Writing a Grant Proposal

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Make it easy for them to say YES!

Make sure the fit is good. Your project should closely match their guidelines. Otherwise, you're wasting their time—and your own.

Follow the instructions exactly. They have to read lots of proposals. When one is exactly right, they'll appreciate it—and remember it.

Convince them that funding you is a **smart investment**—you'll use their money carefully, you'll get a lot done, and you'll help them achieve their goals.

Show them that **you will give them what they need.** That may be strong evaluations, good publicity, or knowing that they are really making a difference.

Make connections and build relationships with foundation staff and board members whenever you can. People give money to people they know.

When writing is hard…
...talk it out.

Sometimes it's hard to just sit down and write a particular section of a proposal. So instead, talk it out. Have one or two people talk through the section while somebody else writes down their exact words. Then, see if you can use that as a start for your written answer—make whole sentences, move things around, make it flow together. Finally, when you're done with the writing, read it out loud again to see how it sounds.

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Writing a grant proposal—like any big project—is easier when you break it down into steps.

1. GETTING STARTED
Read the whole grant application carefully. Highlight all of the questions you have to answer and materials you have to include. Underline key words or phrases you might want to use. Before you start writing—brainstorm. What are the strong points of your organization? Your program? What are your best arguments and examples? These ideas give you a place to start writing.

2. THE SUMMARY
Start by writing a one paragraph (3 or 4 sentences) description of your request. It should include:

- Who you are
- What your project is
- How much you're asking for

This summary lets you start with the big picture—the rest is filling in the details. You may be able to use this summary in the proposal, or as the first paragraph of your narrative.

3. WRITING THE PROPOSAL
Most grant applications ask for the same information, but they often have different formats. Some will have a list of questions. Others will ask for a "narrative"—the story of your project.

Start by writing a draft—don't worry about making it look good, just get the ideas down and polish them later. Look at the ideas you brainstormed before, and start with the questions that you have the most answers for. If you get stuck on one question, work on another one for a while.

Talk most about the parts of your project that they'll like best—use their guidelines for clues.

When you're done with the draft, go through and polish it up. Make sure the ideas are clear. Read it out loud to see how it flows. You may need to rewrite a lot—that's okay.

Before you put it in the mail:

- Add a cover letter that includes a summary of your request.
- Proofread everything...again.
- Double check to make sure you answered all the questions and are sending all the required materials.
- Make a copy for your files.
- Make sure you mail or deliver it in time to meet the deadline.

After you've sent it in:

- About a week after mailing, call to make sure it arrived and is complete (this is also an opportunity to talk a bit with the grant maker.)
- During the review period, if you have major successes, send a letter and let them know. If you get an article in the paper, send them a copy.
- Be patient. The review process can take a long time.

You can use the key words and phrases you underlined in the application. But don't worry about getting fancy—just say what you have to say, briefly and clearly.

When you're done with the writing, go back and look at the summary. Make sure it exactly reflects your proposal—your ideas might have changed!

Proofread everything! Reading the whole thing out loud is a good way to catch mistakes. Have someone else proofread it too.

4. ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

Finally, add all the other required materials, which may include:

- **Project budget.** Be specific and realistic on what you will need to spend. Show you'll use their money wisely. Don't always ask for the maximum amount—a budget for $19,870 looks more precise (and is less likely to get cut) than a request for the $20,000 maximum.
- The **organization budget** shows how this project fits into your whole organization, and allows the grant maker to see how much you spend on administration compared to programs.
- **Letters of support** and newspaper articles document your success and your partnerships with other organizations.
- **Other documents** may be requested for financial and organizational reasons: the 501(c)(3) letter of tax-exemption; an audit or financial report, and a list of the board of directors. Make a file with several copies of each, so you have them ready whenever you write a proposal.

For more information, see The Components of a Grant Proposal in The Toolbox.

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