acknowledge the work being done by other agencies while promoting your agency's case for support.

Example 5.4 **Acknowledging Other** **Child Care Centers**

Two other early child-care development centers operate in the South of Main Street Area: Little Friends Preschool and St. Bartholomew's Child Care Center. Whereas the South of Main Street Child Care Center (SOMSCC) provides care for infants (as young as three months) and toddlers, Little Friends does not, limiting its enrollment to children ages 3½ to 6. And whereas St. Bartholomew's offers care for infants through preschoolers, it is a much smaller child care center with a total of 45 total spaces compared to SOMSCC's 125. Currently, all three centers have lengthy waitlists (up to two years), particularly for subsidized and scholarship slots at all age levels. This demonstrates the urgent need for more affordable early child care in the South of Main Street Area.

JOINING FORCES WITH OTHER HEROIC AGENCIES

Sometimes a problem, the antagonist, requires the collaborative attention of two or more heroic nonprofit agencies. Collaborations between or among nonprofit agencies have become quite common in recent years. When two or more nonprofit agencies join forces to attack a common foe, the whole is often greater than the sum of the parts. Staff expertise, experience, and other resources combine to bring a more efficient delivery of services. Therefore, collaborations are often encouraged and favored by the grantmaking community. Collaborations provide a means for stretching donated dollars even further, thereby making the funder's investment more worthwhile, as either more clients are reached or those who are reached are better served.

If your agency will partner or collaborate with another nonprofit agency, this is a key element in your proposal story. The teaming of two heroes is always an exciting adventure. Be certain that your narrative captures that excitement. Be specific about each agency's particular role and responsibilities.

USING DATA AND STATISTICS EFFECTIVELY

In describing the problem or need, a judicious use of data and statistics can help strengthen your agency's story by demonstrating the magnitude of the problem. Numbers, graphs, and charts can visually convey mounds of information and put a large exclamation point on the problem. I use the term "judicious" deliberately. Include data and statistics wisely, which usually means sparingly. Forcing the reader to swim through a sea of numbers does little, if anything, to bolster your agency's case. You want to select data that are *relevant*, which means data that are both current and geographically appropriate.

What data to include in a proposal story is a very important consideration, as is substantiating the data. For example, one of my colleagues works for a nonprofit agency whose mission is to eradicate breast cancer; to achieve this mission, the agency provides breast cancer education and advocacy primarily to residents of a particular county. Her agency has volumes of data regarding the incidence of breast cancer. Which ones should she include in a grant proposal?

She could report that 10 percent of females in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetimes. This is a powerful fact. She has another piece of data: one out of eight women (or 12.5 percent) living in the county served by her agency will be diagnosed with breast cancer. This is another

powerful factual statement. If I were to advise her, I would include both statistics in a proposal, assuming both are timely and report current data. The second statistic is geographically relevant because it is specific to the county being served. The first statistic provides a context and highlights the fact that the incidence of breast cancer is even higher in this county than the national average.

Citing Sources, Using Footnotes, and Checking Facts

Sources Always substantiate data included in a proposal by identifying their source. What's a valid source? Primary sources, such as census data and research studies published by reputable institutions, are best. Opinion blogs and tabloid newspapers are not. You always want to cite the best source possible.

Footnotes As a general rule, avoid using footnotes in your proposal stories. Whereas footnotes that cite source materials are acceptable in college papers and theses, they are not in grant proposals. Footnotes are distracting and take the reader out of the narrative flow of the story. Rather than using footnotes, incorporate the source of information and date within the narrative itself. Let me provide you with two options on how to do this. In the first option, the source is included in the sentence with the factual statement; in the second, citation of the source immediately follows the factual statement.

- According to a 2008 study published by the Groverdale Police Department, juvenile crime has increased 22 percent over the past five years in the Riverfront district.
- Juvenile crime has increased 22 percent over the past five years in the Riverfront district. *2008 Report on Neighborhood Crime by the Groverdale Police Department.*

As is true with most “rules,” there is usually at least one exception. The exception to the “no footnote” rule in proposals concerns submissions to a very small group of grantmakers, including some federal government agencies and a few large foundations. These funders consider footnotes in proposals to be acceptable. During my career, I have included footnotes in my proposals only a handful of times—when I was absolutely certain that doing so would be in keeping with the funder’s institutional culture. In all other circumstances, I have not.

Facts Don't exaggerate the problem just to make your case. Allow the facts to speak for themselves. Program officers, foundation trustees, and those other folks who review proposals and make funding decisions are intelligent people who will recognize embellishments and inconsistencies when they see them. Program officers may already have expert knowledge of the issue being presented or may undertake their own independent research. If they discover information that contradicts a portion of your agency's story, they are likely to question the validity of the entire proposal. So stick to the straight story. Double-check all your facts. If you do, your agency will be seen as a credible source of information and will have the reader's trust from the proposal's opening paragraph till the closing sentence.

Examples 5.5 and 5.6 do an outstanding job of incorporating relevant data to document the need.

PUTTING A HUMAN FACE ON THE PROBLEM

"A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic" is a quote attributed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. Setting aside the unfathomable circumstances that likely preceded his statement, the point he made is well taken. Numbers alone, no matter how outrageous, do not evoke the same emotional response as one strong personal story. For this reason, frequently I will incorporate an anecdote or client story in my proposals.

I include anecdotes when I am reasonably confident that the funder has a favorable opinion of them. In my experience, smaller family foundations and corporate giving programs are receptive to anecdotes and client stories. These funders tend to "give from their hearts." Large institutional funders are not as favorable, for they tend to "give from their heads." Also, funders in different regions of the country seem to respond differently to the inclusion of anecdotes and client stories. Once again, in my experience, grantmakers in the San Francisco Bay Area are more receptive to anecdotes and client stories, whereas grantmakers in other regions are not. The lesson here is: know your funder.

A limited use of anecdotes (one or two) in the narrative serves an important purpose. Anecdotes have the ability to transform a complex societal problem into a very personal one. They also vividly show the impact that an antagonistic societal force can have on a single person, making it more likely that the reader will be able to relate to the issue.

Example 5.5 Documenting the Community Need in a Planned Parenthood Proposal

For the past five years, teen birthrates have declined in California. Between 1995 and 1996, the rate fell 9% to an average of 58 babies for every 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17. This downward trend proves concretely that funds invested by the government and the private sector in education and prevention programs are indeed working. Yet much work remains to be done.

A 1996 study by University of California researchers and the Center for Health Training identified 82 California communities, "hot spots," where the birthrate for teens is 81 or more per 1,000 teens ages 15 to 17. Planned Parenthood: Shasta Diablo (PPSD) serves three of these communities: Richmond, Vallejo, and Clearlake. PPSD serves other communities, including Concord, Antioch, Pittsburg, Napa, Chico, and Fairfield, where the teen birthrate is significantly above the statewide average.

The consequences for sexually active young women who are not effective contraceptive users are great. Almost half of all teen pregnancies end in birth, slightly more than one-third in abortion, and the rest in miscarriage. The way in which teens resolve their pregnancies is determined largely by their socioeconomic status. Young women from middle-class families generally have abortions. Childbearing, on the other hand, is concentrated among low-income teens; more than 80% decide to have and keep their babies. Only one in ten young mothers is married by the time of the birth of the child, 50% require public assistance to cover medical expenses and subsequent well-baby care, and 30% drop out of high school. Early childbearing has a lasting impact on the lives and future of low-income women and their children.

In addition to the risk of becoming pregnant, young people are contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Despite a historic drop in AIDS cases and deaths from 1994 to mid-1997, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the rate of new infections in young people ages 13 to 24 contracting HIV has not changed.

Note: This excerpt was written by fundraising consultant Laura McCrea and Meike Weyrauch, director of resource development, Planned Parenthood: Shasta Diablo.

Example 5.6
Weaving Data into
a Proposal for Wildlife Preservation

Because no state agency is keeping comprehensive records on poaching activities and enforcement, the exact magnitude of poaching crimes in California is unknown. But statistics collected by the Mountain Lion Foundation show that, far from being isolated incidents, commercial poaching operations have become a multimillion-dollar industry.

The Senate Office of Research estimates that poachers can get \$1,000 to \$3,000 per ounce for dried and powdered bear gallbladders on the Asian market. Mountain lion gallbladders are indistinguishable from bear gallbladders, so poachers often take both species illegally. Bear paws bring \$30 to \$100 each. As many as 200 black bears were recently killed by one poaching ring in Redding, California. In Tulare County undercover agents bought \$7,000 worth of illegal wildlife hides and parts from poachers, including 55 bobcats, parts of 16 bears, three whole bears, two mountain lions, and dozens of other wildlife. In all, 33 people were arrested and charged for poaching crimes in this one sting operation. Department of Fish and Game personnel agree that arrests for poaching represent only the tip of the iceberg.

Poaching on such a grand scale has a powerful effect on our wildlife and is threatening the very survival of some species. For instance, the number of bears being taken illegally each year in California is at least equal to the number being killed by hunters with permits (700 to 900 in recent years). This potentially represents an annual reduction in the bear population of 12 to 20%. Department of Fish and Game statistics for last year showed that the total deer kill included 64,000 legal kills and an estimated 100,000 illegal kills. Furthermore, a report by the California Department of Parks and Recreation ranked poaching as the third biggest threat to park wildlife.

Note: This example was written by Susan Fox, fundraising consultant and coauthor of *Grant Proposal Makeover: Transform Your Request from No to Yes*.

Create tension in your agency's narrative by describing the challenges and struggles faced by one of your agency's clients. What was life like for the individual before he or she received the services offered by your agency? How has the delivery of such services changed or improved this person's life? By answering these questions, an anecdotal story provides both dramatic tension and hope—hope that the antagonistic force can be confronted and ultimately defeated.

That's because an appropriate anecdote will show the nonprofit agency successfully intervening in the life of a client and thereby making a significant difference. Clearly, the best anecdotes to include in your proposal narratives are stories of client successes. Examples 5.7 and 5.8 illustrate how to do this.

One person's success story stands in stark contrast to the thousands of untold stories of people whose lives have yet to be positively touched by your nonprofit agency. Writing this portion of the proposal narrative is therefore a bit of a

Example 5.7

Including a Client Anecdote in a Library Outreach Proposal

Each year, the library's "Books on the Go" program reaches hundreds of individuals, the majority of whom are seniors who cannot leave their homes. So instead of people coming to the library, the library goes to them. Jane is one of the people served by "Books on the Go" last year. Jane is 85 and disabled, living alone and on a fixed income. A former schoolteacher, Jane has been an avid reader all her life. Until a few years ago, Jane used to walk the six blocks to the library almost every week. But then health problems struck, and Jane hasn't been able to get to the library since.

Last year Jane signed up for the "Books on the Go" program. Now Jane is visited monthly by a library volunteer who brings a selection of books for Jane to look through, from which she can choose books to check out till the following month. (To make certain the book selection is appropriate, each participant can indicate the type of books he or she prefers.) Jane is one of the program's most voracious readers, and each month looks forward to seeing the brightly painted "Books on the Go" van pull up outside her home. Jane is not alone. Currently, more than 500 individuals are served by this beloved program.

Example 5.8
Including a Client Anecdote in a Prison Reform Proposal

On August 19, 2005, 19-year-old Joseph Maldonado hanged himself in the CHAD youth prison. Joseph had been in solitary confinement for eight weeks and routinely denied mental health care. An official report concluded that neglect contributed to his death.

On the six-month anniversary of his death, Books Not Bars held a vigil. A month later Joseph's sister, Renee Nuñez, led a No More Lives Lost march on Sacramento. She gave exclusive interviews (arranged by Books Not Bars) to the *Sacramento Bee* and three television stations to tell her story and share memories of Joseph. Next month her op-ed will run in the *LA Times*. In June, she will testify before the state legislature in the confirmation hearing for CYA Chief Bernie Warner.

Without Books Not Bars, there is no outlet for Renee. Her story may emerge, but she could not emerge as a central figure for reform debate.

Note: This excerpt was written by consultant Marie Beichert.

balancing act between demonstrating that an urgent need exists and showing the reader that it is possible to meet this need, no matter how great.

GIVING THE LEAD CHARACTERS A VOICE

In most stories, readers get further insight into the characters through dialogue—what the characters actually say and how they say it. Are you aware that you can use dialogue in your proposal stories as well? In grant proposals, client quotes and testimonials serve as the dialogue.

Quotes are especially powerful because through them the proposal reviewer “hears” directly from your agency’s clients in their own words. Information is no longer being filtered through your voice as the writer, but instead comes straight from the heart and soul of the people who have been served by the agency. But keep in mind the adage: less is more. Use client quotes and testimonials sparingly. A single eloquent quote that jumps off the page will deliver a greater emotional punch than a series of lackluster quotes.

Examples 5.9 and 5.10 are excerpts from proposals that do their own “talking.”

Example 5.10
Client Quotes in a Philanthropy By Design Proposal

From the beginning, Philanthropy By Design (PBD) has filled an important need within the nonprofit community, and our work is deeply appreciated. Here is what two agencies say about PBD: "My agency had no resources to improve the interiors of our buildings, some of which have not been redecorated in 25 to 35 years. PBD's talents and energy are a real blessing for our programs," states Leon Washington, executive director of the Sheffield Center, which provides housing for at-risk youth. "The assistance provided by PBD is far more significant than just improving a facility's ambiance. An appropriate physical setting is a crucial component of substance abuse treatment. In a very true sense, the work of the PBD team is part of the rehabilitative process when dealing with emotionally troubled youth," says Javier Martinez, Sheffield Centers' facilities manager.

Example 5.9
Incorporating Dialogue: Urban Shakespeare Proposal

The youth served by the Urban Shakespeare program say it best.

- "Urban Shakespeare introduced me to a whole new language I didn't even know existed. Now I love the theater! I especially liked doing the pretend sword fights and death scenes. That was cool," says Jimmy, age 14, who participated in last year's program.
- "I really like Shakespeare. He's a cool dude and a good writer. If he were alive today, he'd be bigger than Stephen King!" says Marissa, age 11, a current participant.

WHOSE NEED IS IT ANYWAY?

I want to be absolutely clear about something. The problem or need, the antagonist that I've been discussing, is the one faced by your agency's clients. Their needs are the focal point of a successful grant proposal. A grant proposal is *not* about the needs of the nonprofit agency.

This can be a confusing issue for grantwriters, especially those new to the field, so let me offer some further clarification. Suppose an agency is in need of new capital equipment, specifically new computers. The agency shouldn't seek grant support to purchase new computers by making the case that its staff members will benefit. Instead, the agency should keep the spotlight on the clients—the main characters of its story. The proposal narrative should establish a link between the much-needed computers and the agency's delivery of client services. Would services be improved if staff had faster, more reliable equipment? Would the agency be able to serve more clients thanks to the enhanced capabilities provided by new computers? In a compelling narrative, the answer to both of these questions would be yes. And that's the story to present to potential funders.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Drafting a compelling need statement is admittedly one of the more challenging tasks for a grantwriter. If you fail to present a worthy need (in other words, if the antagonist is not a believable villain), the reader is apt to have doubts about the validity of the request or to stop reading altogether. I hope I gave you many tips that you'll find useful the next time you sit down to write this section. One final proposal excerpt (Example 5.11 on the next page) does an outstanding job of pulling it all together.

SUMMARY

Here's a brief summary of the key points I covered in the chapter; they will help you present your story's antagonist—that problem or need typically caused by complex societal forces. Your objective is to lead the reader up the story arc by building conflict and tension. You will succeed if you do the following:

- Understand that without a problem or unmet need, there's no reason for your agency to exist or for the grantmaker to provide funding.
- Identify your agency's niche in the community, while acknowledging the work being done by other nonprofit agencies.

Example 5.11

Describing the Need for Petaluma Bounty

Petaluma is a semi-rural city of 56,000 people located at the southern end of Sonoma County. Known for its riverfront setting and Victorian charm, Petaluma is called “gateway to the Wine Country” and is home to several leading organic food processing companies.

Amid the bounty of food on our grocery shelves imported from all over the world, and despite our rich agricultural heritage, Petaluma’s food system is leaving many in our community undernourished, unhealthy, and just plain hungry. Although not apparent to the casual observer, there are many families and individuals in Petaluma who do not earn enough to make ends meet and who are suffering the effects of food insecurity and poor nutrition. On May 7, 2006, *The New York Times* reported that this area has the third highest cost of living in the nation, with housing costs eating up 50% or more of many households’ monthly income. A growing number of Petaluma families are forced each month to decide between paying rent or buying healthy food:

- More than 20% of children in Petaluma schools are enrolled in free or reduced school meal programs based on their family income levels (many more are eligible, but not enrolled).
- From Summer 2005 to the present, the number of households provided with meals by the Interfaith Pantry (which Petaluma Bounty helped create) has jumped from 16 to almost 100.
- At a recent meeting convened by Petaluma Bounty, each emergency food provider projected continued increases in demand for supplemental food, while noting that the inventory at our local food bank is lower than ever before.

As Sonoma County’s wine grape growers and housing developers attempt to meet growing demand for their products, rural land becomes less and less affordable to small-scale vegetable and fruit farmers. Meanwhile, global food conglomerates aggressively market “value-added” food products as much for their entertainment value as for

nutrition. Lower-income households are hit the hardest by these forces, experiencing more nutrition-related health problems (such as obesity and type II diabetes) than the rest of the population, and contributing to our overburdened health care system.

Aside from the ever-diminishing nutritional value of much of our food—especially that which is affordable to low-income people—the current food system contributes to serious social and environmental problems, chief among them depletion of topsoil and groundwater pollution from conventional agriculture; loss of small-scale family farms and the critical food and species diversity that such farming supports; fossil-fuel dependence and greenhouse gas emissions from the long-distance transport of food; and loss of local food dollars to distant shareholders who have little investment in our local community.

For Petaluma today, a comprehensive approach to community food security is of paramount importance in the face of the growing number of families facing food insecurity on a daily basis and the many additional unwelcome impacts that this food system brings with it, both locally and globally.

Petaluma is known for creativity, compassion, and considerable resources. The city can boast of strong community involvement, a rich history of cross-institutional partnerships, and a vibrant agricultural heritage. For these reasons, we are confident that we can succeed, even with such an ambitious program.

Note: This example was written by fundraising consultant Judy Kunofsky.

- Use relevant data and statistical information judiciously to strengthen your case for support. Data are relevant when they are current and geographically relevant.
- Cite the sources of all data within the narrative itself and avoid (in most circumstances) using footnotes.
- Give the problem a human face by incorporating one or two anecdotes in your proposal when appropriate.
- Use client quotes and testimonials as the dialogue in your proposal story.
- Write about clients' problems or unmet needs, not the agency's.