

Grant Writing: Tips and Advice for New Writers¹

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Effective grant writing can open new doors for a variety of community resource organizations, including Extension, non-profits, and other organizations, seeking funding for their programs. The ability to secure grant funds is becoming more important for professionals in these sectors, including academia. For example, from 2007–2012, an estimated average of 42% of the University of Florida's budget came from grant and contract sources, mostly from federal sources (UF Board of Governors, 2011). Extension agents are also seeking to secure grant funds for their programs (Harder, Lamm, & Galindo, 2012). While federal and state government grants are common sources of funding for Extension, academia, and non-profit organizations, foundation giving (i.e., giving from private charities), is also an important potential source of funding. Smaller foundations, those with assets under \$50 million, increased their yearly giving by 9% from 2011 to 2012 (Di Mento, 2013).

While grant writing is a highly useful and potentially lucrative skill, it can also be a challenge to learn how to successfully write grants. Additionally, current requests for applications (RFAs) and requests for proposals (RFPs) are looking for collaborative approaches, and, therefore, collaborative teams. Moving through the entire process of creating and harnessing a new idea to building a collaborative team, and making sure the proposal itself is high quality and includes all the important pieces can be daunting for new grant writers. This publication will share

tips and walk you through the process of writing a collaborative grant by helping illuminate how to manage the idea creation, team building, and proposal writing stages of your grant writing experience.

Idea Creation

The first step of grant writing begins with an idea. As a professional working in your area, you are likely aware of different challenges and needs of the populations you are serving. These challenges and needs can be fertile soil for ideas to emerge. However, once you have thought of an idea and would like to pursue writing a grant to fund that idea, there are several tips that can help you transform it into a viable funding opportunity.

One important thing to consider is to think like the funding agency. Many grant writers try to fit the funders' request for applications (RFAs) to their idea, rather than vice versa. Consider shaping your idea around the funders' interests and specifications and to both portray and view yourself as someone partnering with the funding agency to achieve a common goal. Shore and Carfora (2011, p. 32) describe this process:

A funder is in competition with other funders for scarce good ideas. By the power of logic, reason, and exchange, you need to convey that you have something precious to offer: a truly fine idea that can be implemented within

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the funder's guidelines for the benefit of many and to the credit of the sponsor.

In addition to carefully reading the RFA or RFP there are other ways to understand if your idea fits well with the funder. Look up the websites of the funding agencies you are considering and read and understand their mission statements. While you know the reasons why you are pursuing a specific opportunity, the funding agency needs to know that this idea fits with and advances their specific mission. Many large grants have a designated program officer whom you can contact directly. Use this person as a resource by telling them what your idea is and ask whether it is the type of idea that interests the funder. If you do not understand something in the RFA or RFP, the program officer can also help clarify any confusion, which can help you from wasting time on something the funder will not approve.

Once you have thought of an idea and considered how it fits with the funder's mission, the next step is to research the types of ideas that have received funding from that funder in the past and consider ways you could accommodate your idea to fit these trends. While doing this research, consider your own ability to pursue the idea and who is likely to be your competition (Morrison & Russell, n.d.).

Sharing your idea with people that you trust can also be a great way to get feedback from others about the quality of your idea. Include people who are in your field as well as people outside of your field. Sharing your idea with those from different professional areas than your own will help you learn to communicate the idea to those unfamiliar with your line of work. This can help ensure that a reviewer will be able to clearly understand your idea even if he or she comes from a different professional background (Morrison & Russell, n.d.). When sharing your idea with others, it is helpful to sketch or draft your idea on paper. Shore and Carfora (2011) suggest drafting several different versions of your idea using different wording and from different conceptual angles. This can help you see your idea from different points of view, which is helpful when trying to assess whether your idea can fit into different funders' missions. For example, if your organization is interested in the issue of protecting children from child abuse, you can approach this through programs and ideas that provide parenting support and training, mental health and stress management, or raising public awareness about the issue. Have a lot of people review your idea once you have a concrete draft of what you are interested in pursuing. Having different people reading it can help you catch unclear areas and ensures that you are able to present your

idea clearly. Refining your proposal idea ahead of time can help you form the best team and write the clearest proposal (Coley & Scheinberg, 2008).

Building a Team

It is also important that you know how to build a successful team when looking for grant funding. It is increasingly common to have funding opportunities aimed at supporting collaborations between different groups. Collaborating with other organizations with missions or programs similar or complementary to your own is a way to compete for higher grant dollars and secure more resources for wider-scale programs. Collaboration, however, requires learning to balance the needs of different players. When choosing people to work with in grant writing, consider those who have strong writing skills and are people with whom you enjoy working. This will make receiving critiques and making compromises more enjoyable.

When thinking of putting together a team, it is also useful to include people with subject matter expertise, a variety of skills, and previous grant writing success. This diverse team can include not only people with different career experiences, but also people who perform well at different types of tasks. For example, having different people on your team who are comfortable putting together budgets, writing the narrative, or staying in touch with the funding source can help balance the workload and allow people to have responsibility over pieces they are most comfortable completing. When possible, choose people to join your team who are strategic grant writers with an established relationship with the funding agency.

When collaborating, it can be very helpful to designate a main writer or someone who will work to make sure that the style of writing and proposal formatting is correctly done (Shore & Carfora, 2011). When working as part of a collaboration team, make sure to write in plenty of time to finish the proposal before it is due, and consider giving a copy of the final proposal to all members of the team before submitting so everyone has the same copy they are reading when digesting comments from the reviewers.

Writing the Proposal

Once you have developed your idea and put together the grant writing team, it's time to tackle the proposal itself. There are several things to keep in mind that may help your writing process. One is to read the RFA or RFP very closely. Use the actual outline that is given with the RFA or RFP to begin composing your proposal. Consider reading through

it several times with a highlighter to make sure you don't overlook important requirements. If anything is unclear in the instructions, ask for clarification from the program officer. Also, don't be worried about the proposal seeming repetitive. Proposal writing has many repetitions built into it, and it is crucial that you make sure to remain consistent with the way that you describe your program throughout the entire grant proposal (Shore & Carfora, 2011).

Different grant proposals have different structures, particularly depending on whether they come from government funds, nonprofit, or private sources. While the specific RFAs or RFPs may differ from this structure, the following are key components included in most grant proposals.

Abstract

Most abstracts are brief, roughly one page. However, in that one page it is paramount that you both excite the reader about your idea and clearly describe your project and why it is needed. This is best written at the end of the entire proposal writing process, but should be done carefully. Make sure to keep this abstract, since it can be useful in the future if your project is funded and you need to report outcomes. While the reviewers will read your entire proposal, treat the abstract as if it is the only thing they would read, conveying your passion for the project. In the abstract you will include:

- Name of agency
- Type of organization
- Purpose and objectives of the project
- Specific interventions for the project
- Target population: age, race, gender, SES, special needs, etc.
- Location(s) and setting(s) of project
- Relevance of the proposed project to the funding intentions (Yuen & Terao, 2003, p. 21)

Background and Significance

When writing the background and significance section (also called “literature review” or “justification”) you want to clearly define the rationale of your project and why it is needed. Keep this section free from personal beliefs and write based on reasoning and previous information, projects, or literature about your topic and why a project like yours is needed. It can be helpful to ask yourself “are we extending the work of others, taking a new tack, rechecking findings, reaching toward a new synthesis, operating at

a different scale, or working with different populations?” (Shore & Carfora, 2011, p. 39).

When making your case, demonstrate that what you have read, seen, or done leads you to rationally believe that your program will be successful. Remember that the funding agency may be well aware of the problem you are describing, and make sure that you demonstrate the uniqueness of your specific program or idea and your idea alone. Yuen and Terao focus specifically on grant proposals for community organizations when they summarize writing the background section as follows:

This section is like saying: “This is the current condition: We understand the dynamics of the situation in our target areas and how they affect our target populations. Based on the objective information, professional knowledge, practice experience, and support from the affected population, we propose the following promising interventions.” (2003, p. 24)

Avoid using the current lack of a community resource as the reason why that resource should be provided. For example, it is a weaker argument to explain you want to create an after-school program for children because there are no after-school programs in the area, as opposed to creating a case for why an after-school program will benefit the children who will attend. As Yuen and Terao argue, “lacking what is proposed is not a good argument” (2003, p. 25).

Activities, Goals, and Outcomes

The activities, goals, and outcomes sections may be split up differently depending on the structure of the grant proposal you are writing. For the activity section, delineate the type of activities you expect to do in your project. While developing this, make sure that your activities are related to the theoretical argument you made in the background and rationale section and that the activities lead directly to objectives (Yuen & Terao, 2003). Goals and outcomes, while similar, are different from one another, and may differ in terminology from funder to funder. Outcomes (or objectives) are typically the specific changes in your participant population that will result from the activities you are doing in your project. For example, an outcome of an after-school program would be participation level in the program or feelings of satisfaction from attending the program. Goals, on the other hand, are broader and incorporate the type of change you expect that your program will help promote. “Reducing the level of high school dropouts in X county” is an example of a goal that your program can help promote, but one in which you cannot directly measure cause and

effect from your program's efforts. Think of goals as the type of future you want to see and outcomes as the types of things to which you would like to claim your program has contributed. Including a timeline is particularly appropriate in this section, as it can visually show the reader the progression of activities and when you expect to complete them.

Evaluation Plan

Evaluation plans are also common in grant proposals and are a natural next step once you have created the outcomes and goals portion. Determine what type of information or data you need to collect to be able to show that you reached the measurable objectives and then decide on how you will collect and report on this information. Shore and Carfora (2011, p. 70) describe the evaluation plan as a series of steps which include:

1. State the expected outcomes or results.
2. Determine the type of evidence needed.
3. Develop a data collection plan.
4. Identify data analysis and reporting procedures.

You may want to consider having two types of evaluations—formative evaluations to monitor and improve the process of implementing the project, and a summative evaluation to determine the overall impact the project had on its participants. The evaluation section of the proposal is also where you include any information about how you will treat those participants from whom you will collect information (i.e., confidentiality and ethical considerations), surveys or other data collection instruments you will use, and how often you will write reports (Yuen & Terao, 2003).

Some proposals may ask you to include a logic model, concept map, or program theory diagram, which are visual ways of showing how your goals, objectives, and activities fit into one another in a logical fashion. Even if your proposal does not require one, it can still be very helpful to have one developed so that you can easily describe the rationale behind the program. Some helpful resources if you are new to the idea of logic models include two EDIS publications (Israel, 2001; 2010).

Agency Capacity and Project Management

You may also be required to write about the capability you, your agency, or your organization has to implement the proposed project successfully. This is an area where you

argue why your project team and your organization are the ones who should be delivering these services or programs. Include the backgrounds of project team members and the mission and history of your organization, along with any data on impacts you have for things in which your organization is currently involved. Include any and all collaborations and access to experts or resources. Make sure to emphasize the particular skill set of the organization and activities or programs that are currently going well that are relevant to the proposed project (Shore & Carfora, 2011). If working directly with community members, mention the ways that your organization is specifically able to reach those people, especially if you have had projects or ties to that community (Yuen & Terao, 2003). Also describe the way the project would be managed if funded, and who would be in charge of managing the implementation.

Finally, prepare for success by ensuring that your organization is ready to manage the grant, should it be awarded. It is important to think about what it is that you will be giving up if your idea is funded. Make sure you have the capacity to actually manage the project if it is funded. Keep in mind that you want to develop a positive relationship with a funding agency, so you don't want to perform poorly with money you were given previously because you were not prepared to manage the project. By preparing up front for success, through developing a carefully written proposal, managing a collaborative writing process, maintaining persistence, and planning how you will manage the grant funds and program, you will be well prepared to receive grant funds to improve your program delivery or create a new project.

Conclusion

While grant writing can be difficult, time and practice can hone any new grant writer into a seasoned professional. Be persistent in your grant writing and don't lose courage. It may take several times before your idea is funded. Carefully address the reviewer's comments if they are given to you, and keep trying. Think of this time as a way to get to know the funder and for them to get to know you. Funders want to be able to see that you are able to take their considerations and feedback into account and come back with revisions more suited for the funder's mission. Rejection is common in grant writing, but it's important to keep trying.

Securing extra funds to run community programs can help expand the positive impacts of these programs and keep their base budgets safe from agency or donor cuts. Learning to collaborate and share ideas amongst others working in similar ways can expand and improve professional

networks and foster improved ideas. As you embark on grant writing, keep in mind the tips shared in this EDIS publication, and good luck!

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