

Grant Writing Basics

A grant is an award of money given for specific activities for the public good: to conduct research or to provide environmental, economic, or social benefits. Grants are given by private foundations, corporations, and various government agencies; applicants ask for money by writing a grant proposal which describes in detail how the money will be used, if awarded, and how the applicant meets specific guidelines spelled out by the granting organization. The two fundamental principles that guide all grantseeking are that (1) the mission of the applicant's organization and the mission of the grantmaking organization must be in alignment, which the writing of the grant proposal then illustrates; and (2) all of the grantmaker's instructions for submitting a proposal must be followed precisely.

A grant is not primarily about getting money; it is about being able to implement a goal that has been envisioned. Developing a project comes first, before writing a grant proposal. Projects that are developed simply to respond to a particular grant are not built on a strong foundation; the best grant proposals come from having a clear organizational mission, identifying a problem related to the mission, designing a project to solve some part of that problem, and then finding a grant which aligns with the goals and objectives of the organization and its project. Grants are more likely to be awarded to well-designed projects or programs addressing a problem that is also related to the grantor's mission. Writing the grant proposal is preceded by careful planning, and the work of developing a proposal is never a waste, even if that particular grant is not awarded. See chapter 5, "Putting Sustainability into Practice" and chapter 16, "Working in an Organization" in the book *Sustainability Principles and Practice* for information about how to plan a project.

When searching for a potential funding source, the goal is to find a grant which is a good match with the project that has been developed. The websites listed at the end of this document suggest some possible sources. Applicants should carefully research each potential grantmaker, reading their reports, reviewing the projects they have funded in the past, and becoming familiar with their mission and problem-solving approach. The grant proposal should be written in a way that demonstrates the applicant understands the funder's mission, shares their vision, and is offering a project that aligns with that vision and mission. Consider that if a grantmaker had enough money, they would try to solve the problem directly themselves; however, since they don't have unlimited funds, they try to leverage the money they do have by funding projects in the area they care about with the potential to have a meaningful, replicable impact. A grant proposal should assure a funder that this project will be a good investment for them.

Preparing to Write a Grant Proposal

A grantmaker gives instructions for applying in a request for proposal (RFP), which describes the questions that must be answered, the order in which they must be answered, the supporting documents that must be attached, the selection criteria that will be used, and a page limit. It is essential that these instructions be followed exactly; inattention to any one of these instructions will cause the proposal to be rejected. Begin by reading through the funder's RFP and using a highlighter to mark every requirement. Using another highlighter color, highlight words that are used multiple times; these indicate concepts that are important to the funder and give clues to

what they are looking for. Make a list of these words, and use the same or similar language in writing the proposal.

To organize the writing of the grant proposal, begin with the RFP and turn it into a shell; use this empty document as the outline for the proposal, which can be filled in as writing proceeds. This will ensure that all of the required headings and subheadings will be included, in the same order, using the grantmaker's language. Make a list of all of the documents that must be included in the application packet. Use the outline created from the RFP to set up a table of contents, which must include everything the grantmaker asks for and in the order in which they requested it. If the funder provides a point value for each element with their evaluation criteria, make a separate list of the contents with the point values assigned to help determine how much space and information to devote to each section when writing.

Use clear, straightforward language when writing; avoid jargon, and do not assume that reviewers will be familiar with specialized terminology unless it appears in the RFP itself. Write the proposal in an active, not passive, voice, which lends clarity and an emphasis on action. For example, say, "residents use the community garden" rather than, "the community garden is used by residents." Make confident statements such as "we address," rather than tentative statements such as "we hope to address," and use present rather than future tense where possible. Avoid value judgments and limit adjectives as much as possible, maintaining the proposal as a statement of fact. Give your project a vivid, memorable title.

The project narrative begins with an abstract or summary, if requested in the RFP; if not, it begins with an introduction. The abstract, summary, or introduction provides a snapshot of the entire project, consisting of one or two paragraphs that summarize succinctly and clearly what the project is about for reviewers who know nothing about your project. This section should actually be written last, after the rest of the narrative has been written. The introduction or abstract explains the problem being addressed, the solution being proposed, and the major components of the project: who will be involved, what it will cost, and how much of that cost is being requested in the grant. Most importantly, it describes what activities will be done, what outcomes are expected, and who will benefit. This section may determine how carefully reviewers read the rest of the proposal, and in certain situations it is the only thing that some reviewers will read, so it must be written carefully.

The statement of need is an important section of a grant proposal. This is a compelling, detailed description of the problem you intend to solve and why it matters. No organization can do everything that needs doing; to be credible, your project needs to select one part of the larger issue and focus on that. Demonstrate your expertise in this area; include information about who will be served, and back up your statements with statistics, relevant research in the field, and your own past experience. The statement of need is where you begin to illustrate that the grantmaker's concerns are your concerns, and that your organization is well suited and capable of addressing this particular issue. Funders look for solutions that are replicable in multiple sites; show how the problem you are addressing in your community is similar to problems in other communities. Keep the focus on the target population you intend to serve, what it is they need and what the impact will be if their problem is not solved.

The majority of a grant proposal consists of a project narrative, with goals, objectives, activities, outcomes, and a timeline. This is the largest section of a proposal, and it describes the steps of the project. In the statement of need you identified a problem; various approaches could probably be used for solving this problem, and your proposal will describe the approach you think is the more effective.

Having described the problem in the statement of need, the goals and objectives explain what will be done and how it will be done. The goals describe your vision for addressing this need; they reflect the values of your organization and explain why the work of this project is important. The objectives are a description of how you will do this work, what steps must be taken in order to achieve the goals. Goals and objectives must be measurable so that you can determine whether you achieved what you planned to achieved. Following the objectives, describe in detail the activities that will achieve each of these objectives; include exactly what will be done, by whom, and when. Describe the outcomes that will be achieved as a result of performing these activities, sometimes referred to as the deliverables. The activities and outcomes constitute a work plan.

Many grant proposals include a timeline, a graphical representation of the major activities and benchmarks in the project, often in simple table format. It can include just activities and time periods, or it can also include additional information such as who will do those activities, what the outcomes will be, and when evaluation steps will be performed. A timeline can be an effective way to condense a lot of information into a compact space. It is relatively uncluttered and allows the reviewer to grasp a complete picture more easily.

Charts and tables are devices that can communicate a great deal of data in a relatively compact space. They also allow reviewers to see how elements are related to each other. The content of charts and tables might include such things as staff relationships and responsibilities, and the roles of partners. They are particularly effective in communicating details of objectives, activities, and outcomes.

Potential grantmakers want to know that your mission is in alignment with theirs, and they also want to know that your organization has the capacity and ability to complete successfully the project you propose. This is why RFPs ask for information about the applicant's organization. This section typically includes a brief description of the organization's mission, history, programs, and staff qualifications. It should let reviewers see how the mission and work of the organization relate to the project being proposed, and should give evidence that you will be able to manage and complete the work you are proposing. Some RFPs require that projects include partnerships; if so, the organization section should also include information about partners and their particular roles, with explanations of the strengths each partner brings to the undertaking. A discussion of partnerships can demonstrate inclusivity and collaboration.

Every grant proposal must include a budget in table form, with expense items in the leftmost column and income sources across the top, together with a narrative that briefly explains the rationale for all budget items. The budget demonstrates that the applicant has thought through the details of undertaking the project, and also demonstrates the organization's capacity both to manage the project and to carry the activity forward after the grant has expired.

A project management plan demonstrates that the applicant is ready to go, understands exactly what steps will be required, in what order, and will be able to complete the project successfully; it demonstrates to the reviewers that this project will be a good investment. It includes details about precisely what will be done, who has responsibility for doing it, and when it will be done. The plan also demonstrates how the work of the project will continue after the grant funds have been used. If the grantmaker does not require a full management plan, the proposal should still address these elements in some way.

The management plan should also present details about evaluation and dissemination. Evaluation is the act of measurement; an evaluation plan shows how you will know that you have achieved your goals and objectives. It includes descriptions of what will be measured, when it will be measured, what tools will be used, how the results will be analyzed, and how they will be used. This information can be summarized in table format. Large grant projects hire professional evaluators; small projects conduct evaluations with internal staff.

Dissemination means communicating with others successful results and lessons learned. Grantmakers are interested in dissemination because it provides a way to replicate successful projects and thus multiply the benefits from their limited funds. Applicants can demonstrate that they are serious about dissemination by including funds in the budget for communication activities, for sharing information within their own organizations, their local communities, and their professional communities.

While RFPs place a size limit on grant proposals, most of them allow appendices, and some RFPs require these as attachments. The appendices are where applicants can provide letters of support, curricula vitae (CVs), surveys, budget data, citation references, and other supporting material. Be mindful that reviewers' time is limited, and take care to include only what is essential to understanding or requested by the funder.

Once the entire grant proposal has been written, write a one-page cover letter or letter of transmittal, unless it is prohibited. This letter can speak with greater passion than the style used in the body of a grant proposal. Introduce your organization and the target population you intend to serve. Briefly introduce your project, focusing on issues that are important to the grantmaker; show that you have done your research and that your project is in alignment with their mission. Describe your purpose in submitting the proposal and how your project is part of a larger whole. Remember that funders care about what they do; they have worked hard and have spent a great deal of time to set up their fund, to set up the process, and to review and evaluate proposals. Be sure to thank them for the opportunity to submit this proposal.

Resources

Books

Karsh, Ellen and Arlen Sue Fox. *The Only Grant-Writing Book You'll Ever Need*, 3rd ed. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Koch, Deborah S. *How to Say It—Grantwriting: Write Proposals That Grantmakers Want to Fund*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 2009.

Margolin, Judith B. *The Individual's Guide to Grants*. New York: Plenum, 2013.

A guide for individuals who are not affiliated with an organization.

New, Cheryl Carter and James Aaron Quick. *How to Write a Grant Proposal*. New York: John Wiley, 2003.

Websites

Foundation Center. <http://foundationcenter.org/>.

A US organization that provides resources both for foundations and for grant-seekers. Extensive resources include a knowledge base, free tutorials, short and extended training courses, books, and other sources. A searchable database of grants is available through an online subscription service, the *Foundation Directory Online*, available in many public libraries.

Fundsnet Services. www.fundsnet.com.

A list of links to foundation, community, corporate, and government grantmakers in the US, Canada, UK, and Australia, sorted by category and available free of charge.

Grants.gov. <http://grants.gov>

A centralized location for finding and applying for grants offered by agencies of the US federal government. Grants are listed both by date and in a searchable database.

Grantsmanship Center. www.tgci.com.

An online center whose purpose is to help nonprofit organizations plan projects, find grants, write proposals, and manage grant-funded projects successfully. The website offers newsletters, articles, webcasts, print publications, training programs, and links to the top 40 to 50 grantmaking foundations in each state. Access to a searchable database of foundation, corporate, and federal grantmakers known as GrantDomain is available by subscription.