

How to Write a Winning Grant Proposal

Don't let fear of writing keep you from applying for top grant opportunities

Grant writing is one of the most overwhelming, confusing, and time-consuming tasks you'll be faced with—both in starting your nonprofit business, and in managing it long-term. In fact, most people who start a nonprofit organization have never learned *how to write a winning nonprofit grant proposal*.

However, mastering the art of grant writing is critical for nonprofits—especially when securing *grant funding* may mean the life or death of your organization.

Getting grant funding is even more difficult given the fact that grant agencies receive literally *thousands* of applications for a single award. And all of them are for worthy causes.

So how can you make your organization stand out in the stacks? It's all a matter of what you say, and how you say it.

First and foremost, winning grant proposals must be well-written. Your cause could be the most critical in the world, but if your grant is unorganized and ineffective the grantor won't make it past the first paragraph.

In short, winning grants must be two things: *Informative and engaging*. That is, they must be clear, concise and tell a compelling story.

Make sure your proposal is free of typos and grammatical errors. You may want to have someone other than the author do the copyediting. Or, you may want to hire a professional copyeditor, or a professional grant writer, for an extra competitive edge in securing grant funding.

Below are the main components of a *grant proposal* and some *grant writing techniques* that will be useful. Just remember: When writing each section of your grant, if you make sure it is informative and engaging, you'll already be ahead of the curve!

Letter of Inquiry, or Cover Letter. It is critical that your nonprofit grant proposal have a strong cover letter. The cover letter introduces your organization, its mission, and specifically states what you are asking for. This includes the exact amount of your funding request. The cover letter should be concise, and include novel information. It should not be a regurgitation of what is in the proposal itself. The cover letter is your chance to let your funder know up front that you understand their agency's goals, and that your grant fulfills their requirements.

Tips for writing a cover letter:

- Address your cover letter to an individual—making sure they are the correct person.
- Limit your cover letter to one page with three or four paragraphs.
- Include a statement of support for the project from your board of directors.
- Do not include a cover letter in federal or state grant applications, unless they specifically request one.

Executive Summary. The executive summary is one of the most challenging parts of a grant proposal to write because it must be both comprehensive and concise. You must immediately grab the reader's attention and make them hungry for more—while providing an overview of what you are asking for, and why.

Tips for writing an executive summary:

- Identify your organization.

- Include your mission statement.
- Emphasize the key points of your grant proposal.
- Clearly communicate the need for your program.
- State the cost of the project and the amount you are requesting.
- State the time period for the project.
- State the results that are expected from your project.

Statement of Need. In your statement of need, you must clearly articulate the need your grant proposal is addressing, and you must do it in a reader-friendly manner.

The need statement, or problem statement, explains why the issue is important, and why your nonprofit is the right organization to provide a solution. Include background research, such as historical data, as well as stories that illustrate the need your proposal addresses.

Tips for writing a statement of need:

- Make sure your statement of need is well-written and reader-friendly.
- Use quantitative data: statistical analysis, trends and expert views that support your argument.
- Reference reputable research, literature and comparative data to support your argument.
- Explain your time frame, and why securing funding is critical now.

Goals and Objectives. In this section, capture the grant reviewer's attention with powerful, persuasive language. State what your nonprofit hopes to achieve, including specific results and/or outcomes, using key words like: Increase, reduce, provide, protect, improve and others.

Your goals will be broad statements, and may be abstract. But it's critical that your proposal's objectives be concrete, precise and measurable. Objectives are explicit statements as to how you will work toward reaching your overarching goal.

Tips for writing your proposal's objectives:

- Use quantifiable terms.
- Identify who or what your objectives will serve.
- Make sure your objectives are measurable and realistic.
- Objectives should be consistent with your statement of need.

Methodology, or Program Design. The methods section of your grant proposal tells the reviewer how your nonprofit will accomplish its stated objectives. Your methods must be clear and concise, and leave no doubts in a reviewer's mind. Write the methods section with the assumption the reader knows nothing about your nonprofit or your project. In addition to tying your program design to your objectives, this section should reference your statement of need and your budget. All methods and activities must be feasible and logical.

Tips for writing the methods section:

- Be explicit.
- Explain why the methods you've selected are the best to achieve your objectives.
- State the supplies, equipment, resources you will use for your project, including who will perform specific tasks.
- Include a timeline.
- Include who or what will benefit from your services.

Evaluation. The evaluation section is where many nonprofit grant proposals fall short. It is also one of the most important sections for grant reviewers. The evaluation section is where you explicitly state how you will measure your project's results. Granting agencies want to know your accomplishments will be objectively measurable, and that there will be hard evidence that their dollars did some good. Clearly state what records you will keep and/or what data you will collect. Data may be quantitative, qualitative, or a combination.

Tips for writing the evaluation section:

- Make sure this section is consistent with your methods and objectives.
- State how the evaluation will measure whether you met your objectives.
- State how you will use the findings.
- Specify whether you will conduct an internal evaluation or hire outside help.

Project Sustainability. Grant agencies want their funds to both produce results and facilitate future results through project sustainability—either with or without their additional help. Indeed, if you've written a strong grant proposal so far, the reviewer will care deeply about seeing that your services continue over the long term.

In the sustainability section, state your future plans for the project, after the grant money requested has been used. In other words, tell the grantor how your organization will raise money to continue its programs in the future. Your future funding plan can include a mix of strategies and sources.

Tips for writing the sustainability section:

- Outline specific future fundraising plans.
- Provide a blueprint of how you will effect these plans.
- Make sure your plans are realistic, given your resources.
- Include information on hiring additional staff or freelance contractors, if necessary.

Organizational Information. The organizational information section is where you provide detailed information about your nonprofit organization. This is also where you write to impress the reviewer. Spin a compelling narrative about the uniqueness of your nonprofit and include a brief summary of your statement of need. Using persuasive dialogue, let funders know that your organization is the best qualified to carry out the projects you have outlined.

Explain your nonprofit's history and background, provide its mission statement, describe its programs, state the recipients of its services, and give its track record to date. Offer a compelling overview of your nonprofit's role in the community, and its important accomplishments.

Tips for writing the organizational information section:

- Write as though the funder is hearing of your nonprofit for the first time.
- Give your nonprofit's full, legal name and its legal status.
- Name your board members, staff and volunteers.
- State the location of your headquarters and any satellite sites.
- Include financial information, such as annual donations and budget.

Budget. Don't be shy. It's time to come right out and ask for the money. The budget section must be professionally done in order to create confidence in your organization and reassure grantors you are financially competent.

In the budget section, tell the grant agency how much your project will cost, and provide an explanation of each expense. Include personal expenses, project expenses, and other administrative and overhead costs.

Also include any expected income—either earned or contributed. The more community support your nonprofit receives, the more encouraged reviewers will be. Also pay close attention to any supplemental materials requested by the granting agency, such as a tax-exemption letter from the IRS or financial statements.

Tips for writing the budget section:

- Make sure all figures are 100% accurate.
- Specify direct costs—the expenses for which the requested grant funding will be used. Direct costs include personnel, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, and supplies.
- Specify all sources of income and contributions, including volunteer services calculated at “market value.”
- State all indirect costs and overhead associated with administrative expenses

Nonprofit grant writing mistakes and grant writing tips.

When writing *grant proposals*, nonprofit organizations often make some common *grant writing mistakes*, which may be corrected by implementing some professional *grant writing tips*.

Common grant writing mistakes usually stem from inexperience with grant writing (after all, you got into this to help the planet, not to sit around typing), or a lack of resources, like time or research skills. Many grant writing mistakes also come from a lack of familiarity with the funder.

Below are some grant writing mistakes commonly made by nonprofits, and some grant writing tips to help you avoid them.

Generic proposals. One of the most critical aspects of *writing a winning grant proposal* is to tailor your grant to complement the goals of the granting agency. In other words, *know your grantor!* What is their mission? For what purposes are they providing grant funding? What results do they hope to foster? If you forge a strong connection between your mission and that of the granting agency, your proposal will have a greater chance of being funded.

still provide complete information about your nonprofit.

In the organizational information section, provide concise details on your organization including: Its history and mission statement; the recipients of your services; a description of your programs; an overview of your successes; and why the grantor can trust you to use funds responsibly and effectively.

Do not address targeted problems with broad solutions. Offer explicit details about the actions you will take to address the problem.

Too much detail. While some areas will be lacking in information, inexperienced grant writers often include too much detail in other areas. While it's important for your grant proposal to tell a compelling story, don't get carried away with a lot of superfluous information.

In other words, don't spend pages waxing eloquent about the problem or your ideals. Get to the point quickly and use concise, objective examples to illustrate your successes—rather than vague or subjective anecdotes.

Too much emphasis on the ‘why’—not enough on the ‘how.’ Of course, *why* your mission is important is important. But after stating the problems, your proposal must focus on presenting step-by-

step solutions. You must approach the grant writing process like you're a for-profit business. Your grant must include measurable objectives, and an explicit plan of action. Include what records or data you will collect, and how you will measure your program's accomplishments. You may also be asked to provide a logic model.

Poor writing. The person reading your grant will probably have read many others that same day. This means reviewers will have little patience for bad writing. Make sure your proposal is reader-friendly, and that it tells a compelling story without being overly sentimental. Avoid jargon and buzzwords. Do say how the grant agency's goals fit with your objectives, but never cut and paste phrases from their guidelines into your proposal. Write a clear, informative and engaging grant proposal that grantors will actually enjoy reading.

Circular reasoning. Circular reasoning is a veritable death sentence for grant proposals. Circular reasoning can be explained like this: When the problem being presenting is defined as the absence of the solution that is being offered. For example, "The problem is that our county lacks an environmental watch-dog group. Therefore, forming an environmental watch-dog group will solve the problem." Avoid circular reasoning like the plague in your nonprofit grant proposal.

Inadequate or unrealistic cost analysis. Nonprofit organizations tend to low-ball when seeking funds, thinking that the less you ask for, the more likely you are to get it. This is not necessarily true. Agencies would rather invest more and see your objectives fulfilled than grant you less and see it wasted. Unrealistic estimates also make you look fiscally inexperienced and unknowledgeable.

In your budget section, document projected income and expenses. Also include in your grant proposal whether you have other sources of funding, or have applied for other sources. Rather than making your nonprofit seem less needy, additional funding sources may be a benefit. Most grantors will not want to be a nonprofit's sole source of funding for a project.

Lack of quantitative data. Granting agencies want to see statistics. They want to know that your objectives and your results are quantifiable. For-profit businesses include such information as a matter of course. But nonprofit grants are often too light on hard data. To show that you are knowledgeable about your area, your grant should include historical data, statistical analysis, graphs and figures, and long-term projections whenever appropriate.

Avoiding the above common grant writing mistakes, and implementing the grant writing tips, will help your nonprofit to write *winning grant proposals* and secure *grant funding*!

Hiring a professional grant writer.

If you're considering *hiring a professional grant writer* to meet your grant writing needs, you're not alone. Grant writing can be one of the most frustrating, confusing and seemingly endless activities involved in running an organization. In addition to consuming great quantities of time, grant writing requires specialized, expertly-honed research and writing skills. Indeed, grant writing experience will almost always improve the odds your grant will be funded.

Some organizations are fortunate enough to have an experienced grant writer as part of their in-house staff. However, many groups do not have members who feel they are qualified to write winning grant proposals. Alternatively, staff may simply lack the time, resources or inclination to spend weeks working on a grant. In this case, hiring a professional grant writer can make a lot of sense.

In addition, out-of house grant writers work on a contractual basis. This means you only pay them for

a limited time, according to the terms agreed upon by both parties. You thus avoid paying the salary and benefits costs associated with in-house staff, while remaining in control of the process, and getting the benefits of their expertise.

In determining whether you need to hire a grant writer consider the following:

- The cost of hiring a grant writer compared to how much you will gain if the grant is funded (or lose if it isn't).
- Whether you have sufficient grant writing talent on staff, and whether staff have the necessary time to devote to grant writing.
- Your level of need for grant funding from a variety of sources.

In addition, hiring the *right* grant writer for your organization is extremely important. Look for someone who's well experienced, has fully-developed research, writing and interviewing skills, and who fits well with your organization. Interview several grant writers before you choose one, and get cost estimates upfront. Hiring the right grant writer will ensure your grants avoid the common grant writing mistakes, and give your organization a competitive edge in the grant funding game.

By Hired Gun Writing, LLC