Grant Writing Tips

The following information provides general insights on how to write effective and competitive grant proposals, including common pitfalls, hints for success, and working with a grant writer. This information, along with information about the CIWMB grant scoring criteria, is provided to assist you in writing effective and successful grant applications.

Things to Think About

➤ Different factors play a part in funders' decisions, no matter how well-written your proposal is.
➤ There are basic elements, but no "model" proposal for patternning.
➤ Organizing and communicating are more important than form.
➤ Planning is key—a grant proposal is the written version of your planning process.

Some Criteria for Going After a Grant

➤ Project is consistent with your organization's mission and business objectives.
➤ You have a better-than-average chance for funding (e.g., we have an "A-plus" track record, funder expresses interest in us, we are well positioned).
➤ Program is undersubscribed (i.e., competitive opportunity).
➤ Cost/benefit is favorable (i.e., amount of grant award justifies cost of pursuing it).

Common Pitfalls in Seeking Funding and Writing Grant Applications

1. Chasing the money. Don't write a grant to start a new project you don't really need or just to bring funding ($$) into your agency.
2. Requesting money to offset a deficit. No one wants to fund your poor planning or agency shortfall.
3. Going to Macy's to buy groceries. Do your research first—make sure you're going to the right funder for the right project. Match-up is important.
4. Failing to understand it's a competitive process. Unless funding is a sure bet (e.g., based on formula/entitlement), always assume demand is higher than supply.
5. Downloading the wrong grant application. Similar-sounding grant applications could be issued simultaneously by the same funder. Or an out-of-date application might also still be on the Web site.
6. Not reading the grant application thoroughly. Highlight the most important parts (like due dates and required documents). Mark anything you don't understand or where you need to find answers.
7. Not reading the grant application early enough. Don't delay—leaving yourself too little time to make important contacts, gather important data, calculate costs accurately, find a grant writer...can be disastrous!
8. Assuming the funder knows you/your agency. Even if you are the grant-award poster child, don't assume proposal readers will mentally fill in the missing information. Don't depend on prior knowledge or past relationships.
9. Disregarding the funder's questions. If it's important to the funder, it's important to you.
10. Philosophizing. Don't argue with the funder's assumptions. If you don't agree with what they're interested in (or your ideas don't match their requirements), you should probably find another funder.
11. Being redundant. Saying it once is usually enough. Don't add unnecessary "fill" or "fluff."
12. Reorganizing the proposal. Follow the format instructions and place items where the funder has requested them—this is not the time to get creative with your presentation.
13. Being incomplete (including signatures). This could cost you points in scoring, or it could mean being considered
14. **Assuming it’s a one-person job.** In most cases, no matter who writes the proposal or fills out the application, collaboration or consultation with others will be required.

15. **Losing the Q & A window.** Start reviewing the grant application requirements and writing early enough to not let the time pass for asking questions and getting answers—and, don’t be afraid to ask!

16. **Using a former proposal without updating it.** If you’re going to use it, at least shake off all the dust. Use current dates, current numbers, current staff.

17. **Using a proposal previously submitted to another funder.** This is fair game, just be sure to change the names to protect the innocent!

18. **Not doing the math correctly.** Use a calculator or use Excel but make sure the numbers add up! Funders lose confidence when budgets or estimates aren’t accurate.

19. **Poorly estimating real costs.** Although budget line item transfers may be possible after the grant award, think through ahead of time what labor, materials, and overhead costs are expected to be.

20. **Backing into the budget.** Be realistic about what you need. Don’t create a budget that reflects the maximum allowed just because the money’s there. Also, don’t expect staff to make any cuts that may be needed.

21. **Requesting nonqualifying expenses.** Don’t sneak it in and hope no one notices! (Hint: even if funded for it, auditors can catch these items after the grant award.)

22. **Budget surprises.** Don’t ask for items not described or mentioned in the narrative.

23. **“Going political.”** Even with friends in high places, lobbying for points could backfire or blow up in your face.

24. **Starting your project before getting the grant.** If the ink isn’t dry on the contract, don’t assume it’s a done deal.

**Hints for Success**

- **Write clearly and concisely—** Succinctness is more important than volume.
- **Be thorough—** What have you forgotten?
- **Be specific—** Are the deliverables clear? Can the funder easily understand what they are buying?
- **Follow the format—** Be a “responsive” applicant.
- **Use/create local data when possible—** Define “data” as information.
- **Address anticipated challenges—** Don’t try to minimize them; describe how you will overcome them.
- **Identify others necessary to your success—** Who are the stakeholders? How will you involve them?
- **Use reader-friendly format—** Grid display vs. narrative may say it best.
- **Use good grammar. Use spell-check!**
- **Bring something to the table—** Funders view themselves as partners.
- **Write the executive summary after writing the proposal—** It’s easier to put together.
- **Make sure letters of support/letters of authorization mean something—** They should state exactly what collaborators will do and how their expertise will contribute to the project.
- **Put yourself in the reader’s place—** Would you know what the proposal was saying if you didn’t write it? Would you want to fund this proposal?
Working with a Grant Writer

✦ When to use:
  ✦ You don't have in-house expertise.
  ✦ No one has dedicated time.
  ✦ Particular person has unique insight to what they require.

✦ Issues to consider when selecting and using:
  ✦ Number and type of proposals.
  ✦ Reputation.
  ✦ Experience with/as a funder.
  ✦ Ask for a sample proposal they've written.
  ✦ Ask about success rate.
  ✦ Ask if they're also writing for other applicants (you may or may not care).
  ✦ Don't make price the selection criterion.
  ✦ Always check the writer's work—read the application before submitting it!