Strategies and Benefits of Using the Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF) Writing Style in Grant Proposals

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GPCI Competency 04: Knowledge of how to craft, construct, and submit an effective grant application

GPCI Competency 09: Ability to write a convincing case for funding

Abstract

One of the most helpful strategies any grant development professional can follow is a writing style called “Bottom Line Up Front” (BLUF). Used extensively throughout the US Military, BLUF patterns an established journalistic technique that prioritizes information in relation to level of importance, print space, and word count limitations. BLUF has the writer present the main conclusion or recommendation within the first paragraph, followed by additional information of lesser importance in subsequent paragraphs. Promoting BLUF in team projects is helpful since most writers employ various styles, may not fully understand how reviewers want information presented, or know how the formal scoring process is conducted. Grant reviewers, however, eagerly want to read proposals that state the bottom-line points early, with main points clearly found. Reviewers also find it tedious when writers do not present requested information in a relevant, sequential order, or bury content within long sections of copy. This article describes how BLUF was initially developed, how writers can benefit from following BLUF’s supporting strategies and tools, and how these strategies translate into a more efficient grant review process. Content and examples advanced in this article may be useful for one-on-one and small group training, and to help contributing writers maintain focus during team writing projects.
Introduction
Writing styles have evolved over time. In recent years, this could be attributed to the many technological changes that impact the communications process. Today’s electronic grant-submission process is a good example. Proposal writers pull from a variety of skill-sets to ultimately produce a completed proposal. As grant professionals find themselves working more with others in the writing process, knowing how to share strategies that help orient contributing writers on ways to capture and maintain the reader’s attention are key lessons to share. The US Army established a quick reference process that helps writers from all skill levels stay focused on the context and purpose of their writing assignments. Communicating the “bottom line” aligns nicely with how today’s grant announcements ask to receive information. This article seeks to show how quick tutorials on bottom-line-up-front (BLUF) writing can help orient others on the process, and help produce useable content for inclusion in grant proposals.

Making Deadline is Not the Only Challenge Out There
Proposal writers face a wide range of challenges during each project. Writers work to present a compelling case for funding while following a parallel track of presenting historical points of fact about their organization. Reviewers expect to read well-developed sections of organizational performance and proposed activities. Information needs to be cohesive and readable throughout the proposal. For grant professionals, the key technique in learning how to write with greater clarity is learning to rewrite (Baker, 1988).

For some time now the military has worked to train personnel on an exacting method to communicate written material of both historic and analytical importance in a clear and concise way. Nowhere is this on greater display than in today’s military intelligence briefing community. “Intelligence analysts…usually present their work in person, sometimes only once, and often to a decision-making generalist who may not know as much about the topic as the analyst” (Marshall, 2005).

Military briefings are not unlike many of the initial compliance screens used in today’s grant-review process. However, it took years of refinement to get the military, a very large and bureaucratic organization, to effect change within the writer training programs they now offer. Getting to this level of proficiency took years of start and restarts. “Bottom Line Up Front” and the “BLUF” acronym are now familiar and commonly used throughout the military intelligence briefing community. Its origins, however, sprang from the need to gain clarity and order over chaotic and evolving modes of communication.
Wire Communications and the Birth of the Inverted Pyramid

Prior to the electronic transmission of words, the preferred style used by professional writers was rich and vivid. Writers relied heavily on protracted sentences to shape the contextual landscape for readers. For example, the classic poem The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred, Lord Tennyson is based on the 1854 news report from British correspondent William Howard Russell on the Battle of Balaklava during the Crimean War (Walch, 2012). Russell’s opening sentence runs a total of 59 words before the establishing facts (“who, what, where”) appear.

The invention of the telegraph by Samuel Morse in 1835, and the subsequent commercialization of wire service by Western Union in the decades that followed, forever altered the way writers composed news and information. The time it took to post news stories reduced from days to mere minutes, and the competitive nature to be first to file a story eliminated the vivid letter-writing correspondent. Despite the advantage of speed, the telegraph had one huge drawback—it was expensive. Western Union charged one cent per character, a great deal of money in the mid- to late 1800’s (Walch, 2012). Therefore, brevity became the more admired trait within the print news industry (Oseid, 2009).

During the American Civil War, newspapers relied heavily on wire services to report major battles—and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process. To keep the cost down, correspondents stripped away their personal opinions and flowery language (Walch, 2012). Adding to the pressure, military censors routinely “clipped” field news reports before and during transmission (Scott, 1861). Since changes in censoring policy were daily occurrences (Gottschalk, 1990), field reporters had to develop a new writing style that could deliver the core elements of the story from the onset. What resulted was the development of a new structured reporting style called the “Inverted Pyramid.”

Most historians point to Secretary of War Edwin B. Stanton as a key example of how the Inverted Pyramid was effectively used. Stanton’s 1865 press release notified a war-weary nation that President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. His release reads:

This evening at about 9:30 p.m. at Ford’s Theatre, the President, while sitting in his private box with Mrs. Lincoln, Mrs. Harris and Major Rathburn, was shot by an assassin, who suddenly entered the box and approached behind the President.

The assassin then leaped upon the stage, brandishing a large dagger or knife, and made his escape in the rear of the theatre.

The pistol ball entered the back of the President’s head and penetrated nearly through the head. The wound is mortal.
The President has been insensible ever since it was inflicted, and is now dying.

About the same hour an assassin, whether the same or not, entered Mr. Seward’s apartment and under pretense of having a prescription was shown to the Secretary’s sick chamber. The assassin immediately rushed to the bed and inflicted two or three stabs on the chest and two on the face.

It is hoped the wounds may not be mortal. My apprehension is that they will prove fatal.

The nurse alarmed Mr. Frederick Seward, who was in an adjoining room, and he hastened to the door of his father’s room, when he met the assassin, who inflicted upon him one or more dangerous wounds. The recovery of Frederick Seward is doubtful.

It is not probable that the President will live through the night. (Stanton, 1865)

As seen in Stanton’s press release, the Inverted Pyramid design (Figure 1) is simple and consists of three basic parts (Porter, 2010):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part One</th>
<th>Part Two</th>
<th>Part Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the opening paragraph (or lead) is where the questions “who, what, why, when, where and how” are answered. It consists of the “must have” information.</td>
<td>additional information that is helpful to the reader, but not necessary. This can be information that adds color or supporting information.</td>
<td>the least important information. This is the ‘nice to have’, not the ‘need to have’ stuff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. The Inverted Pyramid
Additional information of subordinate nature is included at the bottom of the pyramid as needed. However, the important point seen with Secretary Stanton’s example is that the most newsworthy information is communicated to the reader by the end of the first sentence in paragraph three. A total of 97 words communicate the closing chapter of America’s greatest domestic conflict.

**Origins of the Bottom Line Up Front Writing Style**

During periods of chaos, decision makers are challenged with the process of understanding what is actually happening. The time spent figuring out how best to respond and where to send supporting resources can make all the difference in command and control settings. In 1959, the US Army made an attempt to standardize the communications process, so that the written material advanced up the chain of command was “well organized [and] clear enough for the reader to understand in a single, rapid reading” (Leiby, 1987). The end result was the creation of a simple Army pamphlet entitled, “Improve your Writing.” Distributed throughout the service branch, this pamphlet contained several examples of “preferred standards,” and recommended the use of short paragraphs and sentences. The pamphlet apparently had no lasting impact. Program evaluators suggest the reason it failed was that it was “not part of a total program” and “lacked needed support from top Army leaders for change” (Leiby, 1987).

The next attempt to improve writing skills within the ranks began in 1977. A team visited field commands and conducted two-day workshops to demonstrate how “editorial controls [would serve] to enforce a more readable style” (Leiby, 1987). The training team recommended using more active verbs (e.g. “assess”, “organize”, “classify”) to improve clarity. Aside from creating a new word preference list, no evidence carried over to indicate actual improvements occurred. The Army eventually discontinued the traveling trainer teams in 1980 (Leiby, 1987).

Next, in 1986 the Army’s Communications Skills Office created two new training pamphlets specifically designed for career officers: “Effective Staff Writing Exercise Booklet,” and “Effective Writing for Army Leaders.” Both publications opened with a brief rationale on why a new branch-wide writing standard was needed.

Army writing does not communicate well and as a consequence wastes time and money. Poor writing is viewed ‘largely the result of habit.’ The outdated style can no longer be afforded, given information overload and complexity of the modern Army. (Baker, 1988)

The release of these new pamphlets also coincided with a favorable review of the Air Force’s “Effective Writing Course” by the Army’s Vice
Chief of Staff. The Army developed a comparable training course of their own, based on a series of printed training guides (Baker, 1988).

**Functional Components of Bottom Line Up Front**

Use of the Inverted Pyramid grew, with additional guidelines to encourage shorter writing sections. The Army established “Bottom Line Up Front” and the acronym “BLUF” as a quick way to orient writers on how they should approach written communication. BLUF consists of three basic components: structural changes, style changes, and the use of quick editing tools.

**Structural changes**

The principal approach to BLUF calls for writers at any skill level to focus on expressing their main point as the first task. It asks writers: “identify the one sentence you would keep if you had to eliminate all others” (Baker, 1988). This process ultimately serves to refine the information to a point where the reader suggests a recommendation, course of action, or summation from the onset.

The next step is “packaging.” The writer clearly separates each major sub-section by using short paragraphs, headers, or sectional titles. This process reduces the number of words needed for transitions, and orients the reader on the next general topic (Baker, 1988).

**Style changes**

Several recommendations help reduce the overall word count and keep information flowing smoothly for the benefit of the reader. The principal standard uses both structural and style changes to create a “reader-friendly bias.” (McIntosh, 1986)

- **Use active voice.** This mainly involves naming the specific person involved in the process or activity. Passive voice tends to hide the “doer” of the sentence. Active voice clarifies who is doing the action for the reader during the first read and helps reduce the number of words needed to communicate it.

- **Use I, you, we as subjects of sentences instead of this office, headquarters, etc.**

- **Use shorter words.** The goal is to have a document with only 15 percent of words having three syllables or more. (Example: replace “ameliorate” with “improve.”) A good online resource to reference syllable counts is www.wordcalc.com.

- **“Express rather than impress.”** Simply put, “Write as you talk—If you wouldn’t say it, don’t write it.” The goal here is the writer should use “middle-style” words with an intermediate level tone of formality.
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(Example: “stubborn” is a middle-styled word, contrasted with the formal “recalcitrant” and informal “hardnosed”.)

- **Aim for shorter word-counts for each sentence.** Sentences should have a goal of 15 words as a target average.

- **Avoid long paragraphs.** With few exceptions, paragraphs should be no more than one inch deep. The BLUF style guide recommends five sentences as a maximum length per paragraph. When supported with open line-space before and after, this gives the reader a brief moment to process the information before moving on.

- **Avoid jargon, and limit excessive use of acronyms.** Occasionally repeat the full descriptive words or phrase the acronym is based upon.

- **Avoid sentences that begin with “It is …”, “There is …”, “There are …”** (Baker, 1988; Joint Staff Officer Information Center, n.d.)

**Editing tools**

Use a strategy of proofreading documents three times. Each read checks for separate items. The *first read* is the “quick screen edit.” The reviewer scans for noticeable errors and marks them for correction. The reviewer identifies what and where the “bottom line” statement is and moves it up to an appropriate leadoff position (if not already there).

The *second read* checks effectiveness and organization of content. Are items presented in a cohesive, logical manner? Does the information flow for the reader? Are there any noticeable areas that require the reader to backtrack to ensure meaning was communicated? The *third read* checks sentence structure, diction and typographical consistency (Baker, 1988).

**How This is Applied in Training**

Incorporating less-experienced writers into the review process makes a good impromptu training event, especially if the trainer slips in a grant response with no obvious bottom line. Once the document makes its rounds, ask participants to share what the suitable bottom line point should be, then work down the pyramid adding subordinate points of fact till the response is complete.

An additional point to share for the sake of scholarly interest is that the Army’s BLUF editing process includes a *fourth step* called the “clarity index tool.” This serves “as a yardstick to measure how readable [an individual contributor's] writing is” (Army Pamphlet 600-67). When BLUF’s clarity index tool is part of a small group training exercise, the results show participants how they trend over longer sections of copy. This tool is also useful for periodic self-assessments.
The assessment tool works as shown in Figure 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Target Goal</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Count the number of sentences.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Count the number of words.</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Divide the number of words by the number of sentences to get the average sentence length.</td>
<td><strong>Target is 15 word average per sentence</strong></td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Count the number of <em>long words</em> (those with three or more syllables). <em>(Calendar years excluded.)</em></td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Divide the number of long words by the total word count to determine the percentage of long words.</td>
<td><strong>Target is 15%</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Add the average sentence length to the percentage of long words <em>(numerical value only).</em></td>
<td>21.4 + 15 = 36.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. This sum represents the writer’s clarity index total.</td>
<td><strong>Target is 30</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A clarity index total of 20 means the writing is *too abrupt*. An index score of 40 means the writing is *too hard to understand* (Army Pamphlet 600-67).

*Figure 2. BLUF Clarity Index Tool*

Based on the two paragraphs reviewed, the sample sentence average is too long to meet the BLUF “rapid-read” requirement. However, the writer succeeded in keeping the syllable count down to a comfortable level. With regards to hitting a suitable stride on the clarity index, it would seem the historic reference to *The Charge of the Light Brigade* resulted in yet another casualty.
How BLUF Can Help Writers During the Proposal Writing Process

An important factor to understand is how the writer’s prior experience can impact the overall pace and tone of a proposal. This is most noticeable in academic writing. Professional journals and scholarly articles are oriented for larger audiences and specialists within a given field. As two observers describe:

In this setting, writers are trying to advance a finding that must be methodically described to be reproducible. The evaluation of written material is not just on the final answer, but the thinking, previous research and cited work that got them there (Glover, 2012).

The major pitfall to this style is that authors tend to provide huge amounts of unfocused and never-ending background information and do not summarize the expected value of their new idea. (Flanagan, 2012)

Brevity is not on display here.

To minimize these pitfalls, a good strategy is to begin by putting together a narrative outline. Most funding announcements provide sufficient instruction on what information applicants should provide, and the sequence order they should follow. Many outlines can be structured point-for-point as presented from the funding announcement. Compile and share this draft document with all members of your writing team.

Next, hold a brief meeting and share how the grant-review process works. Remind writers that panel reviewers consist of a small number of volunteers who are also busy professionals. Reference the outline and discuss what content needs to go into each section, then draft the best and most likely responses in short summary statements. This bullet list now becomes the basis to refine the project’s bottom line responses. Remind people “if you get ‘off message,’ your audience will most likely not read the whole paper and you lose a key opportunity...” (Flanagan, 2012). If supported with a brief training demonstration on the clarity index tool, contributing writers are prompted to aim for shorter sentences.

How BLUF Translates Into a More Effective Grant Review

Turning the page to find a solid page of “unbroken ‘wall o’ text’ evokes a strong visceral reaction from most reviewers” (Denny, 2002). Some grant professionals call this “page cramming,” and as one grant trainer characterizes, page cramming can be the kiss of death for your proposal during the review process (Ibrahim, Ebogade, Hill, & Simon, 2012).
Seasoned grant professionals stress the importance of formatting the narrative even before composing any copy. BLUF’s structural style of “packaging” (supporting sections with sub-headers and breaks) serves to break up long sections of copy. This makes the document easier to review by drawing the eye immediately to key points sought by reviewers. Key information is also easier to find upon subsequent reads (Yang, 2012).

Less-experienced writers may be surprised to find out just how few people read and score final proposals. The National Institutes of Health readily shares that, due to the sheer volume of proposals they receive, typically only two people carefully read through applications (NIH, 2012). While larger grant review panels may convene to review and score grants, each reviewer typically only reads the abstract, significance, and specific aims (NIH, 2012). Often, it is left to only two or three principal readers (often generalists) to brief the full review panel. Having key points clustered in related sections makes it easier for the full panel to find items during discussion and scoring (Yang, 2012).

Conclusion
Assessing writing skills and familiarizing contributing writers on the grant-review process are excellent starting points for an organizational training program. Organization training on BLUF familiarizes contributing writers to the process, and helps orient them on ways they can contribute productively to the project. Ensuring bottom-line points are up front also helps ensure grant application questions get answered in a systematic way.

Developing training activities to help improve a writer’s ability to present proposal material with brevity and clarity are not the easiest activities to plan. However, the BLUF writing style works well in achieving these goals, and aligns nicely with how grant reviewers want to receive information in today’s electronic proposal format.

BLUF’s quick screen edit is also a useful tool because it checks to see if answers are correctly placed (or marked for repositioning) within the document. This strategy is particularly helpful when combined with subheadings. Reviewers are able to identify the main points quickly, and move smoothly from one section to the next.

The supporting clarity index tool helps illustrate how shorter sentences serve to improve clarity across extended sections of copy. This training tool works best in more formal instructional settings with several different writing samples.

Finally, BLUF’s three-pass proofreading strategy ensures message clarity is optimized for a single rapid-read. However, additional research is needed to evaluate how effective BLUF is in maintaining the reader’s attention if frequent reference is made to supporting data and attachments located outside the narrative section.
References


**Biographical Information**

Timothy P. Hooper, MPA, GPC currently serves as the staff grant writer for Tennessee State University’s (TSU) College of Agriculture, Human and Natural Sciences in Nashville, TN. He has over 12 years of professional experience in grant development and program management in the non-profit, public, and academic communities. He currently supports TSU’s agricultural researchers, teaching faculty, and extension agents in writing, reviewing and submitting proposals to the US Department of Agriculture and other funders of agricultural and environmental research. Tim was one of the initial
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