

How To Write A Grant

The majority of the following is an excerpt from The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing, (c) 1997. Developing the Master Proposal: Preparation, Tips on Writing, Overview of Components.

One advantage of preparing the master proposal before you approach any funders is that all of the details will have been worked out. You will have the answers to just about any question posed to you about this project.

Another advantage is that usually you will need to customize only the cover letter, to reflect the connection between your agency and that particular funder or to take note of their specific program priorities. Few funders require a separate application form or special format. In the event that a funder requires a special format, usually you will be able to copy portions of your master proposal into the funders outlined format. Each funding application will have specific instructions as to what they are seeking in the proposal packet. Be sure to answer each criteria as directly as possible, and include all necessary attachments, resolutions and maps.

Gathering Background Information.

The first thing you will need to do in writing the master proposal is to gather the documentation for it. You will require background documentation in three areas: concept, program, and expenses. If all of this information is not readily available to you, determine who will help you gather each type of information. If you are part of a small nonprofit with no staff, a knowledgeable board member will be the logical choice. If you are in a larger agency, there should be program and financial support staff who can help you. Once you know with whom to talk, identify the questions to ask.

This data-gathering process makes the actual writing much easier. And by involving other stakeholders in the process, it also helps key people within your agency seriously consider the project's value to the organization.

Concept.

It is important that you have a good sense of how the project fits into the philosophy and mission of your agency. The need that the proposal is addressing must also be documented. These concepts must be well-articulated in the proposal. Funders want to know that a project reinforces the overall direction of an organization, and they might need to be convinced that the case for the project is compelling. Often, a Tribal Council Resolution will suffice to show how the project fits into the organization and will also show its support. You should collect background data on your organization and on the need to be addressed so that your arguments are well-documented.

Program.

Here is a checklist of the program information you require:

- the nature of the project and how it will be conducted;
- the timetable for the project;

- the anticipated outcomes and how best to evaluate the results; and
- staffing needs, including deployment of existing staff and new hires.

Expenses.

You will not be able to pin down all of the expenses associated with the project until the program details and timing have been worked out. Thus, the main financial data gathering takes place after the narrative part of the master proposal has been written. However, at this stage you do need to sketch out the broad outlines of the budget to be sure that the costs are in reasonable proportion to the outcomes you anticipate. If it appears that the costs will be prohibitive, even with a foundation grant, you should then scale back your plans or adjust them to remove the least cost-effective expenditures.

Tips on Writing the Proposal.

Regardless of who writes the proposal, grant requests are unique documents. They are unlike any other kind of writing assignment. Here are some tips for the proposal writer.

For many grant seekers, the proposal is the only opportunity to communicate with a foundation, corporate donor or governmental agency.

The written document is the one thing that remains with a funder after all the meetings and telephone calls have taken place. It must be self-explanatory. Do not assume that the funder inherently understands something that you are proposing. The proposal must reflect the agency's overall image. Your proposal will educate the funder about your project and agency. It will motivate the potential funder to make a gift and/or grant award.

You do need to put as much care into preparing your proposal as you have put into designing the project and as you are planning to put into operating it. You have spent a fair amount of time determining priorities for raising funds and gathering the appropriate information for the proposal. The information you have collected should be thoroughly woven into an integrated whole that dramatically depicts your agency's project for the funder.

There are some basic rules that apply to all writing and a few that are peculiar to proposals for foundations and corporations. State and Federal grants will often require specific information, but they are so divergent, that to cover them here is prohibitive. However, the basic rules presented herein still apply.

Get Your Thoughts Sorted Out.

A proposal must deliver critical ideas quickly and easily. Your writing must be clear if you want others to understand your project and become excited by it. It will be hard to accomplish this if you have not clarified your thoughts in advance.

This means identifying the central point of your proposal. All of your subsequent points should flow easily from it. Once you have clearly thought through the broad concepts of the proposal, you are ready to prepare an outline.

Outline What You Want to Say.

You understand the need for the program. You have already gathered the facts about how it will unfold, if funded. You have identified the benchmarks of success and the financial requirements.

With this information in hand, outline what should be said and in what order. If you take the time to create this outline, the process of writing will be much easier, and the resulting proposal will be stronger. Rushing to write a document without an outline only leads to frustration, confusion, and a poorly articulated proposal.

Avoid Jargon.

Jargon confuses the reader and hampers the reviewer's ability to comprehend your meaning. It impedes your style. It may be viewed as pretentious. With so much at stake in writing a proposal, it makes sense to avoid words (and acronyms) that are not generally known and to select words for their precision.

Be Compelling, but Don't Overstate Your Case. People give to People. While your proposal has to present the facts, it must let the human element shine through. Personify the issue. Tell your story with examples. Illuminate your vision so that the funder can share it with you. Don't be afraid to humanize the materials once the facts are in place. But never assume that your writing is so compelling that programmatic details are unnecessary. A number of the grant-makers indicate a preference for real-life examples to enhance the text of a proposal. In the words of Alberta Arthurs of the Rockefeller Foundation, "I think proposals today are getting a bit too cut-and-dried. They need a little rounding. A bit of anecdotal information is helpful if it achieves that rounding." Try to be realistic in presenting your case. Take care that in your enthusiasm you do not overstate the need, the projected outcomes, or the basic facts about your organization.

It is dangerous to promise more than you can deliver. The proposal reviewer is sure to raise questions, and the result could be damaged credibility with the funder. Worse, if the proposal is funded, and the results do not live up to the exaggerated expectations, future support is jeopardized.

Keep It Simple.

In the old days, fund raisers believed that the longer the document and the more detail it had, the better it was and the more money could be requested. Today, foundation and corporate funders look for concisely presented ideas. Eliminate wordiness. Simply present the key thoughts.

Keep It Generic.

As you progress through the fund raising process, you may well approach a number of different potential funders with the same or a similar proposal. Thus, it makes sense to develop a master proposal that, with certain customizing touches, can be submitted to a number of sources.

Revise and Edit.

Once you have completed the proposal, put it away temporarily. Then in a day or two, reread it with detachment and objectivity, if possible. Look for the logic of your arguments. Are there any holes? Move on to analyzing word choices and examining the grammar. If writing the proposal on a computer, be sure to spell check and grammar check the document. This will not catch every error, but it will eliminate a great deal of them.

Finally, give the document to someone else to read. Select someone with well-honed communication skills, who can point out areas that remain unclear and raise unanswered questions.

Ask for a critical review of the case and of the narrative flow. This last step will be most helpful in closing any gaps, in eliminating jargon, and in heightening the overall impact of the document. A well-crafted document should result from all these hours of gathering, thinking and sifting, writing and rewriting. Carol Robinson, executive director of the Isaac H. Tuttle Fund, provides us with an ideal to strive for: "To me a proposal is a story. You speak to the reader and tell the reader a story, something you want him/her to visualize, hear, feel. It should have dimension, shape and rhythm and, yes, it should 'sing.' Words are another way to draw a picture, to carve, to create music, to blow glass, to weave, to make porcelain." (private letter, December 30, 1985)

Components of a Proposal.

In general, proposals consist of six main elements. Those elements are as follows:

1. Executive Summary 1 page

Umbrella statement of your case and summary of the entire proposal.

2. Statement of Need 2 pages

Why this project is necessary.

3. Project Description 3 pages

Nuts and bolts of how the project will be implemented.

4. Budget 1 page

Financial description of the project plus explanatory notes.

5. Organizational Information 1 page

History and governing structure of the organization; its activities, clients and services.

6. Conclusions 2 paragraphs

Summary of the proposal's main points.