Grant Writing Tips

by

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Basics of Successful Grant Writing

The four basics of successful grant writing are:

1. Start with a good idea and develop it
2. Find grant(s)
3. Follow instructions
4. Package the idea persuasively

Start With a Good Idea (and Develop It)

Do you have an idea for an original project? A new way of doing things? If it's an old idea, can you put an original spin on it?

Granting organizations typically like to use their funds as “seed money” to help pilot or establish new projects, to give people and institutions a chance to try out new approaches.

Your idea/project should address a need or solve a problem

Can you offer evidence there is a need? Can you offer data to show there is a problem your idea will help to solve? How serious is the need or problem? Is it strictly a local problem or does it have ramifications regionally, statewide or nationwide?

Your opportunities for funding will be better if the need is serious and the problem is widespread – at least if you make a good argument for the need.

Research your competition

Is anyone else doing something similar? Are those projects grant-funded? Are they funded by the granting organization you plan to approach? How is your idea better?

You need to demonstrate your knowledge of similar projects, especially any model programs or best practices. And you need to show how your idea is better or builds on those programs and practices.

If other institutions are working in similar areas, is there a possibility of collaborating or partnering with them? Many granting institutions favor collaborative efforts. The downside is that partnerships and collaborations are, of
course, more difficult to organize, supervise, and manage; and in every part of the grant process, they are more time consuming.

**Select an appropriate institution and target audiences for your project**

Is your institution (school? college? non-profit?) the appropriate place for your project? Are the audiences available to you the right target audiences for your project? Do the demographics at your institution match your idea?

**Clear your project and grant with your supervisors**

Discuss your project idea with your supervisors before you have spent too much time on a grant proposal. Be certain that they approve of your applying.

You are likely to need the help of your supervisors as you write and submit a grant proposal, and you’ll also need their help if you are successful. Grants, typically, are awarded to an institution, not to an individual, and some grant funding requires significant contributions from the institution receiving the grant. Some grants require matching funds or in-kind contributions from the institution. Some equipment grants don’t cover the costs for installation or maintenance.

Your grant may affect your institution's staffing if members of your grant team need to reduce their regular workloads to participate in your grant project. Your institution is also likely to be responsible for administering and reporting on the grant funds (see tips on indirect costs in budget sections below).

By clearing your project with your supervisors, you can avoid wasting time on a project that might be in the plans for some other type of funding or for a project that might be impossible to implement even with funding.

**Recruit a team**

Is your project a simple, one-person show? If so, you still need a team to help you in the application process, to discuss your ideas, help with research, review and provide suggestions on your proposal.

If you need a team to plan and manage a project, start with the expertise available to you at your institution. And unless you are a good technical writer and enjoy doing it, recruit someone who is. In addition to the writing of the grant proposal, the grant process also includes reporting of results to the granting institution. There may be many other writing needs and opportunities; for example, publicizing the project through the media and disseminating results through conferences, which require written abstracts or papers, and through journals.
Find Grant(s)

There are three basic sources for grants:
1. Government
2. Private foundations
3. Corporations

For information about specific grants, check:
- Online grant databases, such as the federal site www.grants.gov
- Your professional organizations
- Institutions with funding in similar areas
- College grant writing offices

Many of the online sources and the college grant writing offices also provide tips on grant writing and links to grant proposal examples.

Read the Request for Proposal (RFP) carefully

Does your project idea match the grant’s goals? Do you meet all of the grant requirements as detailed in the request for proposal (RFP)? As the section above (“Clear your project with your supervisors”) explained, some grants would require matching funds or other investments from your institution, some would require you to partner with other institutions.

Apply for a grant only if your project idea meets all RFP requirements.

Follow Instructions

The number one tip from successful grant writers is to follow the instructions in the request for proposal.

- Provide the information the RFP requests, in the categories the RFP requests, and in the order in which the information is requested.
- Stay within the length requirements. If the maximum length is 10 pages, don’t write a word over 10, but don’t look unprepared by submitting 4.
- Meet the document requirements for margins, fonts and graphics. If the RFP doesn’t provide requirements, use a standard font like Ariel or Times New Roman, 11 or 12 point, and standard page margins.
- Meet deadline. If there’s a time of day, like 5 p.m., check the RFP and the geographic location of the granting organization since the deadline is likely to be 5 p.m. in the granting organization’s location. For a grant proposal submitted online, start entering your materials well before the deadline. Online sites get busy as deadlines approach and uploading files can take a long time. Additionally, count on some technical problems as you file and allow yourself time to deal with them.
If anything in the RFP is unclear, call or email the granting organization, depending on what they suggest. Since they provide instructions on how to contact them, they obviously expect some applicants to have questions.

**Format your proposal to be easy to read**

Make your proposal easy to read and look easy to read:
- Use sub-headings to identify sections, especially identifying categories of information requested in the RFP
- Keep paragraphs short
- Present lists of information as numbered or bulleted lists (note this bulleted list)
- Present numbers graphically: tables, pie, line and bar charts.

**Package the Idea Persuasively**

Packaging the idea persuasively includes:
- Writing for the grant readers
- Utilizing the language / wording in the RFP
- Writing in a persuasive tone

**Write for the grant readers**

Think about the people who will be evaluating your proposal. What are their backgrounds? What technical explanations about your project will they need? Writing for the grant readers also includes spelling out acronyms, at least the first time. For acronyms specific to your institution, and if your proposal has a number of them, think about how many a reader can remember. (Note that “Request For Proposal” is spelled out a number of times, followed by “RFP,” in the earlier sections of these tips.)

**Utilize the language / wording in the RFP**

Grant announcements and RFPs express granting organizations’ interests and goals. Utilizing the wording they use in the RFPs can help their grant readers see that your project idea matches their interests. If the RFP refers to “sustainable energy,” utilize that phrase instead of “renewable energy.”

Utilizing the RFP wording in headings that identify proposal sections can be especially helpful; for example, if the RFP asks for dissemination of results, it’s more effective to title that section “Dissemination” instead of “Publicity.”
Write in a persuasive tone

A grant proposal is a sales pitch. Every section, every document included in the proposal, should be persuasive. Convince the grant readers that your idea addresses a need; you (and your staff) are qualified; your goals, activities, methods, timeline, etc. are well planned; your budget request is reasonable. Possibly most important in capturing the readers’ attention, persuade the readers that your project idea is unique, much better than projects that may seem similar.

Grant Proposal Sections

Grant proposals are likely to address the following topics, depending on the size of the grant and the length and detail the granting organization sets:

- Proposal summary
- Introduction to the institution requesting the grant
- Problem / need / rationale
- Project goals / objectives
- Project methods / activities
- Outcomes / deliverables
- Evaluation / assessment
- Project sustainability
- Project staff
- Budget

If the RFP isn’t specific about what to include in a proposal, use the list above.

Proposal Summary

Grant readers will tell you that the summary is the most important section: grant readers utilize the summary to decide whether to pay much attention to the rest of the proposal, and some granting organizations utilize the summary to decide if the entire proposal will even be read.

Some RFPs request a separate proposal summary, possibly as much as a page long. But even for proposals limited to two or three pages, your proposal should begin with a brief summary, only a paragraph or two.

Develop the summary after the rest of the proposal so you know the key points to include. Address the granting organization’s interests, the areas emphasized in the RFP, and make your goals and objectives clear. Let your enthusiasm and confidence in the project show.
Introduction to the Institution

A brief introduction to your institution should establish that your institution is the right place for the project, that it is uniquely suited because it:

- Has a need
- Can accomplish objectives because it has appropriate staff, programs, services, etc.

If the RFP does not request separate information on you and your project staff, this section is one place to provide credentials on the key players to prove you are qualified to accomplish the project objectives.

Problem / Need / Rationale

State the problem your project will address with a simple statement and provide support with documented evidence. Connecting your local need or problem with a widely-shared issue – regional, statewide or nationwide – will improve your chances. Granting organizations try to fund projects that deal with widespread problems and, if successful, projects that can be replicated elsewhere. Research publications and statements issued by the granting organization to see if they are on record supporting the existence of the problem or need your project will address; reference those statements as part of your documented evidence.

Project Goals / Objectives

State your project goal – what you plan to accomplish or the impact/outcome your project will have – in a simple statement. Follow that statement with your objectives – steps you will take to accomplish your goal – in a bulleted or number list. Your goal and objectives should be directly tied to your need statement.

Your objectives should be stated in measurable terms and be realistic. Avoid the tendency you may have to promise too much, to over-reach.

Methods / Activities

List the methods or activities your project will utilize to accomplish the goal and objectives, and explain:

- The relationship of methods/activities to objectives
- The rationale for selecting or designing specific methods/activities
- The target audiences

Include a timeline. For longer proposals and multi-year grants, the timeline will need to include planning and assessment stages in addition to implementation.
Outcomes / Deliverables

Explain the end results you expect and / or any product(s) that will be developed. If you did not quantify objectives earlier, those objectives should be quantified here: for example, "By year two, enrollment will increase five percent." For deliverables, list any materials, products or methods that will be developed by your project, and explain how you will disseminate them. Granting organizations want their funding to be utilized to develop materials and methods that can be widely used. Explain how you will make results and products available to others. Conference presentations, workshops, publication, and web site postings are among the more common dissemination methods.

Evaluation / Assessment

Explain how you will know if you were successful. What methods and tools will you use to gather evaluative data? At what points in the project will that data be gathered? How and by whom will the data be utilized? Who will design and conduct the evaluations?

Review the RFP carefully to see if the granting organization expects your project to hire an external evaluator, which is an individual or firm, outside of your institution, with expertise in assessment. External evaluators are more likely to be required on larger, multi-year grants. The National Science Foundation, for example, expects grantees to utilize outside evaluators as well as internal evaluators.

Project Sustainability

Explain how the project will continue when the grant (the funding) expires:
- Will sustainability be inexpensive since methods/materials/equipment will be in place?
- Will fees be charged?
- Will materials or products developed be sold?
- Will your institution, or others, assume the costs?

Granting organizations, as mentioned earlier, often want their funding to be “seed money” to develop or pilot projects that will continue.

Project Staff

Provide information on key project personnel that illustrates they are qualified for their project roles. As a part of project and grant proposal planning, you should develop a management plan clarifying who handles major responsibilities in the project; many RFPs will request that plan. Granting organizations will want to
know who the key personnel are. Some will request brief information about their backgrounds and project roles; others will request detailed resumes on each. The National Science Foundation, for example, asks for a biography sketch on each of a project’s senior personnel, with instructions for the biography to include specific information presented in a certain order. However, whether the RFP for the grant you are applying for asks you to provide brief or very detailed information on project staff, focus on elements in the staff’s background and credentials relating to the project.

**Budget**

First, read the RFP to see what expenses are allowable. Look especially for expenses that are not allowable.

Secondly, build a list of costs, trying to anticipate all possibilities. Among the areas that might be overlooked:

- Staff salary increases for multi-year grants
- Fringe benefits for staff
- Indirect costs, for an institution to administer a grant
- Evaluation costs, including costs for an external evaluator

In the grant proposal, make the budget easy to read and understand. While some granting organizations will require budget information to be submitted in attached spreadsheets or separately in online forms, most will require some explanation of expenses as a part of the proposal. For those explanations, organize expenses by categories and utilize reader-friendly tables.

**Additional Sections and Content**

**Human Subject Research:**
If your project will include researching, studying or evaluating people, you may need approval to conduct that research to meet federal regulations; those regulations are especially sensitive in research involving children. Your key staff may also need to complete training in research ethics, available online. Many colleges have Institutional Research Boards established to address these regulations and provide approval for research. Your proposal may need to address your approval from an Institutional Research Board to conduct your research. If your institution has a research office, contact them as soon as you contemplate a grant proposal. And check the proposal instructions for any mention of approval needed for human subject research.

**Support Letters:**
Letters of support should probably be called letters of commitment since funding institutions want to read letters making specific commitments to your project, not general approval. The purpose of the letters is to demonstrate that you do have
commitment, real “buy in,” from the institutions and people crucial to the success of your project.

Do get letters of commitment from your institution’s administration, collaborators or partners in the project, a sampling of other institutions playing a significant role in your project, and consultants playing a significant role. To ensure that your support letters meet your grant proposal needs, provide draft letters to the people you contact, and include suggestions for specific commitments in those drafts.

References Cited:
Your proposal should mention similar projects, model programs or best practices in order to demonstrate your competence and to demonstrate how your project is better than or builds on those programs – whether the RFP mentions references cited or not.

If the RFP addresses references, follow those instructions. If the RFP does not address references, and especially if your proposal limit is short, you can document your references in the text of the proposal. For example: “The 2010 report on Goals of Entering Freshmen by the Northern College Association notes that one-fourth of college freshmen are undecided about….”

Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts:
The National Science Foundation (NSF) evaluates proposals on the basis of their intellectual merit and their broader impacts. In evaluating intellectual merit, NSF reviewers look for:

- Projects that will advance knowledge,
- Project staff who are well qualified,
- Project concepts and activities that are creative and original,
- Institutions/project staff that have sufficient resources to conduct the project.

In evaluating broader impacts, NSF reviewers look for:

- Projects that promote teaching and learning,
- Projects that reach out to underrepresented groups,
- Projects that improve research and education infrastructures, such as those that build partnerships or provide/improve facilities,
- Projects that benefit society,
- Project results that will be widely shared.

These merit and impact criteria are worth considering and addressing in proposals to any funding institution.

After Grant Rejection

Don’t be discouraged. Grants are competitive; many projects are rejected – some more than once. Start the after-rejection process by analyzing the
reviewers’ comments. Correct the flaws they spotted and prepare for another submission, either to that institution or to others. If you don’t receive reviewers’ comments, contact the granting institution and ask why you weren’t selected.

Typical reasons for proposal rejections are:
- Project idea doesn’t match granting institution’s goals
- Project idea is not original
- Project over-reaches, tries to accomplish too much
- Proposal does not follow instructions

You need to decide if the reason(s) your proposal was rejected are related to your project idea, to the granting institution you targeted, and/or to the writing of the proposal. You will then be prepared to revise your proposal and resubmit.

However, even if your next proposal addresses the issues identified as weak in your previous submission, don’t count on being funded. Proposals are reviewed by teams of people who change and have differing views, and funding institutions shift their priorities.

**After Grant Acceptance**

Experienced grant recipients will tell you: The good news is you got the grant; the bad news is you got the grant.

Grant projects are big responsibilities. As soon as you are notified you have the grant, contact the people who will be involved and your institution’s financial office and get started. And take a good look at reviews of your project to see if there’s anything there to help you in moving forward with your project.

And good luck!