

# Chapter 18. Developing Projects that Propose Change

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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Recognize writing projects that require change proposals
- Explore writing strategies that support change proposals
- Reflect to predict, problem-solve, and improve throughout the process of writing to recommend change

In some writing situations, persuading your reader to nod thoughtfully in agreement with your ideas is not enough: you need to reach out to one or more groups of readers and persuade them to **change behaviors, policies, resource allocations, or action plans**. You might need to change only a small corner of your world—your neighborhood, your child’s school, your workplace—or you might hope to move others to take a single step on a long pathway of a larger change toward healthier families, less toxic communities, more efficient procedures or technologies, or more peaceful nations.

Change proposals occur across a wide variety of documents, including some changes that you may not think of as particularly remarkable or impactful:

- Job application letters (I recommend you hire me)
- Project or grant proposals (I recommend you support/fund my project)
- Advertisements (I recommend you buy my product)
- Candidate videos (I recommend you vote for me or my proposal)
- Self-improvement books (I recommend you adopt new behaviors)
- Community petitions (We recommend you change the law, policy, or financial plan)
- Advocacy websites (Our organization recommends you change how you vote or act)

In each of these cases, writers are stepping into a situation in which many people are happy with the status quo. That is, they are bound up in *inertia*. Physicists note that when we encounter bodies at rest, they will remain at rest—and that bodies in motion will continue moving with the same speed and direction—unless acted on by a sufficiently powerful outside force. Inertia is not just a property of inanimate objects like rocks or planets: the tendency to stay put, or to continue unswervingly along the current path, is a fundamental aspect of human behavior that shows up in individuals, groups, workplaces, and institutions.

As an advanced writer recommending change, you are the “outside force” that affects inertia. In person, you may exert the force of information or personal regard to change one friend’s dinner choice; as a writer, when you compose a formal recommendation, you can exert persuasive force to request resources or actions from people who are unknown to you, from people who have more power than you do, from people who are at a distance, and/or from many people at once. When you are writing for change, you might keep several threshold comments in mind:



### **Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts**

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

**Writing is a social rather than an individual act**

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

**Writing involves strategies more than talent**

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

**There are many ways to solve a writing problem**

Because writing is complex and interactive, writers have many ways of getting stuck—and just as many ways of getting back on track.

A recommendation for change is *more than an argument about ideas*. Most people would agree with arguments that eating healthier food is better, but we still love eating our burgers and brownies, because *change is hard*. Even though proposals for action are in some ways just another kind of argument, the inertia of individual and collective behaviors is so difficult to alter that you need to develop new strategies. Writers who plan to recommend that readers change their direction or speed need to answer the question, “What moves people to act differently?”

**Explore 18.1**

Review the list of documents given above for ideas, and note down 3-5 times recently when you have tried to persuade others to significantly change their behaviors or policies, whether in your daily life or for a school or work project. Were you successful?



## 18.1 Overcoming Inertia: Exploring Fundamental Strategies for Proposing Change

When you write to recommend changes, you need to keep this sentence in your head:

If a change were obvious and easy, it would have been done already.

Most of the people around you are intelligent, good-willed, hard-working, generous human beings who would like their world to be better than it is. Like most of us, though, they find that motivating and sustaining even small changes can be difficult. It’s not just life-changing promises or profound New Year’s resolutions that are hard to keep: as an experiment some time, you might ask a friend who has a distinct diet-soda brand preference what it would really take to get them to start drinking the other brand. Change is difficult, and composing a document that will successfully educate, persuade, motivate, and direct one or more

readers to make a change and sustain that change can be a very challenging—and rewarding—task.

When you begin to write for change, you will need to consider the complex psychology and ecology of a situation, and develop strategies that will help you to negotiate among multiple and often contradictory factors:

- **Strategy 1:** Identify and balance the multiple factors that influence readers’ actions and decisions.
- **Strategy 2:** Anticipate and respond successfully to readers’ complex resistances.
- **Strategy 3:** Predict a feasible but unknown future based on a clearly but incompletely documented present.

### Address the whole ecosystem of change

To see the ecosystem, you need to be willing to let go of a narrow approach to your issue. For example, an old European and American proverb suggests that once upon a time, a key battle was lost because—stay with me here—the king’s messenger’s horse’s blacksmith could not find one last nail to properly attach the horse’s protective shoes, and so the messenger never delivered a crucial piece of information to the king, “all for lack of a horseshoe nail.” The lesson is that a single small factor or strategy can allow or prevent an important change.

From an ecosystem approach, however, that lost battle was more likely the result of many factors: the last-minute timing of the message, the poor inventory-management of the blacksmith who ran out of nails, and/or the single stranded messenger with only one form of transportation. (Why was the most vital message of the war sent with just one person on one horse?) When you are planning a change-proposal, you want to pay attention to the small details, but it’s crucial that you also work with a broader system-wide view.

### Choose an audience connected to the change you want

Which actor in the ecosystem can best create the change you are arguing for? Do you want to write to the king to challenge his single-messenger plan, the nail-delivery-workers’ union to recommend new supply routes during wartime, or the local barons’ congress to protest the war itself? Where an argument may have as few as two “sides,” a change-process has multiple *stakeholders*—people, groups, or organizations who are affected by the situation and “have a stake” or an interest in how it turns out—and so there are multiple points for intervention and mediation. Your success as a writer may depend as much on where you apply pressure as on what argument strategies you decide to use and what data you bring in support.

## Understand the situational network of constraints

Even once you identify your readers and your request—let’s say you will write the head of the messenger’s guild to recommend having more back-up messengers and horses available—you will want to keep the larger ecosystem in mind. The success of the messengers depends upon how guild interacts with politicians and bankers as well as how it is supported by local laws and roads. If you propose a change that solves the messenger problem but also creates a shortage of horses for generals, you will not be acclaimed as a successful communicator. Writers need to leave time for inquiry about related issues that might be affected by our proposals.

## Acknowledge readers’ multiple and overlapping identities

The head of the messenger’s guild may also be a taxpayer who believes city residents are overcharged for road maintenance, or the parent of a nail-suppliers union member who wants the suppliers to work reasonable hours. Although you won’t usually be able to know all your readers and their needs in detail, you will need to avoid making assumptions or generalizations about how all messengers think and what motivates them to change or resist change. Again, the more you know about all the variables that could be involved in the ecosystem of the change you are recommending, the more successful your writing will be.

These investigations and deliberations may seem more like “thinking” than like “writing” tasks, yet they are crucial to addressing the rhetorical context of your project. Even if you have already decided what the “right change” is, you will succeed only if you can communicate that change to readers who are in a position to enact it. (There’s no use complaining to nail manufacturers about the cost of horses.) And if you recommend change to “the world at large” or “society” or “whoever reads this,” you run the risk of your readers pointing their fingers to someone in another part of the ecosystem: “That sounds like *their* problem, not mine.”

### Explore 18.2



List 2-3 changes that you would like to recommend to your college or university president. Pick one of those changes, and identify 2-3 factors that influence whether or not that change would be possible. You might consider people, locations, budgets, laws, or values that have an effect on the president’s decision making.

Then choose one of *those factors*, and list three factors that influence it. (For example, if you chose *state education laws* in the second round, you might identify state voters, federal education laws, and education researchers as third-round elements of the change ecosystem.) Finally, add a sentence: of all those factors, which one does the president have the most ability to respond to, and which the least?

## Address readers' multiple resistances

Building a connection with readers in a change-focused writing project requires all of a writer's strategies. Change-writers need the mind-reading of expository writers, the complexity-awareness of analysis writers, and the assumption-checking of argument writers, as we try to understand and respond to our readers' current thinking. For this work, writers need to anticipate opposition, build connections, erode resistance, and motivate action for a reader in a particular context.

### Consider diverse sources of readers' resistance

Your readers' current trajectory or beliefs have been influenced by years or even decades of information and experience. To understand their inertia, you can begin by checking on your own assumptions about why change has been slow in coming, and replace any preconceptions you may have (readers aren't just lazy) with evidence- or reasoning-based analysis of readers' likely motives. Face-to-face arguers can adapt to resistance points as they arise in conversation. In contrast, writers need to anticipate and plan in advance how to negotiate with readers in another room, another state, another year, or another country. Readers will likely have multiple, overlapping resistance points, some of which they may not themselves be fully aware of, so writers need a combination of inquiry and educated guesswork as we anticipate the strongest resistance areas.

Readers may be **knowledge-limited**: they

- Don't know about their options, or why one might be better than another
- Don't know how options could apply to their situation
- Misunderstand some key concepts or features related to their situation or options
- Don't know the benefits of changing to another way of thinking/acting

It is best to assume that your readers are not "stupid" (a character flaw) but rather that they have insufficient information. Most of us have to work hard to stay "up to date" on information that is relevant to us, and so we don't leave a lot of time to explore contradictory or alternative ideas. In order to make new information seem relevant and necessary to readers, you may need to demonstrate how new information applies to their current situation.

Readers may be **emotionally or intellectually invested** in the status quo: they

- Have put a lot of time/energy/ego into current ideas or practices
- Are persuaded by evidence that reaffirms their beliefs or values, and belong to communities that praise their beliefs (this is often called "confirmation bias")

- Enjoy the results of their current ideas or practices
- Are afraid of the risks or consequences associated with new thoughts/actions
- Are tired of trying out new things that never work as well as predicted

It's best to assume that your readers are no more "stubborn" than you are. We all invest in ideas and practices that are familiar to us and connect to our value systems, from our preferences in diet soda brands to our political views to our beliefs about how to raise kind, hard-working children. To make new ideas or practices seem reasonable, you may need either to connect them to readers' current values or—a more difficult task—negotiate a way for readers to set their current values aside, or put them lower on the priority list, in favor of the new ones.

Readers may be **resource-limited**: they

- Don't have the **time** to learn a whole new way or try out a new option in a crisis
  - or don't think they have the time it will take (knowledge limits)
  - or don't think it's worth spending time this way (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Don't have the **personnel** to take on a new project
  - or don't think they have enough personnel (knowledge limits)
  - or think personnel are more productive on other projects (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Don't have the **money** or the **materials** to devote to a new project
  - or don't think they have enough money/materials (knowledge limits)
  - or prefer directing money/materials toward other priorities (emotionally/intellectually invested elsewhere)
- Have no **control** over resource allocation
  - or think they can have no effect on resource allocation (knowledge limits)

It's best to assume your readers aren't sitting on resources which they see as entirely unencumbered. Even billionaires might have plans for their great wealth that do not involve your goals. If readers direct resources to the change you recommend, they may need to take resources from another group or project that can seem equally deserving. To help readers move toward change, you may have to explain why their resources will be equally or better put to use for the new project.

### Prepare to respond to readers' inertia

Once you have identified the most intensive resistances to your proposed changes, you will need to build arguments directly in response. It may be helpful at this point to remember that *resistance* can be a sign of intelligence; another name for

your readers' response could be *critical thinking*. So while you may plan to directly refute readers' ideas by addressing and discounting their counterarguments, you might also consider whether you should approach intelligent readers with a plan to use *concessions* or propose *compromises* to motivate an internal change. Your goal may be only to move readers past their concerns and excuses toward productive action—but you may also want to maintain a productive relationship with them and enlist their help with changes that you can all agree on.

### Refutation

You may choose to **directly refute** readers' resistances or objections, using one of three common approaches:

You may argue or provide evidence that a reader's position is **incorrect**: Responding by correcting factual error is the easiest and most direct refutation—but also the least common option among educated or committed readers. You should focus on correcting misinformation without accusing them of poor judgment, and provide information that is credible to those readers.

If readers essentially understand the details, you may be able to argue that their resistance is **correct but irrelevant**, in order to focus everyone's attention on the central issues. If readers are concerned about a drug's effect on five-year-olds when those children are highly unlikely to gain access to it, you can redirect them to more central issues of saving adult lives.

In most cases—since if it were easy it would be done already—you will need to argue that readers' concerns are **correct and relevant but insufficient** to override the need for change. One strategy is to use analysis to argue that readers are not yet mindful of the complexity of a situation: "If one considers only A and B, the current plan seems sufficient; but if one considers C, D, and E as well, you see we need a new course of action." You may also wish to argue about the urgency or impact of a situation: "Doing X is important, but doing Y *right now* is more important for more people with more impressive results."

To argue for change, writers often negotiate among a competing set of values ("We need to invest for the long term even if we lose money in the short term"). Shifting readers' values is tricky, because it's hard to identify which values underlie a resistance point, and because none of us likes to be asked to rethink the guiding principles that have served us well thus far. You will need to establish support from credible sources, but you may also need to strengthen the ethical and emotional appeals in your refutation.



### Concession and compromise

In some situations, you will face resistances that cannot be refuted—or you will want to build a relationship with readers rather than demonstrate your superiority. Research shows that in complex negotiations, people who strive for a mutually successful outcome more than trying to prove that their side is “right” often create more sustainable solutions. So you may want to try approaches that build connections:

You can **concede** that a point of resistance is entirely valid. The more sincere, complete, and specific your concession, the more credibility you may gain with your audience (a stronger appeal to ethos). Since writers are rarely right about everything, acknowledging some points of agreement with readers not only builds common ground but keeps us grounded in reality.

You may call for **compromise**, in which you may describe some radical options for change but then argue for mutually agreeable actions that occur more in the middle of the continuum. Generally, you gain credibility by avoiding scare tactics or poor logic: avoid narrow “either my way or the highway” dramas and “slippery slope” descriptions that exaggerate the consequences of the current situation just to make your compromise position look better. You should aim to recommend helpful actions without either you or your readers “selling out” on a central principle.

If you are joining a long-running conversation, positions on all sides may have become entrenched, and to move forward you may need to **construct** a third, fourth, or fifth option that has not yet been fully evaluated. Remember that *writers create new knowledge*, not just report it. Your insights into readers’ concerns may spark ideas about ways to modify, expand, or redirect earlier lines of argument into new options that may satisfy multiple stakeholders.

### Adapting to genres and audiences

In some proposals for change, writers address resistances and present counterarguments directly. A letter to a political representative might use second-person pronouns to address a reader directly: “You may worry that the vaccinations are too expensive, but compared to the cost of treating the disease, the cost is minimal.” An academic essay or informational web page might use third-person examples: “According to studies, many parents are concerned about the cost of the vaccine; however, those costs can usually be covered through insurance or state health programs.”

In other genres, a direct approach may not work. The change you want from an application letter is for you to be offered a job, and the change you want from a grant

proposal is to be offered a grant. Since everyone knows the goal, it can be considered counterproductive to address resistances directly: “You may be planning to hire someone with a higher GPA, but I bring crucial workplace skills to this position.” Yet to succeed in writing for change, you must still anticipate and provide arguments in response to the concerns that might be raised. Perhaps you could explain your GPA, or simply strengthen your description of your advanced courses and internship experience. Either way, you need to anticipate readers’ thinking in order to compose your response, even when you don’t directly mention their resistance.

Overall, writers who argue for change need to negotiate a viable pathway through significant resistances. A reader who agrees in principle but does not get off the couch to go vote for the candidate you recommend doesn’t help create actual changes any more than a reader who still disagrees with you. If you’ve ever used one flimsy excuse after another to talk yourself out of an action as minor as going to the gym on a cold day, finishing your homework rather than staying to chat online, or cleaning the house rather than playing outside with the kids, you will recognize the need to fully address readers’ assumptions, questions, and resistances. You know that if you leave non-change pathways open, readers may be able to justify inaction and continue on their current course.

### Predict a feasible future

To move readers forward, you need to document the present and then predict a reasonable future. You may occasionally argue for a return to policies, procedures, or behaviors that were previously in place; more commonly, you will ask readers to venture into much less familiar territory, taking risks that they cannot be certain will come with adequate rewards.

If predicting the future sounds impossible—after all, you don’t have magical powers—you’re partly right. Yet while you can’t be 100% accurate, you should aim to provide as much specificity and convey as much confidence as possible without exaggerating the current challenges or straining your credibility too far. To convince readers that your proposed future is feasible, you might use one or more of the following strategies.

#### Predict by clarifying current consequences

If the present situation is causing serious enough problems for a wide enough group of people, then readers may be persuaded that a future without change will have detrimental effects. In such a case, the change you recommend may seem well worth taking some risks. Perhaps your audience is not fully aware of the extent of the current consequences (or of the potential consequences if no action is taken). So you might document the present carefully: “Each site already developed to drill for shale gas or install windmills has involved creating a network of roads, wells, and power supply lines that adversely affect groundwater

and wildlife.” Your credible evidence about the measurable current consequences can encourage readers to prefer a different future.

### Predict by extrapolating from current data

If you regularly work with numerical data, you are familiar with the benefits and limits of extrapolating from current data: how long, how far, and along what trajectory will a current trend continue? The longer the current trend and the more thorough and credible the data, the more reliable your prediction about the near future will be. You may need to use qualifying language in these kinds of arguments to help readers imagine a vivid future picture even when the outcomes are uncertain. Instead of saying that your proposal *will* lower the number of deaths from opioid abuse in your county, you can extrapolate carefully: Since a two-year pilot study observed a 20% decrease in deaths by providing outpatient counseling at one crisis support center, creating three more centers *could save up to* 600 lives per year.

### Predict by analogy with a related current situation

Maybe nobody has solved the problem you are working on, but someone may have fully or partially solved a similar problem in another time or location, or for another group or profession. Any time you refer to a research study or an example from the town down the road, you are arguing by analogy: if it worked there, it should work here.

When you predict successful change via analogy—“Expanding mail-in voting and early in-person voting in Virginia would lessen the time people spend standing in line on election day, just as it has done in Oregon”—you have several tasks to accomplish. You must demonstrate credibly that the analogous change worked: that Oregon had better voting access than Virginia, even if there were still some problems in Oregon. You also need to establish the ways in which the two situations are similar: for this, Oregon’s program may be a better example to show readers in Virginia than California’s. Most importantly, you must be careful not to press an analogy argument too far. If the situations are too unlike to begin with—“Mail-in registration has been efficient for colleges and universities for decades, so we could use it for voting too”—readers will question your fundamental logic, and the analogy will fail.

All of these predictions require careful negotiation: the further you reach from readers’ current, familiar experience (and from credible data about it), the less confident readers will be. Yet without some implied or stated arguments about the future, you cannot successfully motivate readers to change their present actions. How you handle that balancing act will depend on the strength and source of readers’ resistance, as well as on your genre and rhetorical situation. Writers of academic journal articles often conservatively mention the “possible implications” of the currently reported data, suggesting that it needs to be confirmed by replication in subsequent studies. On the other hand, composers of websites for advocacy organizations often argue vividly about the long-term consequences of

decisions or policies, and grant applicants often lean on their prior successes to directly make the case that their next project also deserves funding. In all these cases, writers move readers toward change when we convince them that the future we imagine is not just beneficial but feasible.

### Explore 18.3

Briefly describe a change that would improve your college or university campus (perhaps one you identified earlier). If that change were easy, it would already be done, so start by identifying two ways that campus leaders might resist or feel stuck: how are they limited by knowledge, values, and/or resources? Then write a sentence or two to persuade leaders that, despite limitations or concerns, change is feasible. You can argue based on how bad the situation is now, based on reasonable extrapolations of how the situation could reasonably evolve, or based on analogy (“University X did this last year”). You can make up data now if you need to, but if you do that, add a note: “I’d need more research about this.”



### Practice

- To learn about and practice avoiding **logical fallacies** like confirmation bias, see [Reason Appallingly](#).



### Learn

- To learn more about **analyzing discourse communities**, see [Chapter 3, Responding to Readers’ Needs](#).
- To learn more about **using argumentative appeals**, see [Chapter 17, Developing Projects that Argue](#).
- To learn more about **adapting to alternate genres**, see [Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres](#).



## 18.2 Reflect To Predict: Exploring Your Change Proposal Project

All advanced writers benefit from planning a project, perhaps by writing an outline or identifying a research process; reflective writers take some additional steps to deliberately explore a range of options and predict which ones will be most successful.

Remember that you can DEAL as you explore and predict aspects of your project. Predicting as a change proposer requires many of the same considerations as you will encounter in other writing tasks: you will want to **define** your audience and your goals, **explore** your own subject knowledge and consider your dispositions, **act** to acquire resources and develop



early insights, and **learn** how you can combine new strategies with previous ones that have been successful for you as a writer.

Because you will need to *understand the ecosystem* surrounding your recommendation for change, you may want to take some time with the explorations explained here.

### Explore your goals in relation to readers' constraints and opportunities

Envisioning a specific audience is never more important than when proposing change: when possible, you should direct your recommendations to readers with the ability to act on your advice for themselves or for others. Even when a goal-to-reader connection initially seems obvious, such as writing to your child's school principal to help reduce bullying on the playground, you should take time to explore alternatives (perhaps the local parent-teacher association or the state board of education could help provide resources or policies). You should also consider readers' inertia: why haven't they *already* taken up this change? The more you can investigate how why and how your readers may resist, and the constraints within their ecosystems, the more you'll know about the actions they are capable of taking. When the inertia is higher, you may need to focus on smaller steps toward change or to collect stronger evidence to move readers to action.

### Explore the past, present, and future

To successfully argue for change, you need to know a little about what has already been tried and how people responded; you need to understand the current situation and how the consequences affect a wide range of stakeholders; and you need to examine data that helps you predict the future results of change. If you only address the problem right in front of you, you run the risk of readers saying, "We tried that last year and it didn't work" or "That sounds good in theory but it will never work here." You should also evaluate what resources you have for obtaining credible general knowledge (such as trends in university residence hall policies nationally) as well as specific local knowledge relevant to your readers (your local school policies).

### Explore your scope and structure

Is it more effective to argue for one ambitious solution that will inspire readers? Or will readers in the community or profession respond better if you propose small steps or offer a compromise? Your decisions about the depth, breadth, order, and even genre of your document will depend in part on whether readers have the interest and time to review all the research or would prefer a quick list of steps or a chart with a three-year budget. If you are recommending a low-stakes change or connecting with readers who are likely to be flexible, you may find that it's effective to start with your own arguments and focus primarily on your recommendations using

a block pattern. When you anticipate that readers are more resistant or fearful, or when you are recommending a change that is risky or large-scale, you may want to start by reassuring readers that you understand their concerns—or integrate your responses to counterarguments throughout your document in a side-by-side pattern.

Once you understand your intensity and scope, you might also experiment with phrasing your initial claim: most proposals use an explicit argument statement that leans toward high complexity.

### Exercises to consider as you reflect to predict

Before you set out to write the actual first pages of your change proposal, you will want to acquire resources that will help you meet the challenges you’ve identified, and practice some of the strategies you may use as you compose. You already know of actions that can help you: perhaps you like to list reasons supporting and resisting your view, read some popular articles about an issue, or set up note-taking cards or documents to track your thinking. As a proposal writer, you may also find the exercises below particularly helpful.

#### Practice

- To practice **identifying goals and constraints**, see [Audience Profile](#), [Audience Switch](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Magic Three Choices](#), or [Out on a Limb](#).
- To practice **inquiring about the change ecosystem**, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Date My Topic](#), [Evidence Shopping List](#), [Mind the Gap](#), or [Scenarios](#).
- To practice **exploring your scope and structure**, see [Cousin Topics](#), [Deluxe Project Scheduler](#), [Expand and Narrow](#), [Explode a Moment](#), or [Six Structures](#).



## 18.3 Reflect To Problem-Solve: Exploring Sticky Proposal Problems

Advanced writers often take steps to solve problems during the composing process; reflective writers look for ways to step back from a problem to explore likely alternatives rather than staring at a blinking cursor or “just doing it.”

As you compose your proposal, you may encounter challenges that feel familiar to you: generating material, staying organized and focused, providing sufficient evidence, managing your time or finding a stronger motivation boost. When you get stuck, you can DEAL with your problem: define it, explore possible solutions, act to try out a new approach, and make a note of what you learned: did your strategy help?



In writing to propose change, you might find that you get stuck trying to balance between fully describing the ecosystem and presenting a feasible, cohesive recommendation. While it can be an achievement sometimes just to get people to agree that change is needed, you also need to use your careful research and innovative thinking to identify the next necessary steps (otherwise you may be falling into the pattern noted in the old joke, “Everyone complains about the weather, but nobody *does* anything about it”). You may want to explore the strategies noted here, so that you have some new approaches ready to try.

### Balance vision and reality

In arguing for change, writers are often encouraged to project confidence and create an inspiring vision in order to motivate readers. In order to open up space for change, you may need to be innovative and present reasonings, steps, or goals that readers have not considered before. However, you should also remember that writers motivate change by presenting complete, reasonable, and effective recommendations. If your advice is not supported by credible evidence, or if the change feels too extreme for readers to manage, your proposal will be less likely to succeed. If you’re feeling stuck, you might experiment with aiming for a more exciting or influential change, or scaling back to recommend some initial steps or localized change that are strongly supported by your evidence. In this work, your dispositions of *confidence* need to balance with your dispositions for *openness* and *curiosity*: the more you can learn about your readers and the ecosystem of change, the more likely you will be to offer a feasible proposal.

### Empathize with readers’ goals and values

Often we propose change because we’re frustrated with a current situation or the people leading it, yet it’s hard to motivate people to change by scolding them. As you write, you should strive to see your recommendations from your readers’ perspective. Most people aren’t resisting change just to be ornery, but because they believe the current scene or system matches what they most value, or because they fear losing something they value. Once you can identify a reasonable alternate value and think, “If I valued X instead of Y, I would be skeptical of this proposal, too,” then you will be able to investigate approaches to help you encourage change. You should be prepared to change your evidence and even revise your recommendations as you learn more about what might motivate readers.

### Manage multiple points of view

With so many moving parts in a change proposal, writers can get a little lost. It can help to check in and ask yourself which of your main goals you’re working on in a particular section, paragraph, or even sentence:

- Are you arguing that the problem is serious enough to require change, explaining how change happened elsewhere, or specifically recommending steps toward change?
- Are you providing direct recommendations to readers about what they should do and why, or addressing their counterarguments to reassure them that their values and experiences align with the change?
- Are you representing data or examples from credible sources, or stating your own argument or analysis based on the evidence presented?

When you yourself know your position and goal, then you can look for coherence strategies to help readers keep track of the pathway, through large patterns like paragraph order or smaller patterns like transition phrases, repeated key terms, and known-new conventions.

### Exercises to consider as you reflect to problem-solve

When you get stuck composing your proposal for change, you may use strategies you've used before: taking a break, reviewing the assignment directions, talking to a friend, working on a different part of the writing task, or connecting to a value that motivates you. If you're stuck because you aren't sure whether your writing will motivate readers to change, you may also find the exercises below helpful.

#### Practice

- To practice **exploring your proposal**, see [Believing/Doubting](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Expand and Narrow](#), [Gray Area Finder](#), [Out on a Limb](#), [Stance Switch](#), or [Values Freewrite](#).
- To practice **exploring readers' needs or values**, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Evidence Shopping List](#), [Scenarios](#), [Used to Think / Now I Think](#).
- To practice **considering multiple views** of a situation or recommendation, see [3D Mind Map](#), [Dialogue](#), [Source Synthesis Grid](#), [They Say / I Say](#), [Write the Problem](#).



## 18.4 Reflect To Improve: Exploring Your Growth as a Proposer and a Writer

As you complete a draft or finalize your project, you will benefit not just from making a few final edits, but from taking time to reflect on your work: you will want to define what you learned from this project, explore how to complete your revisions and identify key principles for writing, anticipate and adapt to meet the needs of future projects, and learn how you will keep improving as a writer.





You might also find that you want to explore some of the ways that you can improve your *proposal* writing specifically, for this project and for future projects. Successful proposal documents require skills at balancing the big picture with small details supporting feasibility that you may want to add to your repertoire. You could thus give some extra time to the explorations explained here, so that you take full advantage of the opportunity to grow as a writer.

### Assess your insights to improve your proposal

The journey from an initial idea about “what I want to happen” to an understanding of “how others can make something happen” is filled with learning: about the topic, about readers and their ecosystems, about change processes generally, and even about yourself. It makes sense to pause after completing an initial draft to honestly assess that learning and apply it to revisions for your project—particularly if you’ve received feedback from readers. (One writer I know finished an essay recommending that students always turn off their cell-phones in class because research showed that it detracts from student learning—but admitted that she herself was unpersuaded by that research and still kept her own phone on in classes, a realization that prompted her to rethink some of her arguments!)

Since proposers often gain strong insight into how hard change can be, they often need to recalibrate their arguments as they revise. Remember that if you or your readers have doubts about part of your recommendations, you can choose to strengthen your evidence (even if this means doing some new research), address readers’ concerns or constraints more directly, or shift your advice to something more feasible. Sometimes it is better to succeed in persuading people to make a small, initial change—and perhaps consider what their next steps could be—than to have no effect at all.

### Identify proposal strategies to expand your writing story

Reflecting on how you investigated a whole ecosystem in order to write a proposal to move one small piece of it—and identifying arguments that were tricky to make—can help you transfer your improved proposal-writing skills to another project. Whatever field or profession you are in or hope to be in, it’s likely that one thing that distinguishes leaders from followers is the ability to imagine and successfully propose changes.

It might be interesting to consider how composing your writing story is itself a proposal for change, in which you identify both what *has always* worked for you as a writer along with some *new approaches* that you are planning to adopt as you grow and change (even if they seem difficult right now). In addition, you might look at how some key proposal strategies might also become part

of your story, whether they are focused generally on matching argument and evidence to readers' up-front needs, or more specifically on how you might use a combination of refutation and compromise to negotiate in difficult writing scenarios.

Writing for change nearly always helps writers understand our own strengths, preferences, and growth areas, because at least some part of this work is hard for nearly every writer. Maybe you've discovered that you're interested in all the interlocking pieces of an ecosystem (and so you get off on a tangent sometimes), or that you prefer "just the facts" reasoning (and so sometimes miss out on readers' more emotional or psychological resistance points). This could be a "meta" moment: learning how to change and improve yourself as a writer—or to grow in any profession—will draw on the same skills and strategies that you are using in a change proposal project. So even if you don't see a future for yourself as a grant writer or social activist, your proposal skills can prove valuable in a wide range of personal and professional situations.

### Exercises to consider as you reflect to improve

Since proposing change relies on strategies you use in other writing tasks (explaining a problem, analyzing the effects of current actions, arguing for solutions), you might find that familiar strategies help: checking on feedback from your readers, using highlight colors to help you see patterns, or connecting to your core values for motivation. You may also find it helpful to explore the resources below to see which ones might support your work:

#### Practice

- To practice **highlighting insights about proposing change**, see [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Letter to Kermit](#), [Scenarios](#), [Shrunk-en Draft](#), [Ten Directed Revisions](#), [Used To Think / Now I Think](#).



#### Learn

- To learn more about **revising**, see [Chapter 10, Revising from Feedback and Reflection](#).
- To learn more about **paragraphs, organizational patterns, and cohesion**, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about **improving future writing tasks**, see [Chapter 12, Creating Your Writing Theory](#).



## 18.5 Sample Writing Projects that Rely on Change Proposals

### Experience-based writing project: Hard habit to break

One of the best ways to learn to empathize with readers who don't want to change is to become one. For this project, you will be both the author and the audience: select a habit you want to break, a new behavior pattern you want to adopt, or a goal you want to achieve, and write to yourself arguing in favor of that change. (If you can't think of any improvements for yourself, you can write to a very close friend or relative.) Psychologists explain that New Year's resolutions tend to fail because people set their sights too high and don't create a clear plan, so don't plan to quit smoking forever or give up all social media.

Instead, consider cutting back or setting a temporary limit.

Then identify as many of your resistances or concerns as you can (if it were easy, you'd already have done it), identify the values that support your current behavior, and map out responses to those points. Use a genre and style that you'll pay attention to: a humorous animation? a heartfelt letter? a step-by-step manual? If you need to do a little research, you can, but you should focus on providing reasons that address your specific concerns or fears, rather than lists of expert opinions that don't relate to your life.

#### Practice

- To practice writing **proposals** that you can use to change your own behavior, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Believing/Doubting](#), [Cause-Effect Map](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Reason Appallingly](#), [Used To Think / Now I Think](#), or [Values Freewrite](#).



#### Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, [Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#), regarding
  - [Narration](#) to provide examples from your experience
  - [Causal argument and evaluative argument](#) to explain how and why benefits occur
  - [Reflection](#) to consider how your own life has changed in past years or could now change for the better
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you complete a successful proposal, see
  - Chapter 19 on [conducting self-based research](#)
  - Chapter 7 on [implicit/explicit thesis statements](#) and [organizational patterns](#)
  - Chapter 11 on [editing to create an appropriate and consistent style](#)



## Writing-about-writing project: Revision plan or genre critique

Every time you provide feedback as a peer reviewer, you are arguing for change. Instead of leaving just a few comments this time, create a full-scale revision plan. You can write to a peer about revising their recent draft. Alternately, you can write to an instructor or supervisor suggesting changes to a whole *genre* of writing in order to improve learning and/or communication: you could critique a midterm or final project genre that puts too many stresses or limits on writers, an annual report structure that wastes time or omits key details, or the design of your company's website or informational brochure.

Writers don't always accept others' suggestions easily. Thus you'll need to anticipate what the author or supervisor prefers about the current version and address those concerns, and provide very specific suggestions for changes, even to the point of writing sample sentences. To gain credibility, you might use specific terms about writing like those in this textbook, or conduct some research about the ways other writers compose in similar genres. You might draft an essay or memo, or try your hand at using a screencast app that lets you talk as you annotate a text. Remember that this is a persuasive assignment: your goal is not just to point out errors or problems, but to convince your audience to make a change.

### Practice

- To practice **proposing** ways to improve a text or genre, see [Audience Profile](#), [Believing / Doubting](#), [Best and Better](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Genre Switch](#), [Ten Directed Revisions](#), [Values Freewrite](#), or [Write the Problem](#).



### Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, [Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#), regarding
  - [Description](#) to identify a problem
  - [Definition](#) of key rhetorical terms or writing strategies
  - [Causal or evaluative argument](#) to make your case
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you propose specific, feasible changes to a text or genre, see
  - Chapter 1 on [threshold concepts](#)
  - Chapter 3 on [adapting to discourse communities](#)
  - Chapter 5 on [identifying key elements of a text or assignment](#)
  - Chapter 9 on [reviewing a peer's draft](#)
  - Chapter 13 on [adapting genres](#)
  - Chapter 11 on [rhetorical sentences](#)



## Inquiry-based writing project: Home improvements

Identify a change that you'd like to see in your neighborhood, community, or workplace, and write to argue for (part of) that change. You need to select a specific audience that has some power to enact or support the change, and that is exact enough that it either has a mailing address or could fit into a room. Thus you can't write an open essay "to all parents," but you could write an article for an online parenting magazine or blog (which has an email address) or compose a presentation to give to the parent-teacher association of a local school district (which can meet in a room).

Remember that the more you can find out about the ecosystem surrounding your recommended change and about your readers, the more persuasive you can be. So you will need to locate sufficient credible data or information both to make your case for change/improvement and to predict and respond convincingly to your readers' disagreements, resistances, and concerns.

### Practice

- To practice **proposing** community change, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Evidence Shopping List](#), [Evil Genie](#), [Six Degrees](#), [Six Structures](#), [Source Synthesis Grid](#), [Subtopic Generator](#).



### Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, [Selecting and Combining Composing Moves](#), regarding
  - [Description](#) of the difficult situation
  - [Explanation](#) of different possible steps and their consequences
  - [Synthesis](#) of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
  - [Exploration](#) of possible future results
- To learn more about **additional writing strategies** to help you propose focused and feasible change, see
  - Chapter 5 on [choosing a topic](#)
  - Chapter 20 on [gathering primary and secondary data](#) and [evaluating sources](#)
  - Chapter 21 on [addressing conflicts and complications](#)
  - Chapter 13 on [using genre patterns](#)
  - Chapter 7 on [planning paragraph structures](#)
  - Chapter 22 on [integrating evidence from sources](#)
  - Chapter 11 on [editing to create an appropriate style](#)



## Community-engaged writing project: Funding proposal

Nearly all groups seek additional funding—and they need advanced writers to help craft their proposals. Choose an organization or group in your campus or local community, identify a project or event they want or need to improve, and write a proposal to get funding in support of it. You can address a local agency like a city council, a funding organization that offers grants, or a specific group of local donors. You can use hypothetical situations, but the more *real* you can make this project, the better: interview an organization leader to find out their needs, and do some research to identify an actual grant program or donor you could write to.

You will need to research the donor or grant giver that you select as your audience: what are their goals and values, what achievements will they most want to see, and what (if any) specifications do they give for writing a proposal? If you don't find proposal specs, use what you know about asking for change: identify what you want and why it's valuable; connect to readers' likely values and answer their concerns about what their money will be used for, convince them that the project is feasible, and provide credible evidence to support your arguments. If no structure is specified, choose a genre that helps you provide an organized argument about what you want and how they will benefit.

### Practice

- To practice **proposing** that someone donate money to your organization or group, see [Assumption Inspection](#), [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#), [Counterargument Generator](#), [Elevator Speech](#), [Emperor for a Day](#), [Scenarios](#), [Six Structures](#).



### Learn

- To learn more about **additional writing moves**, see Chapter 14, *Selecting and Combining Composing Moves*, regarding
  - [Description](#) of the organization's facilities, practices, goals, or clients
  - [Causal or evaluative argument](#) to identify the benefits the organization provides and how additional funding will improve its work
  - [Synthesis](#) of material from several sources to build credibility and detail
- To learn more about additional writing strategies to help you propose a reasonable project for funding, see
  - Chapter 20 on [gathering primary and secondary data](#)
  - Chapter 21 on [addressing conflicts and complications](#)
  - Chapter 22 on [framing and citing your source information](#)
  - Chapter 11 on [editing to create an appropriate style](#)

