

The DO'S and DON'TS: Writing a proposal for an exhibition or funding application

Note that the tips below are relevant to most proposal processes

Find out which galleries and spaces accept proposals.

When are their deadlines? What is their selection process?

- Different galleries have different processes and requirements. Make sure you are aware of these. You can usually find out online or request information via email. E.g. Enjoy, Toi Pōneke, Thistle Hall, Hirschfeld etc

Before you start (key questions)

- Is the gallery or organisation you're applying to a good match with your work?
- Do your research on the gallery/organisation. Make sure you have an understanding of who they are and what they do. Go to their openings and shows. What sort of work do they normally show or support?
- Get the gallery's/organisation's advice on submitting a proposal to them. You could send an email or call and arrange an informal meeting. Be prepared to introduce your idea briefly, and be concise. Allow plenty of time – don't call and expect someone to meet you that day.

Writing the proposal

- Start well before the deadline.
- Read the criteria! Make sure your work is a good fit. If it's not, then look for another opportunity. If it is, then consider the criteria and how your work relates. Make this evident in your proposal.
- Have a clear idea of what you want to do and how you can make it happen.
- In general proposals usually outline:
 - the concept (your ideas)
 - a physical description (how the show will look e.g. media, approach, how it will work in the space)
 - How it will be achieved:
Provide pragmatic details including timeline, install requirements, and **BUDGET**: do be upfront and clear about costs, so that galleries can get a good sense of the scope they may have to assist. State what you can offer financially, and "in kind" (free) to the project, so that the gallery/organisation can see what sort of effort you are prepared to put in.
 - Context (why the exhibition is relevant to this space).
Be clear about why your proposal is relevant to this specific context i.e. why this gallery/space/place? This could be because of the type of gallery and audiences it attracts, e.g. community based, artist run. Or, it could be the ethos of the gallery or the actual physical space that's important. Provide some detail, or at least a note (as the supporting material will illustrate this more fully), about the work's context within your own practice. That is does it represent a departure from earlier work / the continuation of a series / a collaboration / does it respond to or build on something else you have done? Also, how it will operate in the space? Is there an expectation of audiences i.e. interaction / prior knowledge / sound or other sensory component? And thirdly, timeliness: why is it significant that the work be shown *now*, how is it relevant to the space and the place and the time?

- Include a selection of relevant images.
This could be works in progress, drawings or images of previous similar works and past works. Make sure the images are not HUGE if you're emailing them! If emailing each image it should be low res – around 100 – 500KB.
- Include your contact details
- And, if the criteria asks for something specifically then be sure to respond to it.

Supporting Information

- Support material can include a short bio or CV separately (note this should be art-focused and include any exhibitions, awards, relevant experience, bibliography) and any relevant catalogues or writing on your work if you have it.
- Images of previous work – a well-chosen selection - not every single work you've ever made
- sketch or diagram of what you would like to achieve in the space.

Do

- Get someone else to read your proposal and give you feedback or edit it. Just because it's clear to you doesn't mean it is clear to other people.
- Be clear about how far along the project is: if the ideas are still in development, or you are open to discussion and advice about how your ideas may be refined in execution then say so.
- Be specific – don't send the same proposal off to 50 galleries – think about what you're doing and why you want to do it at XXXXXXXX gallery. Make it relevant.
- Use paragraphs and section headers to clarify your information and make it easy to read.
- Create a sense of 'this is what I am doing and I'm going to make it happen – get on board.'
- Think about other events that can promote your project – a performance, artist's talk, radio interview for example. Think about the complete package and how you want your work portrayed, and how this could be interesting, and encourage people to come along.
- If you are doing an artist's talk think about the structure of it; if you have stage fright, strategise – can you invite someone to do a talk for you with a specific topic? Can you be in a "discussion" with someone more confident?
- Label your files with your (not the gallery's) name for each download/file.
- If you are planning on being the curator, and charging a fee, then make sure that the artist/s fee gets acknowledged first and foremost. Most spaces do not pay a curator's fee.
- Consider writing – some spaces have a publishing program – have a think if you would be interested in this, and if having a publication is applicable to your project.
- Consider group proposals: sometimes a collaborative project is a good way to approach a gallery for the first time, and gain practical experience developing an exhibition.

Don't

- Try too obviously to mould your project to suit the needs of the gallery or funding – be strategic (but not overtly) in "ticking the right boxes."
- Include anything that's not relevant
- Use too much copy and pasted material
- Include your life story or personal journey
- Have spelling mistakes
- Send HUGE attachments

And...

Ultimately it's about the work. A good proposal goes a long way but it can't do everything.

Further Suggestions

Other possibilities

- Hire or find an alternative venue and have your own exhibition – this could be short and sweet, just a single night or weekend show.
- Make a show for outside the gallery – living room, apartment, garage, studio, window space.
- Propose one-off events for galleries – public programming or performance based.
- Get involved as a volunteer – through this you will have more opportunities and experience, as well as references.
- Publications, websites and blogging are great for generating a public profile.

Other general tips

- Presentation matters (page numbers, headers, each page named, clean & clear lay out)
- Group shows are always good places to start as are small-scale projects e.g. window works or billboards
- If you can't find galleries that suit your work then think about starting something yourself. It doesn't have to be a gallery. It could be a one night show in an empty space or an exhibition in someone's living room.