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# Promoting Innovation in the Workplace: The Internal Proposal

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*Today's managers expect employees to be able to contribute not just their labor but also their analysis and ideas, yet little training is provided for writing the major document that contains such ideas: the internal proposal. Business and academic textbooks, as well as academic courses, focus almost entirely on external proposals, which are most appropriate in areas such as consulting and sales. The internal proposal (also known as the justification report), on the other hand, is applicable for almost any student's future career. It provides an opportunity for students to develop the competence and confidence to express their ideas in the workplace, encouraging them to demonstrate awareness and initiative, utilize problem-solving skills, and create a persuasive strategy. Because students are motivated to complete this real-world assignment, it also inspires some of their best work.*

Keywords: Business proposals, internal proposals, justification reports, teaching proposal writing, teaching report writing

**W**HETHER THE TERMINOLOGY is "Total Quality Management" (TQM), Six Sigma Quality, empowerment, or teamwork, one of the main themes promoted in today's workplace is that employees are expected to contribute actively to the direction of their organization. Therefore, students should not expect simply to be told what to do once they are hired; they should be prepared to participate by sharing their ideas, both orally and in writing. While making increasing demands on workers, however, the workplace usually does not provide much training to help employees to promote their ideas through proposal writing. One Fortune 500 sales executive interviewed by Joseph Conlin (1998) fondly remembers a time over a decade ago when salespeople were provided with the support of a typing pool and boilerplate proposals. Now salespeople in the same company are simply handed a laptop and told to develop their own prototypes. The

result, he laments, is that “no one can write any more” (Conlin, p. 72).

Students often do not receive much preparation from their academic training either. The fortunate few are taught proposal writing in a required or elective business communication course, but the assignments generally use imaginary scenarios, and they are written for the teacher as audience (Wahlstrom, 2002). Students are often not required to do complex business writing in their own entry-level or part-time jobs, so they fail to see a clear connection between writing and work. The solution is to ask students to write an internal proposal.

I teach both internal and external proposals together, but I sell students on the internal proposal by telling them that it will be easier for them. It is often true that if students have noticed that a change is needed in their workplace, chances are good that they have already thought about this subject a great deal, discussed it with others, and even gathered evidence. Students are more motivated to write about a subject of personal interest, and they are certainly better qualified to write than they would be if they were simply to imagine a scenario. They also learn more as they analyze the real-life issues, arguments, and facts relevant to their proposals.

### **Benefits of Teaching the Internal Proposal**

The result, as you may expect, is better quality work. The proposal assignment usually generates the best quality work that I see all semester from a student (for an example, see Appendix A). The assignment also ensures that students will be better prepared for the workplace in terms of their analytical and persuasive writing skills. Once students have completed a good proposal, they also have more confidence in expressing their ideas in the workplace.

Many students actually submit their proposals within their organizations, allowing the students to see some real-world results. Students have proposed new equipment purchases such as new forklifts, new computers, or new security systems. They have suggested improved inventory and ordering processes, new hiring procedures, and new scheduling systems. It is exciting for me as a

teacher to watch students discover the value of their own ideas and then announce, "I'm going to send it in!"

Developing proposals also brings many career advantages for students. Unsolicited internal proposals are usually considered impressive when submitted by entry-level employees, since most employees will complain about a problem or a needed change, but few will actually make the effort to express their ideas constructively in a well thought-out piece of writing. Students who can write internal proposals will have the coveted "competitive advantage," since this kind of writing demonstrates initiative, enthusiasm, and excellent communication skills. These proposals can also be added to portfolios to present to potential employers.

### **Literature on Proposal Writing**

Several good books on proposal writing are currently available. My recent favorites are by Weiss (1999) and Johnson-Sheehan (2002). Weiss offers excellent advice specifically for consultants, while Johnson-Sheehan provides a somewhat broader perspective. Both authors take the reader through the proposal writing process and provide models. However, like all the other proposal books that I have found, they focus exclusively on external proposals.

### **Business Communication Textbooks**

The same is true for most business communication textbooks, in that they generally include only a brief explanation of internal proposals and an example or two. Some texts (Boone et al., 1999; Krizan et al., 2002; Lehman & Dufrene, 2002; Penrose et al., 2001; Thill et al., 2002) distinguish between external and internal proposals, defining internal proposals as those offered to suggest changes and solve problems within an organization, as opposed to external proposals, which are offered to prospective clients and government organizations.

Part of the problem is an issue of semantics, in that some authors use different terms to describe internal proposals. Guffey et al. (2001) use the term "justification/recommendation report," and they present one of the best examples of what I would term a

persuasive internal proposal (see p. 429). Guffey et al. state that justification/recommendation reports are used to present new ideas for purchases or changes in operations, programs, or personnel. Locker (2000) presents three different categories: justification reports to justify the need for a purchase, investment, personnel, or procedure; problem-solving reports to identify the cause of an organizational problem and recommend a solution, and problem-solving memos to analyze an internal problem and explain a solution (p. 366, 228). Her best example of what I would call an internal proposal is found in the persuasive messages chapter (see p. 243). However, a problem-solving memo does not include all the necessary elements of an internal proposal or justification report. The report format is more demanding, since as Guffey et al. explain, the author is required to “analyze alternatives, interpret findings, and make recommendations” (p. 342). I would add that a work plan is necessary to address scheduling, staffing, and budget planning. In summary, Thill et al. (2002) provide my favorite solution to this problem of semantics in their definition: “Justification reports are internal proposals . . .” (p. 314).

Textbook authors also make distinctions between short and long, or informal and formal proposals, leading to format differences. External proposals tend to be longer and more formal, including many distinct sections. In contrast, most internal proposals are short and informal, following the need for concise wording in internal communication, and thus they are generally presented in memo format. Nearly all of the textbook authors use the memo format in their sample internal proposals or justification reports. Only Lehman and Dufrene (2002) use a report format. Their model also differs in that it is more informative than persuasive, while the other models follow a persuasive structure. The average length of the models runs about one and a half pages. A few extend to three to five pages, including references (Boone, pp. 397-400; Guffey, pp. 431-432). Locker presents a preliminary internal proposal to write a report, which is presented in memo format and extends to five pages (pp. 372-375).

## Teaching Proposal Writing

In the area of pedagogy, Ralph Wahlstrom (2002) has written an excellent article on "Teaching the proposal in the professional writing course." Wahlstrom does not differentiate between the internal and external proposal, incorporating both forms. He describes a course-length project in which letters and memos are incorporated as preliminary correspondence for the project. This holistic approach sounds promising. Sushil Oswal (2002) also uses a holistic approach in his idea to integrate proposal writing with presentations, placing the proposal in the context of an extended debate. Neither author, however, specifically addresses the internal proposal.

## Context of a Proposal Assignment

Within my course, the proposal is presented as a separate assignment, but it always comes after persuasive letter writing, since the elements of persuasion form a good preparation for proposal writing. Like Wahlstrom, I also teach external and internal proposals together, but I distinguish between the two. Teaching them together provides many opportunities for students to discuss the differences in writing for an external versus an internal audience. I offer students a choice between the two types, yet I encourage students to choose the internal proposal. Writers are always advised to write about what they know, and most students know their workplace fairly well. I ask them to think about a problem or need that they have noticed at work (or school or volunteer organizations, for those students with little work experience), or some change that they have often wished would be made. They must demonstrate that the idea is not a personal issue, but an issue for the organization.

The assignment has a maximum length of two pages, in accordance with the need for brevity in the business world. Occasionally students choose ideas with too broad a scope: a new stadium for the downtown area, a new wing for the hospital. For this reason I suggest that students check with me first if they have any doubts about their subject so that I can suggest modifications. In the case of the downtown stadium idea, for example, I suggested that the student write a proposal for a preliminary feasibility study.

I ask students to write the assignment as though they were actually going to submit the proposal within the organization. This means that sometimes they need to include a separate, brief explanation of any business context and any jargon or abbreviations that would be unfamiliar to someone outside the organization. This preserves the authenticity of the proposal while allowing me to understand it fully and evaluate the assignment fairly.

After I explain all the parts of the assignment in class, we analyze the models in the Guffey text and student models from previous years (see Appendix A for an example). I ask permission from students to use their proposals in future classes. We discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each proposal, analyzing the persuasive strategy of each piece. We pay particular attention to positive wording, credibility building, and reader benefits, since one of the major complaints in the workplace is that proposals generally read more like informative, rather than persuasive documents (Conlin, 1998). I find that student models are most effective for inspiring excellence. They provide encouraging proof that the assignment has been completed successfully in the past, while they also clarify the expectations and objectives for the assignment.

## **Segments of the Internal Proposal**

The internal proposal can be broken down into three main sections, with each section containing multiple subsections (see Appendix B). The “list of ingredients” allows students some freedom to choose their own organization, while it ensures that they will cover all the essential elements. The list also serves to set out the assignment objectives clearly so that students know how they will be evaluated. It applies to both internal and external proposals. In the following discussion of each of these segments, those identified with an asterisk (\*) are often not considered essential to an internal proposal.

### **Introduction**

The introductory section usually consists of one to two paragraphs and these elements:

### **Attention-getting Opening\***

We cover attention-getting openings in our discussion of persuasive letters. For internal proposals, however, I suggest that in the interest of brevity, students may assume that they already have the attention of a supervisor. If they still want to use an interesting opening, I suggest focusing upon the key problem or benefit to be discussed.

### **Credibility-building Statement\***

In an external proposal, the writer needs to establish credibility with the prospective client through mentioning experience, education, or expertise. Credibility may also include rapport-building goodwill statements. Again, for internal proposals the writer may assume that the supervisor is familiar with the writer's qualifications. However, for a proposal sent within a large company or to a distant supervisor, this element should be included to introduce the writer and build persuasive appeal.

### **Background and Purpose**

This section includes how the problem or need originated: its cause and its history, how the writer became involved, what previous solutions have been attempted, and why they did not work. It also may include the larger context of the problem in terms of the organization, or broader social and economic trends.

### **Main Problem, Need, or Opportunity**

One or two sentences should summarize the main problem or need and identify the cause (if not identified earlier), since the best solutions address the true cause of the problem. I use a humorous example of a person who goes to a doctor complaining of fatigue. The doctor asks, "How much coffee are you drinking?" The person responds, "One or two cups a day." The doctor replies, "Well, why don't you just drink more coffee?"

### **Proposal and Main Support**

One sentence should describe the proposal and its main benefit or the reason that the writer knows that it will work (in other words, the generalized support).



## Research Sources and Methods\*

This section expands upon the general support and builds credibility by briefly describing the research that was conducted and its methodology. Since a supervisor may already be aware of the work that has been done, or because the facts may have been gathered informally, this section may not be necessary for an internal proposal.

## Body

The body of the proposal typically consists of three to six paragraphs containing these elements:

### Problem/Need Analysis

Now the writer goes into more detail in describing the negative aspects of the current situation: the factual and ethical consequences. Factual disadvantages include excessive costs, inefficiency, time lags, safety concerns, waste, etc. Ethical disadvantages include situations that are unfair or immoral, or conditions that contradict the organization's mission or decrease morale. Quantification through accurate and current statistics, facts, and examples builds credibility and persuasive appeal.

### Proposal Benefits

The writer may explain how the proposal will address the negative situations described one by one as each is analyzed or in a separate section. A bulleted list is often a good way to present the proposal benefits. The writer should also explain how the benefits will be achieved and evaluated.

### Plan and Schedule

The implementation plan breaks down the goals of the project and sets deadlines for their achievement. Gantt charts showing the schedule are common in business proposals but rare in business communication textbooks. Johnson-Sheehan (2002) provide a good example (pp. 217-218).

### Budget/Cost Analysis

This section should include direct and indirect costs: employee wages, consultant fees, facilities, equipment, moving or travel

expenses, materials, office supplies, etc. Johnson-Sheehan provides a "Basic Budget Worksheet" (pp. 148-149) that can help students anticipate all potential costs. Wahlstrom points out that even for projects that depend entirely on donated facilities and resources and volunteer labor, students should include a budget section showing these donations to increase the persuasive appeal of the proposal (p. 86). To create value, students should also include a cost-benefit analysis and the anticipated break-even point as well. This analysis is especially important for internal proposals because they focus upon justifying costs.

### **Staffing**

All proposals must describe who will be involved in the project. External proposals use this section to build credibility through describing staff qualifications. Internal proposals may not need this emphasis, but they do need to explain how labor will be used appropriately and efficiently.

### **Exceptions\***

External proposals must explain what they will not do in order to avoid cost overruns and legal problems. Internal proposals are usually not as concerned with these issues.

### **Opposition**

Here the author addresses existing opposition arguments or anticipates potential objections. Using a three-step pattern of summary, concession, and rebuttal, the writer addresses the opposition either point by point in each section or in a separate paragraph. The writer should acknowledge any disadvantages of the proposal but explain how the benefits will outweigh the disadvantages. To help students evaluate proposal disadvantages, I ask them to think of examples of "solutions" that have created worse situations than the ones that they were originally supposed to solve.

### **Alternatives**

All proposals should consider alternative solutions and show how they will not work as well as the idea proposed.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion of the internal proposal should consist of one to two paragraphs covering these elements:

### **Summary of Benefits\***

For the sake of brevity, internal proposals may eliminate this item on the grounds that it may be considered repetitive. External proposals require more persuasive appeal, so they should always restate the main benefits to emphasize value.

### **Request for Action or Approval**

This call to action should be clear and specific, requesting authorization to begin the project.

### **End Date/Deadline**

To provide motivation, the writer presents a date for the requested action and explains the reason for the deadline, since the reader is more likely to cooperate if he or she understands the reason that action is needed by a certain date.

### **Incentive\***

The above reason should be sufficient motivation for an internal proposal. External proposals often provide incentive for action by offering discounts or added value in exchange for prompt action.

### **Goodwill Closing\***

External proposals require a friendly closing statement to reinforce a positive relationship with the client and demonstrate social graces. For internal proposals, one may usually assume that goodwill already exists between the supervisor and the employee.

## **Summary**

Students appreciate writing within this clear structure, which allows them to focus on developing and supporting their creative ideas. It also ensures that they cover all the bases in a thorough persuasive appeal. Finally, it presents a good guide for critiques of

models, since missing elements become obvious, and their value becomes clear.

The internal proposal assignment allows the instructor to teach all the elements of persuasion in a condensed and practical application. Students gain not only persuasive skills, but also the opportunity to develop their initiative, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Employers receive perhaps the greatest benefit, since as Krizan et al. (2002) explain, "Ideas for internal improvement, creatively developed and effectively presented, are the lifeblood of organizations" (p. 354).

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