

## Grant Writing Tips & Tricks

### Be clear about what you need and want from a grant

- Your grant proposal needs to tell a story, and your story needs to be compelling. It's hard to tell a compelling story if you don't have a clear purpose behind your ask. Reasons for needing new funding:
  - Program expansion: More participants, additional location, adding new services and/or staff to meet a clear demand, etc.
  - Service addition: New services to address a critical or unmet need for participants.
  - Capital needs: New building, van, playground equipment, technology, etc.
  - General operating expenses: Many funders say they will only fund projects, and not ongoing program operations.
    - You can break down parts of your program into discrete projects.
    - For example, as part of your services you might provide ongoing parent education, youth activities, or regular family events that are held during mealtimes. You can ask for funds to pay for those events for a period of time.
    - You may also be able to ask for funding to pay for salaries and other costs for direct services.
    - Be careful that you don't supplant other funding.
- Grants should fit work you are already doing or plan to do.
  - Without a strong sense of your program's goals and vision, you can end up with mission creep.
  - Even if the grant fits within your mission, it may require a lot of time and energy from your staff. For example:
    - You will need a system to collect and track new data for reporting.
    - You will end up spending much of the money buying supplies.
    - You have to hire a specialist in this new area of work.
    - You need to rework your service model to accommodate the new programming.
  - *Example:* Your organization exists to introduce elementary-aged children to the outdoors through summer day camps. You are feeling nervous about funding, so you apply for a grant that funds summer reading programs to prevent summer learning loss. You haven't really thought about it before, but it could be an exciting addition to your program. **HOWEVER:** if you get the grant, you will need to hire or contract with a reading specialist, buy books, create a location for a library, revamp existing programming to accommodate reading time, and figure out how to facilitate pre- and post-tests to monitor literacy gains over the summer. Is this really a good fit for your program?

### Think through each specific grant opportunity

- Make sure the grant is a good match for your project and agency.
  - Look through the funder's website
    - Understand their goals and priorities.
    - Notice the language they use.
  - Read the RFP closely.

- Consider the likelihood of success, the reporting requirements, etc. This needs to be worth your time and not create difficulties for you down the road.
- Attend pre-grant webinars and read grant guidance and FAQs.
- Glance through their most recent 990s, if you can find them. (Try [ProPublica](#).)
- **Reach out to the funder.** You should **ALWAYS** do this. Common subjects for questions:
  - Explain and/or send brief information about your program—how long you have been operating, what you do, who you serve, how you are governed. Based on this, ask if they agree that you are a good fit for their grant.
  - Timing of the application. You would like to apply now. Does that timing make sense to you? Would they prefer that grantees operate for a certain number of years, have a certain budget size, or serve a specific number of participants before applying?
  - Identify what they are looking for in applicants. What would position you for success? This is a good question, as sometimes you find out that they are focusing most of their funding in a specific direction in this grant round.
  - If you have specific concerns or questions, ask about them. For example:
    - They may ask for three years of financial statements. Would they accept two full years of financial information and one partial year?
    - They may require all board members to make monetary donations. Your organization intentionally prioritizes recruiting board members who are people living with low incomes, program participants, or youth. Will they consider waiving that requirement for your organization?
    - They may not pay for general operating support. Will they consider a request for funding for a position that provides direct services to participants?
- Build a team—identify people to help with data, budgets, program information, proofreading, etc.
- Create a rough schedule, with the goal of being done two or three days before the actual due date. You often need time to deal with technical difficulties and other setbacks.

### **Prepare all supporting documents and information**

- Make a checklist of supporting documents needed—letters of support, proof of financial capacity, etc.—and start collecting them right away.
- If you have the chance to attach optional documentation, choose (or create) high-quality materials—upload annual reports or brochures, or create a document with photos and/or links to your website, social media, news stories, etc.
- Start your budget—**work it out first**.
  - Even if you don't need to upload a budget, roughing out a budget helps you solidify your plans.
  - Include everything related to the project or program, including pieces that will not be funded by the grant.
  - General operating vs project: You may need to carve a project budget out of your general operating budget.
  - Don't be discouraged if you need matching funds—there are ways to work that out!

### **Write!**

- Make your grant easy to read and grasp.
  - Use mostly short sentences—no more than 15-20 words.
  - Use active verbs.
  - Use straightforward language and explanations.
  - Avoid bureaucratic language and acronyms. They make reading a chore.

- Be specific and to the point. No beating around the bush.
- Let your enthusiasm for the project show. Grant proposals don't need to sound formal and clinical.
- Build your story around the data you have. Even pieces of small, local data can be combined with other data to enhance your case.
  - Identify sources for data that make a case for need for the project AND incorporate some program data. The data itself is important, but mostly you are showing that you know how to work with data and that you are tracking outcomes. (Note that most grant applications will ask you for some program data, particularly participant data.)
- Use bullet lists as needed. This is acceptable in most grant applications.
- **Follow the directions. Follow the directions. Follow the directions.**

#### **Before you hit "send"**

- Find at least one person to proofread—ideally two people who have not been working on the application. Ask them to carefully consider if you have fully answered all the questions.
- Doublecheck all directions and the list of attachments to be sure you aren't missing anything.
- Keep all the grant documents together in one place for future reference.

#### **After the grant decision is made**

- Contact the funder for information either way.
  - If they did not fund you: Don't take it personally. They probably funded a very small percentage of applications. Ask what you can do to better in the future.
  - If they did fund you: Call or email to say thank you and express your enthusiasm for working together. Ask them for feedback on what parts of your proposal most resonated with them, so that you can be sure to address their interests in your reporting.

#### **Additional Resources**

##### [Learn Grant Writing](#)

- Membership-based but also has free resources and trainings
- [How to Write a Grant](#) is a useful common-sense guide

##### [Instrumentl](#)

- Subscription resource for finding funders and tracking grants
- Free 14-day trial
- Free [grant writing guides](#) and information

#### **Thoughts on federal grants ...**

- All federal grants are listed on [grants.gov](#).
  - The [Grants Learning Center](#) has useful information. For federal grants, including training, eligibility information, and explanation of terminology and acronyms.
  - You can [subscribe](#) to receive grant notifications by email.
- You will need to have some combination of registration in SAM, a DUNS number, and a UEI code.
- Federal grants require a very high level of attention to detail, are often difficult to write due to page and word constraints, and require detailed supporting documents, including budgets, timelines, and work plans.
- If you feel that a federal grant is a perfect match for your organization, make sure you have plenty of time and the necessary support.
- [Community Blog, Grants.gov](#) provides general tips with information specific to federal grants.