

Proposal Success in a European Call for Digital Innovation Intermediaries: A Text Analysis of Applications

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Extended Abstract

This study explores empirically the cornerstones of purposeful written business communication for securing project funding by investigating the relationship between various document features of 328 EU grant proposals submitted within the framework of the funding programme for European Digital Innovation Hubs, and their evaluation scores (continuous, ranging between 0 and 15) as well as evaluation outcomes (classified as *below threshold*, *above threshold*, and *main list*). To this end, we extracted various measures from the proposal documents concerning document structure and design, text readability, tone and sentiment of the language used to describe the submitted project, as well as the content and/or alignment of the project idea with the call and EU digital transformation priorities. Thus, in line with the literature, we argue that successful and effective business communication relies not only on the substantive content quality and alignment with funders' expectations and priorities but also on the proposal's effectiveness in terms of rhetoric and content presentation (e.g., van den Besselaar and Mom 2022, Tohalino et al. 2021, Connor and Upton 2004).

Our findings revealed that the internal organisation of the proposal document, readability and complexity of the text, as well as the tone and sentiment of the language used to depict the project idea, are key factors that correlate not only with the expert scores but also with evaluation outcomes. Specifically, a stronger emphasis on the conceptual section, higher readability, and less constraining language are positively related not only to the expert scores but also to favourable

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evaluation outcomes. These characteristics likely enhance the evaluators' ability to assess the proposals' strategic and technical merits quickly and efficiently (Mayer 2024; Hartley 2013). Further, clarity and a pronounced persuasive structure may reduce uncertainty and foster trust in the organisation's competence and vision (Boyack et al. 2018; Loughran and McDonald 2016).

However, the content and alignment with the EDIHs call and EU digital transformation priorities—here EDIHs' objective as a one-stop shop with a wide range of expertise and services across different digital areas—was a crucial factor behind expert scores only. On the other hand, a higher number of figures enhances the chances of proposal success and funding, but including visuals appears to exert no significant impact on expert scores. We interpret this pattern as reflecting how evaluators work during outcome assignment: after detailed review of the proposals and scoring individual criteria, they must efficiently recall an overall mental picture of each proposal and compare the proposals with each other. In that process, the way information is presented—for example, clear conceptual sections and helpful figures—makes it easier and quicker for reviewers to grasp and recall a proposal's strengths and its strategic and technical merits, which, in turn, can influence the final outcome.

Overall, the alignment with the funder's objectives and call, the utilisation of figures, a strong focus on conceptual content, text readability, and less constraining language were distinguishing features of successful proposals. These elements likely facilitate a clearer understanding of the project's potential impact and feasibility, signalling otherwise unobservable characteristics of the project and project team (Parhankangas and Renko 2017; Connelly et al. 2011; Li 2008).

The results of this study allow us to formulate several policy implications for those defining the call for proposals, the candidates, and the evaluation process design. Integrating advanced text analysis tools into the proposal evaluation framework could automate initial assessments of readability and tone, streamlining the process and reducing the evaluators' administrative burden. Agencies might also provide more explicit guidance on effective proposal preparation beyond technical requirements, including readability guidelines, writing workshops, or AI-powered writing assistance. Given the influence of linguistic tone on evaluation outcomes, initiatives that help applicants present their ideas positively and confidently could be beneficial, potentially including training on conveying optimism and assurance.

For applicants, our results underscore the importance of investing in proposal preparation beyond technical content. The significant effects of conceptual content emphasis, readability, and linguistic tone indicate that how ideas are communicated matters as much as what is communicated. Applicants should allocate sufficient time for iterative drafting, editing for clarity, and careful structuring to highlight conceptual foundations. Visual elements should be considered strategic tools for enhancing comprehension and recall.

From a broader policy perspective, improving communication quality in grant proposals benefits the entire funding ecosystem. Better-prepared proposals enable more efficient and accurate evaluation, allowing funding agencies to identify and support the most promising projects more effectively. This efficiency gain becomes increasingly valuable as EU research and innovation programmes grow in scale and complexity.

As with other studies, this paper suffers from several limitations. Our analysis is based on relatively straightforward text-specific metrics and a deterministic approach—the use of pre-existing word dictionaries to capture the content and alignment of proposals with the funder's objectives. More sophisticated natural language processing techniques, including topic modeling or machine learning approaches, could reveal additional nuances in how successful proposals communicate ideas and align with funder priorities. Furthermore, the dataset comprises proposals from a single programme, which may limit generalizability. Future research should consider other funding programmes and include more document-specific and text-related metrics and additional text analysis to capture more specifically the communicative abilities of the business documents, especially in terms of the content and project idea. A particularly promising avenue for future research would be linking proposal characteristics to post-award project performance. Do features predicting funding success also predict successful implementation and research impact? Or might some communication characteristics that enhance evaluation success correlate negatively with implementation performance? Investigating these relationships could inform both proposal evaluation design and broader questions about optimizing research funding allocation to maximize societal benefit.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that effective grant proposals require careful attention to both what is communicated and how it is communicated. Strategic alignment with funder priorities, clear document structure, accessible language, confident tone, and effective use

of visual elements collectively distinguish successful proposals. While substantive quality remains fundamental, the ability to communicate that quality clearly and persuasively significantly influences evaluation outcomes. Our findings suggest that relatively straightforward improvements in proposal preparation practices and evaluation processes could yield substantial gains in both funding efficiency and research impact, helping ensure that the most promising research receives the support it deserves.