A writer doesn't solve problems. He allows them to emerge.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Module Three: Beginning the Proposal Writing Process

To write a convincing proposal, you must get started on the right foot. This module will look at how to determine the purpose of the proposal and gather background information.

Identifying Your Purpose and Your Audience

Your proposal should have a single goal in mind. What exactly will the proposal do? Some examples:

- Convince a customer to buy the WidgetMaster 3000

- Convince a customer to hire you to demolish a building

- Outline the meal planning services that your company provides

Then, identify who the audience will be. Some continued examples from above:

- Bill Smith of Smith Construction Inc.

- The business team at Acme Hotels Ltd.

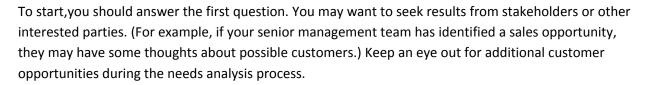- The nutrition team and the business team at a local nursing home

Note: When you write your outline later on, you may want to make a note of sections that may have a different audience, such as the executive summary.

Performing a Needs Analysis

A good needs analysis must answer four questions:

- Who are the customers of the proposal?

- What do they want or need?

- What do they currently have as a solution?

- What can we offer?

To start,you should answer the first question. You may want to seek results from stakeholders or other interested parties. (For example, if your senior management team has identified a sales opportunity, they may have some thoughts about possible customers.) Keep an eye out for additional customer opportunities during the needs analysis process.

Next, it is time to gather information about the customers. Stakeholders may be a possible source, as are market research studies, company reports, and organizational biographies. At times, you may be in contact with the customer themselves. Make use of open questions to gather as much information as possible.

During the proposal, keep an eye out for new or changing answers to your needs analysis, and adjust your proposal approach as necessary.

Writing the Goal Statement

Once the needs analysis is complete, it's time to write the goal statement. This will help you understand what you want to achieve.

First, identify the type of proposal. Throughout this course, we will be focusing on a generic proposal. However, having a more defined type in mind will help you create a more successful proposal. You may choose a type discussed in the previous module (technical, sales, cost, or professional service), or it may be of a different type altogether (such as a non-profit grant proposal).

Next, add in the purpose of your proposal. Finally, bring it all together into the goal statement. This statement typically takes the form: Our <type of proposal> will convince the reader to <desired end result>.

Example

Our technical proposal will convince the customer to upgrade to Snazzy Web Services 2.5.

Module Three: Case Study

Sharon called up her customer, Michelle, to discuss the specifics of the solicited sales proposal. Sharon asked, "Michelle, what's your main reason for shopping around for another program?"

Michelle said, "We were working with Computech, but we experienced too many glitches and crashes with their program."

Sharon said, "In past years, we had the same problem with our database. Our experts quickly solved those problems, and currently, our clients report very few issues. The issues they do report are quickly fixed." Sharon asked, "What can we offer your company at this time?"

She kept using open questions with the customer and received the information she needed. Sharon then used the information to present a dynamite sales proposal to Michelle's company.