

Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

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Overview

This session seeks to provide participants with practical guidance on how to plan and write an effective and successful grant application. We will address:

1. What you need to know and do before writing a proposal
2. Main components of a good proposal, and how to approach each of them
3. What comes after the proposal
4. Eight essential tips for grant writers
5. Additional resources for learning

Essentials of Successful Grantsmanship

1. Understand the role of funders in your organization and its work
2. Cultivate strong relationships – *before* you ask for money
3. Write an effective grant proposal
4. Steward funders for long-term engagement

The Role of the Funder in Your Agency

Think beyond the funding transaction!

A funder can mean much more for your agency than just a source of cash.

- Partner in a shared vision
- Collaborator in the mission (program, project)
- Evaluator of impact and effectiveness
- Truth-teller
- Customer
- Advocate



The Role of the Funder in Your Agency

Funders Have Missions Too!

Every grant-making organization (foundation, corporation, government) has its own **vision** and **mission** – the impact it seeks and how it wants to achieve that impact. All of its investment decisions will be guided by these considerations.

The key to successful grant-seeking is to understand:

- the funder's view of how the world *is* and how it *should be*.
- the problem the funder wants to solve – and the solutions it favors.



Before You Write the Proposal

Before You Write the Proposal ...

Cultivate Relationships

- Engage with prospective funders to find the best fit of interests and goals
- Phone calls, in-person meetings, site visits, correspondence, concept papers.
- Deploy program staff, leaders, allies.
- This takes time, effort and planning!

Before You Write the Proposal ...

Engage the funder's program staff

- Funders want to give away money. Private foundations *must* give away a minimum percentage of their assets each year.
- Their staff members are there to help grant-seekers identify the best opportunities and the right fit. Your outreach helps them do their job better.
- Don't be afraid to reach out. Send an email or make a phone call to request a conversation.
- Be persistent and professional. Don't be intimidated.



Before You Write the Proposal ...

The grant administrator can be your best advocate!

Get to know the grant administrator (sometimes called a program manager) at the funding institution.

Make a personal connection beyond email.

How well you understand each other can make or break your chances for funding.

Many administrators and program staff have some (or even complete) discretion in the distribution of funding. The better they know your work, the more likely you are to succeed with your funding request.



Before You Write the Proposal ...

Benefits of successful relationship building:

- Increases the chance that your proposal will stand out from others.
- Your proposal will be stronger because you've been talking (and listening!) to the funder, and have allowed the funder to help shape your proposal.
- If your proposal succeeds, you will have both funding and a potential long-term partner for your work.
- If your proposal does not succeed, you will have a solid foundation for continued engagement and subsequent funding requests.

Before You Write the Proposal ...

Information You Need to Write a Proposal

1. Concept

- How the proposed program fits the mission of your agency
- The need that will be addressed

2. Program

- Description of the program and how it will be implemented
- Timeline of program development and implementation
- Anticipated outputs and outcomes
- How results will be evaluated
- Staffing and volunteer needs

3. Expenses

- Start with a broad outline of the budget to make sure expenses are in proportion to the expected outcomes
- Develop the detailed budget after the narrative is complete



Writing the Proposal

Writing the Proposal

Main components of a proposal

1. Executive Summary – *overview of the request*
2. Statement of Need – *why is the project necessary?*
3. Project description – *details of development, implementation and evaluation*
4. Budget – *description of required resources, with explanations*
5. Organizational Information – *history, structure, mission and services, audiences*
6. Conclusion – *summary of main points*

Writing the Proposal

Executive Summary

- Provide a concise summary of key information
- Best chance to “sell” your proposal & engage the reader
- Be concise – keep it to one page unless the funder instructs otherwise
- Should include:
 - Statement of problem or need your agency is going to address
 - The solution you propose: what you will do, who will benefit, how and where it will operate, for how long and with what staffing
 - How much funding will be required
 - Very brief description of your agency, its history and mission, key services/activities, and its capacity to carry out the proposed program



Writing the Proposal

Statement of Need

Helps the funder understand the issues better; lays out evidence to support the need for the project you are proposing.

Key Considerations:

- Which facts best support the need for the project? Info should be specific, not generic. Above all, make sure your facts are accurate!
- The funder should understand that the project you propose is a viable (and necessary) solution to the problem, and that funding the project is a good investment. Avoid overstatement and emotional appeals.
- Know what other organizations are doing to address the problem. Try to set your program apart without being critical of others. How does your work complement and not duplicate the work of others?
- Don't get caught up in circular reasoning: "We have no basketball court in our community. Building a basketball court will solve the problem."



Writing the Proposal

Statement of Need

Is the problem you address worse than other problems? Is your proposed solution better than other solutions? If yes, say so.

Example:

“Drug abuse is a national problem. Each day, children all over the country die from drug overdose. In the South Bronx the problem is worse. More children die here than any place else. It is an epidemic. Thus there is a critical need for our drug prevention program, which has been specifically designed to reach at-risk youth in the South Bronx.”



Writing the Proposal

Project Description

This is the meat of the proposal.

Five key elements are mutually supportive and together provide a complete picture of your proposed project.

Each element defines subsequent elements.

1. Objectives
2. Methods
3. Staffing and Management
4. Evaluation
5. Sustainability



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: Objectives

Objectives are measurable outcomes of the project or program. They describe what you want to achieve.

Objectives must be:

- Concrete
- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable in a specified period of time



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: Objectives

Present your objectives clearly; don't bury them in the middle of a lot of verbiage.

Try to set your objectives apart using numbers, bullets or indentation.

Above all – be realistic. Set objectives that you know can be achieved.

Don't promise more than you can deliver!

Writing the Proposal

Project Description: Objectives

Differentiate between overarching goal (abstract) and related objectives (concrete).

Goal: “Our out-of-school programs will help children read better.”

Objective: “The after-school reading program we propose will help 100 children improve their reading scores by one grade level after six months of participation. Improvement will be measured through administration of standardized reading tests pre- and post-program.”



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: Objectives

Different types of objectives are possible and valid. But it is important to make sure the objectives make sense in the context of the project you're proposing.

Let's look at the example of a proposed swim class that seeks to enroll 100 children.

Behavioral objective:

- Seventy of the 100 children participating will learn to swim.

Performance objective:

- Seventy of the 100 participating children will learn to swim within six months and will pass a swimming proficiency test administered by a Red Cross certified lifeguard.

Process objective:

- We will document the teaching methods used and identify those with the greatest success at teaching children to swim.

Product objective:

- We will create a manual to be used in teaching swimming to this age and proficiency group in the future.



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: **Methods**

Your methods and activities should align with the objectives of the project.

Describe the specific activities that will lead to achievement of the objectives.

How?

Detailed description of what will occur from start to completion of the project.

When?

Order and timing of all activities. Provide a timetable or flow chart.

Why?

Explain why the activities you plan will lead most effectively to the outcomes you want to achieve. Try to use examples of other similar projects that work.

Writing the Proposal

Project Description: **Staffing & Management**

How many staff members/volunteers/consultants are needed to accomplish the project activities you've described?

- Describe the time commitment and duties of each current staff member who will participate.
- Identify roles to be filled with new hires and/or volunteers.
- Define necessary levels of education and experience.
- Describe the credentials of all key staff on the project.

Describe how you will manage the project:

- Qualifications and credentials of the project director
- Who is responsible for financial management? For project outcomes? For reporting?



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: **Evaluation**

An **evaluation plan** should be built into your project from the very start:

- As a management tool for program improvement
- As a signal to the funder that you take your program objectives seriously and want to know how well you've achieved them

Evaluation plans can seek to determine the measurable outcomes of your project and/or the impact of your project on the audiences you serve.

Include both qualitative and quantitative data!

Describe how evaluation data will be collected, analyzed and reported. How will the evaluation be used? How and how widely will it be disseminated, and to what audiences?



Writing the Proposal

Project Description: **Sustainability**

Is your project financially viable in the long term?

How will you keep it going after this funder's investment has ended?

Will the project contribute to the self-sufficiency of your agency or enable expansion of services that might generate additional revenue?

Will the project make your organization more attractive to other funders in the future?

Be specific and honest about current and projected funding streams and about your agency's base of financial support. What other funders are you asking to support the project?

Writing the Proposal

The Budget

Review the proposal narrative and make a list of all personnel and non-personnel items related to the operation of the proposed project.

New costs that will be incurred if the project is funded

- e.g. new staff to be hired for the project

Ongoing expenses that will be allocated to the project

- e.g. office space used for project activities, proportion of current staff time devoted to the project, overhead costs

Writing the Proposal

The Budget

Personnel costs:

- Salaries, benefits, consultants

Non-Personnel costs:

- Travel, equipment, printing, other materials

Indirect costs:

- Overhead – projects don't exist in isolation, but draw on a portion of your agency's resources such as utilities, support staff time, etc.

Be sure to provide notes in the budget to explain any unusual line items.



Writing the Proposal

Organizational Information

In the project description, you have sold the funder on the need for the project.

Now is your opportunity to sell the funder on your agency's ability and capacity to carry out the project.



Writing the Proposal

Organizational Information

Describe:

- When your agency was established
- Your agency's mission (show how the proposed projects fits within that mission)
- The services provided by your agency and the number of people served
- The audience served, their demographics, any unusual needs they have, and why they rely on your agency
- Your agency's particular expertise, especially as it relates to the subject of the proposal
- The agency's structure, programs and leadership
- The agency's board, how board members are recruited and their level of participation
- Number of full-time and part-time staff and their levels of expertise
- Number of volunteers and their functions



Writing the Proposal

Conclusion

Your chance to make a **final appeal** for your project!

Reiterate what you want to do and why it is important.

Emphasize why you need funding to accomplish your objectives.

Remind the funder of the impact you want to have – how the community will be better as a result work you want them to support.

Be concise – no more than 1-2 paragraphs!



After the Proposal

After the Proposal

If your proposal gets funded:

Don't settle for a funding **transaction** – build a funding **relationship!**

Have a stewardship plan for each funder that includes:

- Engaging the funder in your work
- Regular and transparent communications
- Timely and complete reporting
- Meetings, site visits, other opportunities

And remember –

Good stewardship starts with Thank You!



After the Proposal

If your proposal is not funded:

Don't get discouraged. We can learn more from failure than from success.

Ask the funder for feedback on your proposal. If you have taken the time to develop a relationship with foundation staff, this will be easier.

Keep talking to the funder to assess whether there is potential interest that would make it worthwhile to submit another proposal.

Incorporate funder feedback into the proposal – and then consider submitting it to other funders.

When you re-apply to the same funder, make sure your next proposal addresses *all* of the feedback you received.

8 Essential Tips

(in no particular order)

8 Essential Tips

Tip #1: Have fun and let your passion show through.

- The proposal itself is an opportunity to create impact by engaging others in your work.
- If you don't feel strongly about your mission, why should the funder?

Tip #2: Use data specific to the program you want to be funded.

- Even limited or preliminary data can help demonstrate that the program is viable and necessary.
- Objective: demonstrate that the proposed work needs to be done and that your organization is positioned to do it.



8 Essential Tips

Tip #3: Understand and follow the funder's guidelines.

- Most funders will not consider proposals that do not comply with their requirements. Ignorance is not an excuse.
- Length, format and structure must be exactly as specified.
- Check and double-check spacing, margins, typeface, type size.
- Get supporting materials right and keep them up to date.
- Don't send fluff. Provide what is requested and no more.

Tip #4: Use multiple proofreaders

- Have someone read your proposal for content. Is it clear? Does it make sense?
- Have several people you trust read the proposal for typos and formatting errors.
- Have someone check the finished proposal against the funder's requirements.



8 Essential Tips

Tip #5: Help reviewers get the most out of your proposal

- Don't bury your key points. State them clearly up front; don't hesitate to repeat them.
- Remember: not all reviewers will be experts in your work.
- Use formatting (as allowed by funder guidelines) to highlight important information
 - Headings, underline, bold, bullets, etc.
 - Consider leading off each section with a summary of its main points.

8 Essential Tips

Tip #6: Write clearly and concisely.

- Short sentences are easier to digest than long sentences.
- Long, complex sentences are difficult to follow for many readers.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Don't "utilize" when you can "use."
- Active verbs have more impact than passive verbs.
 - "Mistakes were made."
 - "Your gift is appreciated."
 - "You are loved."
- You don't have to fill the maximum allowed page count!

8 Essential Tips

Tip #7: Be explicit about the details of the proposed project.

- Outputs & outcomes
- Success measures
- Duration of project
- Management of the project
- Roles and responsibilities of project staff

8 Essential Tips

Tip #8: “The facts, ma’am. Just the facts.”

- Avoid broad statements and exaggerations.
- Illustrate your points with real examples.
- Data, data, data!



Additional Learning Resources

The Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org)

Print: *The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing*, 6th ed. (NY: The Foundation Center, 2012) by Jane C. Greever.

Online and free of charge:

- Proposal Writing Short Course (www.foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/shortcourse/index.html)
- Additional courses at www.foundationcenter.org/getstarted/training/online include:
 - Introduction to Fundraising Planning
 - Getting Ready for Foundation Fundraising
 - How to Approach a Foundation
- Knowledge Base on Proposal Writing (grandt.space.org/tools/knowledge-base/Funding-Research/proposal-writing)

The Foundation Center offers a comprehensive online course in Proposal Writing for a fee, and regular full-day Proposal Writing Seminars at locations around the country.



Additional Learning Resources

GuideStar (www.guidestar.org)

GuideStar provides numerous articles on topics of interest and practical use for fundraisers. These can be found at www.guidestar.org/rxg/news/articles/index.aspx

- See in particular Grant Writing 101 & 102 (March & April 2006)

Pennsylvania Grant Watch (pennsylvania.grantwatch.com)

- Offers an extensive toolkit of grant resources, including a useful proposal development guide created by the University of Michigan. Available online at: pennsylvania.grantwatch.com/toolkits.php

“Ten Simple Rules for Getting Grants” (Philip Bourne & Leo Chalupa, 2004)

- Online at journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.0020012

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Thank You!

Michael Schultz

Vice President, Development & External Relations

michael.schultz@bettertomorrows.org

