

developing proposals

This resource paper is based on a training day led by Caroline Wright. Since graduating with a masters degree from Norwich School of Art and Design in 2002, Caroline's practice has developed via issue-based and multi disciplinary forms, using time-based media, live art and experimental photography. To find out more about her work, visit

www.linesofcommunication.co.uk

In 2003, Caroline was awarded a bursary from Artsadmin, London and funding from Arts Council England to research into speech and voice production that will culminated in a touring exhibition during 2005/6.

In 2005, she performed at *home*, London and in the Church Ale Festival @ *home*, Suffolk, had a solo show at firstsite, Colchester, and produced a collaborative project with York University Senior Research Fellow David Howard entitled *Voices of the City* in 2006.

This training event was held as part of **making art work**, the professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk.

For more information about the scheme, please visit the Suffolk County Council web site at www.suffolkcc.gov.uk and follow the link from Leisure and Culture to the Arts.



making art work is a professional development scheme for visual artists in Suffolk, devised and managed by Suffolk County Council and part financed by the European Union European Social Fund and Arts Council England Grants for the Arts.

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1. General introduction

1.1 What is a proposal?

A proposal is a way of describing an idea to someone. Think of it as a four-stage process:

- starting with the idea
- developing that idea
- producing a plan of how that idea can be delivered
- presenting that plan

The development stage of the process will include all the practical considerations, such as how long it will take, how much you need to achieve it, health and safety issues, who you will work with, where will it take place, etc

1.2 When might a proposal be required or useful?

Obviously in direct response to an advertised opportunity (Note: the back pages of a-n the artists newsletter is full of such opportunities and is a principal source for artists).

It may be to present to a funding body, to raise the money for the project.

Or it could be for the artist to work out how feasible an idea is – i.e. prepared with no specific end in mind, but as a means of focussing on a particular idea.

It could be that you wish to create a new opportunity – perhaps you want to work in a particular gallery or with an arts organisation/agency and so you prepare an unsolicited proposal.

1.3 Why am I writing a proposal?

Because it provides focus, helps you identify the entire process, rather than just the initial idea. Specifically it enables you to: -

- Evaluate the idea
- Communicate the idea
- Develop ways of managing the idea
- Helps you identify markets for your idea

2. Relevance and Research

2.1 Opportunity – does it knock or do we seek it out?

Be proactive in developing your ideas – you don't have to wait for an opportunity to knock on your door.

And do your research. If you want to develop a project with a local gallery, make sure you know exactly which local gallery works with artists like you, does the sort of thing that you want to do – or maybe it doesn't but has always wanted to – and you will make it possible for them.

Sometimes they knock on our door. But ask yourself this, before you seize the first opportunity that comes along, how it fits into your practice. Is it really an opportunity for you to progress your career?

2.2 Positioning yourself

If you are responding to an advertisement, make sure you are clear about what they want. Are they asking for mid-career artists. If they are, and you have only just graduated, then this is not for you.

Let's assume it's a residency that is being advertised. There are many practical reasons why it might appeal. First, there's the money (of which, more later) but it could also be a challenge, it could be a chance to work with people you want to work with, it should be a chance to make the sort of work you make.

There is also a theoretical context; developing and/or responding to opportunities gives you the chance to consider the current context of your work, and where you place your work/practice in the context of art theory. Writing a proposal is an opportunity to examine critically where you and your work fits with current/past art movements, who your influences are, etc; as such, it enables you to position yourself not just in terms of your career stage, but on a much broader platform.

2.3 Strategic Planning

Every job you do as an artist should ideally provide the stepping stone to the next job – it should feed your practice, develop your skills and experience.

Unless you know where you want to be in a few years time, it's impossible to be objective about how useful an opportunity is for you. So, ask yourself what your long term plans are, and then consider whether the opportunity can really help you move towards it – and how it can help you achieve it.

3. Getting down to basics

3.1 What is the proposal for?

Whether you are responding to an advertised opportunity, or creating your own proposal, be CLEAR about what is going to happen. The following steps provide the framework to supply that information.

3.2 Who am I?

What sort of artist are you? What is your work about? Can you write a 15 word statement that encapsulates the answers to those two questions?

3.3 When is the proposal for?

What's the time scale? Are you planning an event to take place next year, in two years' time? And how long will it last?

3.4 Where is the proposal taking place?

Seems obvious, I know, but put yourself in the reader's place. Particularly if this is a self-initiated project, be clear about location(s).

3.5 How am I going to make it work?

Timetables and budgets. Until you know these elements you cannot be clear about anything else – and neither can the reader.

3.6 Why do I want to do it?

Be objective. Forget the fluffy 'because it makes me feel good inside' stuff and focus on what the benefits will be for you, professionally.

It could be all the things mentioned earlier, like working with a particular group of people, a type of organisation, other artists, etc, etc.

It could be an opportunity to make work of a particular sort that feeds your practice. Be clear about why it benefits you – and if, on reflection, it doesn't benefit you enough, then either rethink, redraft – or forget it.

4. Long-term views

4.1 What doing this proposed project will do for you?

Do you know where you want to be in 10 years time? And are you making plans to achieve your aims, or are you hoping that it will just kind of happen?

Preparing proposals gives you an ideal opportunity to demonstrate your professionalism. Even if you are going to do the event for free, you should prepare a proposal that includes a realistic budget – not least of all so that people see how much it would cost, if they were going to pay for it.

And if you are doing it for free, are you clear about what the benefits will be? Does the opportunity provide you with a stepping stone to the next stage of your career, will it raise your profile with people you identify as important to your career development? Does it give you a chance to work with/show with other artists whose practice you respect and admire?

Make the most of every opportunity you take. Never think of it as an end in itself, but as part of the progress of your career. So think about how it can move you on.

Evaluate the project or event. Not just the people who attend, but the people with whom you work, for whom you work and yourself. Learn from it, so that next time you can avoid pitfalls, and use the evaluation as evidence to support future proposals.

Document the project or event. We think we won't forget important things that happen – but we do, so make sure you've got a record, both for your own professional development and as evidence for future activities.

4.2 What will it do for others?

Consider who will benefit from your proposal. It could be: -

- Commissioners – i.e. the people advertising the opportunity
- The audience – the people taking part and/or seeing the work
- The community – and different sections of the community, e.g. elderly, ethnic minorities, etc
- An organisation – in that your project will help them achieve their aims
- A gallery – in that your exhibition may bring in more and/or a different audience
- Other service providers – e.g. any body or agency charged with providing a service to the public, which your project could help them achieve
- Funders – they all have their specific aims, and need projects (and artists) to help them achieve those aims
- Other artists – may benefit from your project
- Technicians and fabricators – depending on their level of involvement in your project

5. Funding

5.1 Self-initiated projects

First, a word about public funding.

No one is going to pay you to do what you want to do. They will, however, pay you if what you want to do helps them achieve what they need to do. So, if the principle aim of a public fund is to engage with disaffected youth, and your proposal is aimed at just those people, then there's an obvious match.

Don't waste your time arguing with funders about why they won't fund your pet project. Instead, research the market, and if you can't find a fund that can support your activity, think of a different way of raising the money.

And finally, our advice would be NEVER change your project just to get the money – unless you are committed to, and interested in, the changes. You'll only end up doing stuff you don't want to do, that may lead you away from your planned career path and may also be very boring.

Arts Council England runs the Grants for the Arts fund. This can provide funding for individuals and groups. They also run seminars to help you make the best bid possible. Check out details at www.artscouncil.org.uk

Suffolk County Council has a small arts fund, called Arts for All. This is available to groups ONLY – individuals are not eligible to apply. Check out details at www.suffolkcc.gov.uk/singlegateway/html

Awards for All is a lottery fund, again aimed at groups, and intended to support community involvement. Details available at www.awardsforall.org.uk

Make it part of your practice, whenever you hear of or see a project that interests you, to find out how it got funding – if only by peering at the row of logos at the bottom of the poster.

And finally, an anecdote. An artist needed to raise funds for a visual arts project. She approached the Arts Council, but was not successful.

She then found a small fund, available only to professional females born in Scotland. This was NOT an arts fund, but was happy to help, as she fulfilled their criteria (on account of how she was female and was born in Scotland).

She had also previously suffered from a period of depression. In the course of her research, she found another fund, aimed at helping mental health recoverers return to employment. They, too, were able to help.

And then she identified a third fund aimed at supporting the geographical area she wanted to work in.

She successfully raised the entire budget from 3 sources, none of which was an arts fund.

5.2 Open opportunities

Open opportunities can seem well funded and many are.

However, do check out exactly what is funded and that this is realistic within your proposal. For example, if an open opportunity advertises a fee of £700 and no apparent money for materials realise that this equates to four working days only or less if materials need to be purchased from the £700. In this case your proposal should be for work that is achievable within the time and money available.

5.3 Sponsorship

There are some very generous people out there, who will give money just because they can.

Normally, however, most sponsors will support you financially IF THEY CAN SEE THE BENEFIT TO THEM – so again, don't waste your time knocking on everybody's door, on the off-chance they're feeling altruistic.

Research the market, find out what businesses, shops etc have a link to the kind of work you're doing, or the audience you're doing it for. And then be very clear about the benefits to them.

6. The successful proposal added value checklist

To recap, make sure your proposal

- is well researched
- sets the context for the project
- is clear
- creative
- relevant

6.1 Supporting material

If in doubt about what to send as supporting material, ring them up and ask.

Don't assume that everybody can open every type of digital image – ask before submitting dvds or CD-Roms (unless they are specifically requested).

Only include RELEVANT supporting material – don't send everything you've got and expect the reader to select for you.

Don't send stuff they don't ask for.

6.2 Housekeeping

Deadlines: keep them.

Specific requests for information: read the submission guideline/brief carefully, and make sure you supply all the information they ask for.

Covering letter: always include a brief covering letter. It may make your application stick in someone's mind.

Ask a friend whose views you respect and preferably has no prior knowledge of your work or ideas to read your proposal. Then ask them to summarise what they have understood from it and point out any parts that are unclear or where grammar and spelling need correction. Their comments will provide you with a direct response to your written material - invaluable for understanding how your proposal will be read once submitted.

CV's: relevance is the watchword here. Tailor your CV to the opportunity – don't include everything you've ever done just in case. And if you don't have particular skills requested, don't pretend they never asked for them. Instead, write about other experiences you've had, and transferable skills and make the case that you could do the job.

Postal record and SAE's: you've spent a lot of time preparing the proposal – don't let it get lost in the post. If you want the proposal and supporting material back, then send a SAE. If, however, you are happy for them to keep it on file, tell them so in your covering letter.

7. Use the experience

Whether or not your proposal is successful, make the most out of the opportunity.

If it's successful – then enjoy it and remember that it's not an end in itself, but a stepping stone to the next project. So use everything you can, learn from the experience, remember the importance of evaluation as evidence when applying for future projects.

If problems occur, don't pretend they're not there. Learn from them, make notes about what happened, why you think it happened, and how it could be done better next time.

Be aware of how much time you spend doing the project – and how much time you thought it would take you. Are there differences? Did you budget enough?

And if you find yourself doing things you didn't intend – or didn't know was expected of you – does it matter? And how would you handle it, next time?

If it's not successful, follow up. Often, people say they cannot go into details, and there's not much you can do then. This is particularly the case when there are hundreds of applications for a limited number of opportunities. So go and see the show, inform yourself of the artists who were selected, and be objective in appraising your work alongside theirs.

If it's a small selection group, or if you were short listed and then not successful, do follow up. But only once you've got over the initial disappointment and feel ready to hear constructive criticism of your proposal. Remember, you applied in the first instance as this opportunity was going to help you develop your career. So asking for an explanation of why you weren't successful is a useful way of turning it into a positive experience – and learning from it.

There are many reasons that proposals fail, ranging from the idea not being suitable to the funders running out of money. Along that scale there are several points at which you might have succeeded, only to miss out at the end. So do ask, and learn from the experience.

And again, go and see the actual project or resulting exhibition. Inform yourself of the work of the artist who did get the job – get to meet them if you can – and learn from them, too.