

Developing Creative Proposals

ANNETTE MOLONEY PROVIDES SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE ON HOW TO DEVELOP ENGAGING PROPOSALS AND APPLICATIONS.

HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE an early-stage idea into a clear and confident proposal? The task can appear quite daunting at first. Writing proposals is a general necessity for artists, particularly when applying for exhibitions, residencies, funding, commissions or education opportunities.

When submitting a proposal all you can hope for is that you've done your best within the timeframe and that you've used the proposal to progress an idea a bit further. The main person you're aiming to impress is yourself. Beyond that, getting the gig is a bonus.

What follows is some general advice, based on experience of sitting on selection panels and delivering workshops on developing creative and engaging proposals, in partnership with Visual Artists Ireland and other arts organisations over the years.

Getting Started

If there was a recipe for creative proposals, in a Mary Berry kind of way, three key ingredients would be included:

1. **Time** – This is a key factor in developing proposals that you can be proud of. Giving yourself plenty of time before a deadline allows for research, drafting, editing, proofing, developing support material and finally, submission. Keep an eye on your time management and try to win in the battle against procrastination.
2. **Feedback** – Ideally ask others, such as fellow artists or even non-artists, to read your proposal at draft stage, to make sure it's clear and doesn't lead the selection panel in the wrong direction.
3. **Assessment Criteria** – It's really important to be aware of the assessment criteria outlined in the opportunity you're applying for. These criteria are generally listed in the artist's brief or application form, almost like the main 'exam question'. Sample selection criteria might include: Track record or potential of the artist; Artistic quality of the proposal; Feasibility; Supporting material etc. Including a couple of sentences addressing these criteria in your proposal can make assessment easier for the selection panel.

Sample Proposal Headings

The following are some general headings that may help you outline key information in your proposal:

- **Proposal Summary** – start with a clear and concise summary of your idea and what you propose to do (two to three sentences), in a way that will help capture the selection panel's attention. This summary is often best written at the end of the drafting process.
- **Describe your Idea** – give more detail (about 200 words). This should be clear and concise and not smothered in 'art-speak'.
- **Project Intention** – write about your vision for the project and how it can be developed within the specific context (about 200 words).
- **Outline Project Plan** – set out your proposed timeframe (what you will do and when).
- **Context & Potential Impact** – this section gives you an opportunity to set out in more detail your intention for the project and, if appropriate, how you aspire to engage with any places or communities of interest, as the project evolves. If your project is more technical or developed within a studio context, this information can also be outlined here.
- **Budget** – include this in a spreadsheet or table format. Double-check all calculations, as the selection panel will do the same, particularly where public funding is involved.
- **Feasibility** – consider what might go wrong (but hopefully won't) and how you might deal with this.
- **Additional Information** – give more information on the connection between your proposed project and your current practice. Is this project a continuation of previous research, or the development of an entirely new body of work?
- **Your Practice** – give more information on your practice to date, similar to a short artist's statement.
- **Documentation** – some opportunities encourage artists to use 'whatever means to communicate your idea'. This could include text, images, mind-maps or other formats. Supporting material could include specific weblinks, USB sticks, recordings, scripts, visuals, publications, etc. Make sure to stick to the submission guidelines.

Proposal Advice

It is advisable to:

- Include artwork details in your documentation, such as: artist's name, artwork title, date (year), medium, dimensions (metric height x width), context, etc.
- Compile an image list and if submitting JPEGs on a USB stick or via online transfer platforms, include a list of artwork details, featuring thumbnail images and the information outlined above. Corresponding JPEG files can be re-named to include these details, ensuring that your name is on everything you include.
- If submitting PDFs or hardcopy publications that include work by other artists, add a digital link or brightly coloured tab, to mark the page(s) where your work appears.
- Use the footer option on the document to add your name to each page. Go to 'page set-up' or 'header and footer' to add information in a small font, such as your name, month/year and page number. That way, if your proposal is shared by email or photocopied, your name will be on each page, reminding the selection panel which artist they are looking at.
- Put your most recent experiences first in your CV and biography, outlining your practice to date. Feel free to include other work and voluntary experience, if relevant, and place these in a separate section.
- Develop a clear and eye-catching cover sheet for your proposal. This can include summary information, such as your name, date, the opportunity you are applying for and an image that represents your work.
- Try to develop an attractive layout that will make your proposal stand out from the many others submitted. A blank A4 sheet can be dull and commonplace, until you put it in the hands of an artist... Think of your proposal as a creative publication, your own self-published catalogue or an artist's book, one which represents your practice, ideas, research and the time that you invest in them.

Common Pitfalls

- Submitting incomplete material – review the checklist in the artist's brief and add a cover letter stating what you have included.
- An unconvincing or undeveloped idea that is either too obvious, not sufficiently connected to its context or too similar to previous work.
- Submitting multiple proposals – each must be clear and original.
- Commercially-orientated proposals – be clear about your artistic intention.
- Proposals that have too much text, at the expense of other elements, such as images, drawing, diagrams, etc.
- Proposals that are lacking detail or have too much irrelevant information.
- Lack of budgetary considerations or no budget breakdown – this is essential when applying for public funding.
- Title of the proposal is 'as Gaeilge', or in another language with no translation offered.
- Over-embellishment or self-praise – when developing CVs or biographies, try to write outside yourself.

Annette Moloney is a socially-engaged curator and collaborator based in Limerick. She is an Arts Council Adviser on the government Per Cent for Art Scheme.

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