

Grant Writing Tips

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Grant Writing – Myths & Realities

1. ***“Isn’t a grant the same as free money?”***

No. First and foremost you must understand that a grant is not a gift. It is not ‘free money’ that you may obtain through good writing. A grant is a kind of contract. In a grant application you are promising to provide certain services in return for money, just the same way you would in an employment contract. However lofty or ephemeral your goals, the grantor is employing you to provide a service for the public good. As such you should treat your grant applications just like any other legal contract. Don’t promise more than you can fulfill.

2. ***“My organization does good work in the community and we’re highly regarded. Isn’t that enough to deserve a grant?”***

Nope. The second thing you must understand is that grants are given to programs, not organizations. Funding will be given based on the strength of the program, not (just) the esteem of the administering organization. The funder is interested in specific objectives and identifiable results. Specific problems + specific solutions = results!

3. ***“Once I’ve been chosen, they’ll just cut me a check, right?”***

Sorry. Most granting agencies expect monthly or quarterly reports. You will need to provide hard data in support of your ongoing Program Objectives. Also, some agencies will only give you your money on a reimbursement basis, which means you have to pay for your expenses out of your own coffers first. Some will also require that you be able to show that you have matching dollars in place before they will cut you a check.

4. ***“They won’t actually check to see if the work has been done, will they?”***

You bet they will. Most agencies have provisions in their contracts that allow them to take back 100% of the money granted to your organization (with interest) if the program objectives are not met. They will very likely send someone for a site visit and may even ask to review your records. In applying for a grant you are agreeing to accept whatever terms and requirements are set out in your final contract (signed after the grant is approved). Read all applications (and supplemental materials) thoroughly and ask questions. You don’t want to find out later that you are required to do something you cannot or are unwilling to do (such as purchase additional insurance).

5. ***“I don’t understand part X of the application but that big agency/foundation doesn’t care about my little program, who should I turn to for help?”***

Actually, grantors love to hear from you! They would much prefer to answer your questions (no matter how stupid they may seem to you) ahead of time than have to throw out your application on a technicality. Most people who work for a granting organization enjoy giving money away. They want to help you, so call!

6. ***“If I write a good grant am I guaranteed success?”***

I wish I could say yes, but a 5% return is considered very good in the grant writing business. That means that for every 100 grant applications you send out you can expect that five will be funded (if your application is good.) Grant writing is a very competitive field!

The Grant Process and The Boilerplate Proposal

This may come as a shock but a really good Grant will take three months to a YEAR to complete. You’re probably thinking what I did when I first heard that - no application, no matter how difficult or complex could take a year! Here is the thing: filling out an application is not the same thing as writing a Grant. A Grant encompasses the entire grant process from the first moment of strategic planning through program development to the last edit of each grant application. A lot of how long it takes depends on how much work your organization has already done.

At the end of the grant process you want to end up with a boilerplate proposal. Writing each section as you go will help you to define what needs more work and research. You will use the same boilerplate as a source document for each grant application, updating it as needed much the same way you can use your resume to fill out many different job applications.

Here is a boilerplate proposal outline:

- I. Summary/Introduction: Introduces the essence of who you are and what you do and should include:
 1. Name and location of your organization
 2. Mission, Vision and values
 3. Identification your clients
 4. A short synopsis of your program including a statement of need and your proposed solution
- II. Needs(also called the Problem Statement or Needs Assessment):Tells the reviewer about the problem you plan to solve if you are awarded the grant. Some tips for developing your Needs Section:
 1. Clearly identify the problem in simple terms
 2. Provide evidence of the problem using PRIMARILY your own first-hand research in the field as well as statistics and quotes from authorities
 3. If the problem exists in more than just your area show data to support that the problem is nationwide/worldwide
 4. Do not overdramatize the problem – grant reviewers want to read about successful, robust organizations not ‘poor, starving’ ones that need help
- III. Program Goals & Objectives: Says what you hope to accomplish in relationship to the problem
 1. Goals: general statements regarding what you hope the result of your program will be in relation to your solution to the Problem
Sample Goal: “The goal of the Animal Shelter Dog Walker program is to provide dogs under our care with daily exercise and human contact to help keep them healthy and sociable and increase their adoptability.”
 2. Objectives: the quantifiable outcomes of the program. Note: don’t confuse objectives with methods; the mehtods are the means, the objectives are the ends. Objectives should:
 - i. be realistic – you are going to be asked to deliver on your objectives
 - ii. say who changes and in what way
 - iii. state the direction of change (increase or decrease)
 - iv. give a projected percentage of change based on your research (be conservative, don’t go above 25% unless your funder requires it)
 - v. state when/how often it will be measuredSample Objective: “Increase the social contact and exercise by 20% among dogs in the Animal Shelter, measured monthly.”
- IV. Project Description (also called the Program Activities section): Tells the reviewer what methods (the who, what and when) you will be utilizing to fulfill your goals and objectives and should:
 1. describe where the project will be occurring (not just the address but the type of facility and why you chose it)
 2. who will be involved (include names if you have them) and describe positions, titles and responsibilities
 3. state when events will occur (if you don’t have a definite schedule then you may wish to show the order of happenings without dates e.g. “In the first week of the program we will...”)
- V. Evaluation: tells the reviewer how you will measure your goals and objectives and should:
 1. include what data you plan to collect to measure your goals and objectives
 2. how you plan to collect it and who will collect it

3. how it will be analyzed and by whom
- VI. Actual Budget (Quantitative): shows the cost to run your program in a table or similar format and should include:
1. columns for:
 - i. a description of each line item
 - ii. the total cost for each line item
 - iii. the total requested dollars for each line item
 - iv. the total donated dollars/matching funds for each line item
 2. sections dividing the table or spreadsheet into:
 - i. personnel costs (including salaries, benefits, contract/consultant services)
 - ii. non-personnel costs (including office space, equipment, services such as telecommunications, any other costs such as postage or insurance)
 3. HINT: Don't round off your numbers. This shows the reviewers that you have a clear picture of the actual cost of your program. Base your numbers on research and be prepared to show supporting documentation.
- VII. Budget Narrative: provides a rationale for each item on your budget and should include:
1. Personnel: short job descriptions and a little about what each person will be doing for the project
 2. Non-Personnel: describe how you arrived at your figures such as, "According to bids from three office supply stores, the average cost for new desks of the type our project requires are..."
 3. Future funding: some applications will want a paragraph or two on future funding. This is the place to discuss your plans for how you plan to fund the program after the grant period.
- VIII. Conclusion: will contain most of the same information as your introduction but will be shorter in length. Recap the problem, solution, what you're asking for and how it will be used.
- IX. Cover Letter: no more than a few paragraphs long and should include:
1. the name and location of your organization
 2. the name of your project
 3. the amount of your request
 4. a little about your program
 5. who to contact with questions
 6. a short list of what is enclosed (including your grant application and attachments)

Style Issues

I said in the myths section that you should treat your grant application like a contract. That does not mean it should contain big words or complex language. The more simple the language, the easier it will be to read. If a 12-year-old child can't understand it, it's too technical or complicated.

While you don't want to write in legalese, you do want to write in a formal style. Here are some pointers:

- A. Avoid using pronouns
- B. Don't use acronyms (by the third page of your application your reviewers may have forgotten what GASETE stands for (Greater Austin Society for the Ethical Treatment of the Elderly). You may want to shorten the name to "The Society" when you repeat it throughout a section, but always say the full name at least once in each section
- C. If applying out of state or for a national grant use your city and state after your name whenever mentioning it (e.g. AIDS Service Care Organization, Austin, Texas)
- D. Do not use cutesy nicknames or fake names when describing your clients, just say "the client"
- E. Do not use jokes, ever
- F. Do not use jargon, explain what things mean in simple terms

- G. Show, don't tell – do not use persuasive language, simply allow the reader to draw their own conclusions from the facts you provide (don't draw the conclusion for the reader)
- H. “*When you catch an adjective, kill it.*” – Mark Twain; Do not use flowery adjectives or too many descriptive words. If you are following “F” above this really shouldn't be a problem. If however you find yourself yearning to use an adjective, reconsider the slant your writing is taking!
- I. Write unified paragraphs and use transition sentences

An important point related to “B” above – each section should be able to be read independently. Many of your readers will be what we call ‘skippers’ or ‘skimmers’ and will not read your application sequentially. It is important that you continually remind your readers of your name and location.

There are three general types of readers whom you must keep in mind:

1. The Critic – this person will read every single word. Make sure you write in unified paragraphs and that your grammar is correct.

2. The Searcher – this guy is looking for particular information. Allow them to find the information they are looking for by having clear headlines for each section (provided you are not given a form to fill out). Make the first sentence in each paragraph the strongest. The searcher may only read that one sentence. Try reviewing your proposal reading only the first sentence of each narrative section. Make sure it reads okay. If not, revise.

3. The Skimmer – she will flip and dip through the proposal. This person will be attracted by your headlines and by charts, maps and graphs. If you are allowed to submit a free-form proposal, use summary charts to demonstrate the meat of the proposal.

After you have the first draft of your boilerplate start getting feedback. Here is a list of people to get feedback from. If you heed their advice you are MUCH more likely to get funded!

- 1. someone on your planning team
- 2. someone in your organization who is not on your planning team
- 3. someone in your field who is not in your organization
- 4. a professional writer/editor
- 5. a 12 year old child

Number 5 may seem a little off the wall but trust me, if they can't understand it, you need to revise! Remember not to use buzzwords or techno jargon. Also, try not to use friends as your reviewers if at all possible. You want someone who can be brutally honest.

Once you get feedback, start editing your proposal. Make it sleek and solid.

Researching Grants

The most important thing to understand about applying for a grant is that Grant Writing = Values Matching. It is crucial that you match the values of your organization with that of your potential funder.

It is obvious that an education program should not apply to a funder who supports environmental causes, but you must look deeper than the obvious. There are an amazing amount of education grants out there. Some focus on particular age groups, ethnicities or geographic locations. Others focus on particular topics such as math or science. Still others fund programs for economic hardship or leadership training.

Take another look at your organization's mission and vision. Put them on one sheet with your Summary. Use this as your guide for research.

Set up a well-organized filing system. I recommend that you keep something in hard copy in case of computer failure. Take good notes. Set up folders on your computer and in your filing cabinet for each potential funder. Keep records of everything, including your phone calls. Trust me, you won't remember the secretary's name three months from now when the grant cycle opens for new applications!

There are several types of grants available – federal, state, county and local government, private donors, foundations, corporations, fellowships and so forth. You don't have to narrow yourself to one particular type of grant. Apply for as many as are fits for your program, but be careful - if you are awarded more than one grant for the same funding request you will have to have a chat with your funder to revise your budget request. You cannot double bill for the same items. That is illegal. Either wait until you have an answer before applying for full funding from another source OR leverage more than one application by asking for different portions of your budget from different sources. This is a bit of a juggling act as different funders have different grant cycles, but it can be done. Take a look at your budget. Each item you wish to get funding for is like a puzzle piece. Some funders may take care of several pieces, some only a portion of another.

Applications

Remember that each grant application is unique. You will not just be turning in your boilerplate proposal with a new title page for each grant. It is the source document for what will end up in your final proposal or application. Funders have their own ways of doing things. Some will have very picky forms with little boxes for each and every thing. Others will simply give you an outline or ask you to answer questions in a particular order. READ THE GUIDELINES and follow them to the letter. You don't want to be thrown out on a technicality! Reviewers will see your mistakes as a lack of sincerity and will quickly relegate your application to the round file.

IMPORTANT NOTE When reading the grant guidelines pay extra attention to the funder's expectations beyond granting the award. Will they require that your organization have certain kinds of insurance? How often will you need to report to them? Do they fund outright with one check or on a reimbursement basis? BEFORE you apply, make sure you can follow through on each requirement. If they are asking for detailed monthly reporting and your staff is already overwhelmed it would be better to add a line item for an additional part time person to do the reports than to promise that your staff will 'find the time' and then lose the grant later when you can't deliver. Remember that funders like being asked questions so pick up the phone if you are unclear on any part of the application.

Attachments

Just as important as the grant application itself are the attachments. As with the application form, pay attention to the funder's guidelines. Some funders will have restrictions on what you can and cannot include. Others will have REQUIRED attachments. Also pay attention to guidelines with regards to overall length. If you can only submit a 20-page proposal you will have to be particular about which optional attachments you select.

Attachments to include (if allowed) in order of importance:

- 1) documentation of in-kind support: letters of agreement from donors, volunteer sign up sheets, acceptance letters from other funders
- 2) letters of support from community leaders (pick the two or three strongest – it is better to include fewer good letters than tons of mediocre ones)
- 3) a list of your board of directors and their contact information (may be required)
- 4) IRS 501(c)3 letter declaring your organization a Non-Profit (may be required)
- 5) a 4-color processed, glossy one-sheet summary of your organization including your mission and vision, benchmarks and history –include pictures, graphics and quotes; Hire a designer – you want your collateral materials to look as professional as possible

Aside from the one sheet summary mentioned in number 5, be wary of including too much

propaganda. Reviewers like to get the flavor of your organization but they do not want to be inundated with pamphlets and fliers. One or two pieces will add spice and color to your proposal without taxing the reviewers' patience. Also, be sure to either include enough copies of your collateral for every reviewer or (better) make sure it can copy well and/or is designed in black and white/grayscale.

Final Submission

When you have completed the application to your satisfaction, have someone in your organization double check it for you. Proofreading is essential! Have someone from the accounting office go over your budget to make sure the math is correct. Count the pages and look again to make certain that you haven't exceeded length requirements. If there are places on an application form for your director to sign, check again that they have signed and dated. Before you put the application in the mail, make a copy of it for your files. If the application itself has no place for a date applied, attach a post-it note to the file copy of your application. Mark your calendar to follow up within a reasonable timeframe. Some funders will include a timeline, letting you know when to expect an answer. If they do not, give them six weeks before following up.

Use certified mail to send your application so that you can be sure the funder actually received the proposal. If it must be post marked by a certain date, be absolutely certain you get the post office to stamp your certified receipt with that date. It is far better to send it a week in advance of the date if at all possible so you can be certain of its getting there in good condition.

Good luck!!!