

Taking the Arrogance Out of Proposal Writing

How Arrogance Creeps into Proposals

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ar-ro-gant: 1. Over convinced of one's own importance; haughty. 2. Marked by or arising from haughty self-importance. (*Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary*)

Arrogant: Severe, Proud, Insolent
(*Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*)

We face many challenges in writing winning proposals. Organizing to win involves many people and different kinds of activities, and often continues for several months. Proposals must be complete and compliant. They must persuade skeptical reviewers that our company is the best-qualified applicant. Persuasion is tricky because the narrative sections of most proposals combine approaches that usually are consid-

ered opposites: bravado and modesty, brevity and depth, and innovation and conservatism.

There are two axioms all proposal professionals probably know (reference Beveridge & Velton):

- It is the height of marketing arrogance to believe that you know your customer's business better than he or she does.
- Arrogance has lost far more competitions than incompetence.

These axioms focus squarely on the dangers of arrogance in proposal writing.

The pressures of competitive bidding may encourage applicants to use an arrogant style—making exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims about their capabilities, features, or benefits—to strengthen their own case and undermine their competitors. Proposals may be written in ways that disrespect their customer's viewpoint or prior work, make recommendations in a very didactic manner, or offer solutions that suggest that the customer will not be consulted.



Reviewers, however, are usually repelled by an arrogant tone or arrogant claims in proposals. Like most of us, they heartily dislike applicants that appear enamored of their self-importance.

Although the author has never come across any statistics or case studies of arrogance in proposal writing, there is ample anecdotal evidence that many proposals either deliberately or inadvertently make exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims that reviewers may perceive as arrogant. We have all been cautioned by Red Teams to tone down overly exuberant language and to make sure that all our claims are thoroughly documented.

Proposals, however, do not have to use arrogance as a persuasive technique. There are more effective and less grating ways to be convincing.

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Logical Arguments in Proposals

Although we usually associate arrogance with a style or tone, proposals most often appear arrogant because of their logical flaws or logical inconsistencies. When applicants make unsubstantiated or exaggerated claims about their capabilities, experience, or solutions, they often anger reviewers for two reasons.

The most obvious one is style or tone. Even a thoughtful proposal can undercut itself if it conveys an approach that is preachy, impertinent, and contemptuous of the client. Here, for example, is a particularly egregious example in a proposal of a company implying that it knows the customer's business better than the customer:

In its Statement of Work, the Department of Energy states that contamination is a problem at its Las Cruces, New Mexico Nuclear Waste Facility because of underground seepage. This is incorrect. It is caused by the improperly designed fuel containers currently used by the Department of Energy. Our Green Fuel Container will resolve all contamination problems.

While these kinds of proposals exist, most of us do not deliberately submit applications that are designed to repel the very people we want to impress. More commonly, proposals appear arrogant because *we make claims that are not supported by sound evidence or compelling rationales.*

In everyday life, we usually use inductive or deductive reasoning to make decisions and persuade others. With inductive

reasoning, we make a general claim based on specific examples or facts. With deductive reasoning, we make a specific claim based on generalizations. While inductive and deductive arguments are commonly found in proposals, most proposal narratives are based on a logical model of claim, evidence, and rationale.

This model has been authoritatively analyzed by Stephen Toulmin, a British logician and historian of philosophy who taught for many years in the United States. According to Toulmin, a claim is a point you want to prove in your proposal. Using Toulmin's model, you want reviewers to accept a claim as:

- True if it applies to you or is applied by you to competitors.
- Not true if it derives from your competitors.
- Good or bad.
- Worth doing or not worth doing.

Claims try to answer four basic questions: Is it true? What is it? What is its quality? What should be done about it? In the logical model of claim, evidence, and rationale, all arguments are presented as answers to these questions.

In proposals, claims are usually supported by evidence, which commonly includes facts, statistics, exhibits, opinions, and predictions. Table 1 illustrates the kinds of questions that reviewers are likely to ask about the quality of evidence in proposals.

To some extent, the power of evidence is subjective. If you are convinced that your evidence is true and does not need to be substantiated, the reviewers may find it unpersuasive. If you believe that your evidence may be controversial or challenged, then you probably will have to treat the evidence as a claim and demonstrate its truth by answering those classic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

For example, reviewers will uncritically accept national HIV/AIDS statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They are less likely to accept your company's unpublished internal survey, especially if it is used to substantiate a questionable claim.

The rationale behind an argument is the logical principle that connects the evidence to the claim. Toulmin believes there are seven basic types of rationales that are commonly used in arguments. Not surprisingly, each of the seven has a typical weakness. Table 2 illustrates the seven kinds of rationales and their particular weaknesses.

Some proposals may not clearly distinguish between evidence and rationale. As a result, the presentation of evidence is often considered so obvious that a rationale seems unnecessary. Whether a rationale is spoken or unspoken, there must be some logical connection made between your arguments, the evidence, and the requirements in the Request for Proposals, or reviewers may contest or deny your claims.

Arrogance and Logical Flaws in Proposals

Arrogance in proposals arises when claims are made without supporting evidence or a convincing rationale. You can avoid the perception of arrogance by using Toulmin's model of logical

Table 1: Reviewers' Tests for Evidence in Proposals

Proposal Evidence	Tests
Facts	What is the source of the facts? Is the information credible? biased? qualified?
Statistics	What is the source of the statistics? Do they cover a significant size? Do they cover a sufficient time? Is the reporting method valid?
Exhibits	Is the exhibit genuine? Is the exhibit typical of the phenomena it represents?
Opinions	Who is the opinion maker? Is the opinion maker credible?
Predictions	Who is making the prediction? Is the prediction maker credible? Is the prediction consistent with other evidence? Is the prediction consistent with itself?

Table 2: Common Proposal Rationales and Weaknesses from a Reviewers' Perspective

Proposal Rationale (With Examples)	Characteristic Weakness
<p>What is true of some is true of more or all. <i>In our factory, an informal survey of complaints indicated that 56 percent came from the Products Division. Consequently, to improve our factory we should concentrate on addressing complaints from all divisions.</i></p>	This rationale is no stronger than its sample.
<p>What is true of many or all is true of some. <i>Seventy percent of Ford Escorts sold in 1998 have faulty steering. Therefore, all Ford Escort owners should have their cars inspected by an authorized dealer.</i></p>	First you must determine what is true of many or all.
<p>Two cases are parallel. <i>Our company has trouble increasing its efficiency. The Jones Company improved its efficiency by decentralizing its operations. Therefore, we should decentralize our operation too.</i></p>	The two cases are not wholly parallel.
<p>Alternative claims are false. <i>Because the weather has been unseasonably warm, there will be a shortage of air conditioner repairers because they are very busy at this time of the year.</i></p>	There may be an unforeseen or counterfactual claim that is true.
<p>One situation is caused by another. <i>When we installed our new machinery, output increased 20 percent over the next six months.</i></p>	If one event comes first and another follows, the linkage could be a coincidence or simply an illusion.
<p>One situation is the sign of another. <i>In 2001, we doubled the size of the sales staff. Over the next year, our sales volume tripled. Therefore, it was a good idea to hire more sales staff.</i></p>	The linkage could be a coincidence or simply an illusion.
<p>Two cases are analogous. <i>A good engineering staff is like having a great manager of a baseball team.</i></p>	The statements being compared are too dissimilar.

argument to make strong and credible claims.

Here is a typical claim from a technical proposal:

The Jones Gyro package is the state-of-the-art solution for underwater, surface, or air missile launches.

Simply stating that your technical solution is state-of-the-art proves nothing. A reviewer is likely to respond, "Of course, Jones thinks his gyro package is the best in the business. All applicants make the same claim about their devices. Why should I believe Jones? What arrogance!"

To avoid the perception of arrogance, the claim must include compelling evidence and a sound rationale that can pass muster with reviewers. A revised version of the same claim that follows Toulmin's model is:

Claim: The Jones Gyro package is the state-of-the-art solution for underwater, surface, or air missile launches.

Evidence: It has been used successfully on 75

underwater, surface, and air missile launches over the past five years.

Rationale: Because it has performed successfully in 100 percent of all missile launches for the US Department of Defense, it is the most reliable gyro for your missile launch program.

Although the first statement may appear like an obvious example of a claim without evidence and a rationale, sometimes technical proposals make grand claims that are supported with little more than the window dressing of phrases like "cutting edge," "state-of-the-art," and "world class," as if these words were sufficient to demonstrate that the claim is true. Red Team reviews can help ensure that every claim you make is defended with solid evidence and a convincing rationale. They can also help eliminate such hackneyed phrases as "world

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Arrogance is hardly a newly identified problem in persuasive writing. In the mid-eighteenth century, the English author Samuel Johnson wrote expansively on the subject. He considered arrogance a happy by-product of boldness and intelligence, but he also understood that it had a number of negative connotations. Below are two of his definitions.



Arrogance: Popularity

“Few have abilities so much needed by the rest of the world as to be caressed on their own terms; and he that will not condescend to recommend himself by external embellishments must submit to the fate of just sentiment meanly expressed, and be ridiculed and forgotten before he is understood.” Rambler, October 26, 1751.

Arrogance: Audacity

“The mental disease of the present generation is impatience of study, contempt of the great masters of ancient wisdom, and a disposition to rely wholly upon unassisted genius and natural sagacity. The wits of these happy days have discovered a way to fame, which the dull caution of our laborious ancestors durst never attempt; they cut the knots of sophistry, which it was formerly the business of years to untie, solve difficulties by sudden irradiations of intelligence, and comprehend long processes of argument by immediate intuition. . . . Men who have flattered themselves into this opinion of their own abilities. . . readily conclude, that he who places no confidence in his own powers owes his modesty only to his weakness.” Rambler, September 7, 1751.

class” because they only lull you into thinking that you have proven your claim.

Because proposals commonly use discriminators to separate themselves from their competitors and exploit their competitors’ weaknesses (ghosting), the next examples come from attempts

to convince reviewers that your company is superior to its rivals. The first statement represents your competitor’s claim while the second argument is your contrasting claim using Toulmin’s model of argument.

Competitor’s Claim: Smith, Inc. is the only firm with the specific engineering skills necessary to perform the Statement of Work.

Your Claim: Of the many firms capable of performing this contract, Jones, Inc. has the most qualified personnel.

Evidence: Jones, Inc. will assign 12 engineers to this project. Sixty percent of our engineers have master’s degrees in engineering; twenty percent have masters in business administration; and eight-nine percent of them have worked on projects very similar to the one described in the Statement of Work.

Rationale: With its highly qualified and experienced personnel, Jones, Inc. is most qualified to complete this engineering project according to the Statement of Work.

Competitor’s Claim: Howard Van Lines provides the best move management services for

Improving Credibility of Claims - With Specificity, first to features, then to benefits	
Least Credible	Recommendations for Programming
	Technical Recommendations for Improved Programming
	5 Technical Recommendations for Improved Programming
	5 Proven Technical Recommendations for Improved Programming
	5 Proven Technical Recommendations for Reducing Costs while Improving Programming
	5 Proven Technical Recommendations for Reducing Costs by 40 percent while Improving Programming
Most Credible	

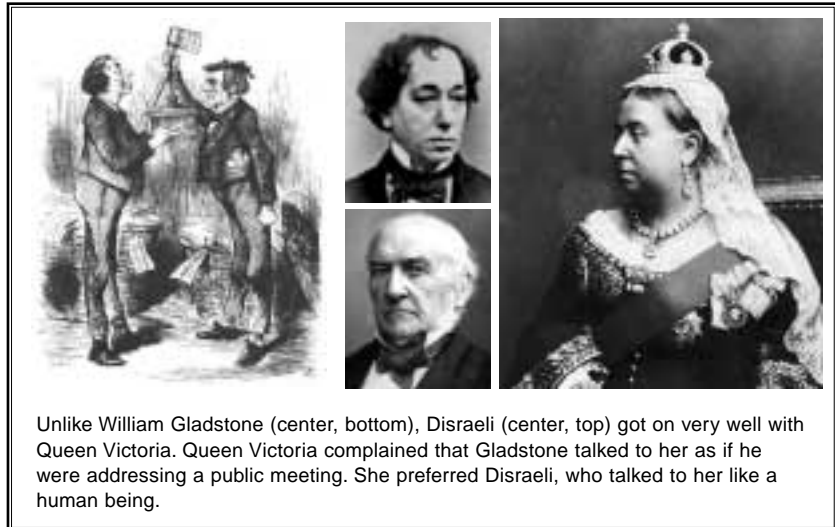
Table 3

federal agencies.

Your Claim: Berger Van Lines has demonstrated that it can provide move management services that are more efficient than any other company on the General Services Administration Federal Supply Schedule.

Evidence: In 2001, Berger Van Lines received the US Navy's prestigious Rickover medal for its "stellar move management services." And in the US National Park Service's recent report, National Parks for the 21st Century (2002), Berger Van Lines was lauded for its "outstanding reliability, efficiency, and low costs in the field of move management." No other move management company has ever received these two accolades.

Rationale: Berger Van Lines has documented its ability to provide highly efficient move management services for the US Navy and the US National Park Service. It will provide the same level of outstanding services to all other federal agencies.



Unlike William Gladstone (center, bottom), Disraeli (center, top) got on very well with Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria complained that Gladstone talked to her as if he were addressing a public meeting. She preferred Disraeli, who talked to her like a human being.

Avoiding the Perception of Arrogance

Toulmin's logical model of claim, evidence, and rationale can help you avoid the perception of arrogance in proposals. Using this model, you can make any claim as long as you support it with evidence that addresses the evidentiary questions in Table 1 and a rationale that addresses the weaknesses in Table 2. The most effective approach is to be very specific about both your features and benefits, which are at the core of any winning proposal.

Table 3 illustrates how your claim becomes more credible as you add specifics first to the features and then to the benefits.

This formula will help you shape proposals into more direct, clear, and persuasive documents while avoiding the perception of arrogance. With Toulmin's model, you are likely to see one or more of the following results in your proposals:

- You will support your claims with evidence and a rationale that reviewers find credible.
- You will temper some of your claims while supporting them with evidence and a rationale that reviewers find credible.
- You will eliminate claims that cannot be adequately supported.
- You will avoid the perception of arrogance because your claims are not merely asserted but thoughtfully and logically defended.

All of us understand that you cannot win contracts with proposals that are meek, modest, and self-effacing. The challenge is to convince reviewers that your claims are valid without going overboard in the opposite direction.

Arrogance usually appears in proposals when claims are made without evidence and rationales. Whether this approach is deliberate or inadvertent, the consequences are the same. Reviewers conclude that you are too puffed up with your own self-importance because you will not deign to substantiate your assertions. By using Toulmin's logical model, you can avoid the perception of arrogance while helping reviewers positively answer those two critically important questions: Why you? Why your approach?

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