

Grant Writing Tips from a Funding Agency Perspective

Getting Started

1. Get to know the funding agency. Make sure your project fits its mission and the stated purpose of the funding program. If your project is not a good fit, your proposal has little chance of a second look.
2. Study the program guidelines carefully, and then study them again. Keep a copy handy while you are preparing your proposal.
3. Most agencies encourage you to contact them to ask questions and to discuss your ideas. Make sure you have studied the guidelines before making your call.
4. Consult with your Sponsored Programs Office staff or authorizing official of your organization as soon as you start working on a proposal. This will not only save you a lot of headaches as the deadline approaches, but these persons may also be able to provide you with invaluable advice that will improve your proposal and your chances for success.

Planning Your Project

1. Plan your project first! Agencies fund projects, not ideas. Many grant seekers attempt to write and submit proposals based on preliminary ideas alone without spending sufficient time on identifying the problem and planning the details of the project objectives, activities and budget. A well-developed project will write itself!
2. Identify a clear problem or need that your project will address. Funding agencies want to have real impact on the needs of society, and they look to you to find effective solutions. A well-defined problem statement is the foundation for the rest of your proposal. In research proposals, this corresponds to developing a solid hypothesis.
3. The scope of your project should align with realistic goals. For example, you are not likely to find the cure for cancer with a simple research project, but you may develop a better diagnostic or specific treatment.
4. Don't confuse the objectives (the results) with the strategies or methodology (the plan). The objectives of your project are the measurable outcomes that you hope to achieve at the end of the grant period. Sometimes these are referred to as the deliverables of a project or the specific aims of a research project.
5. Make sure to include the appropriate expertise on your project team. If applicable, include collaborations and partnerships in your project plan. Your reviewers will expect to see that you are making effective use of available resources.

6. Don't avoid the obvious. If there are related issues or initiatives that will have impact on the success of your project, address them specifically in your proposal. For researchers, anticipate and acknowledge potential obstacles that might come up during your research. If you don't, the reviewers certainly will! Explain how you will address these issues during your project.
7. The evaluation section of a proposal is your plan for assessing the impact of your project. If you are having trouble writing your evaluation plan, take that as a clue to re-examine your objectives and make sure that they are specific and that the outcomes are measurable.
8. Your budget is a financial picture of your project plan. Reviewers will look for reasonable expenses that support the activities and personnel involved in the project. The "budget justification" is an important part of your proposal, because it is here that you will provide the rationale for each line item in your budget.
9. Think like a reviewer! What would you look for in an innovative idea and well prepared proposal? What details would you need to know in order to evaluate whether a project has potential for success? What would annoy you if you had to read twenty proposals in one sitting?

Writing the Proposal

1. Follow the instructions. Demonstrate to the funding agency your commitment by preparing a proposal that follows all instructions to the letter! Agencies and reviewers take note of incomplete or sloppy proposals as an indication of the applicant's willingness and ability to conduct a successful project!
2. Get to the point. Put your main ideas/objectives at the beginning of your proposal. You want to "grab" your reviewer's attention right away. Don't make him or her guess until the end what your project is all about.
3. Keep it simple. Write your proposal in clear, straightforward language, avoiding too many acronyms, jargon and unnecessary background information.
4. Make your proposal easy to read and easy to follow. Use headings, bullets and white space. Informative graphics can also be a welcomed change from text. Follow the instructions for font size and type, margins and page limits!
5. Seek feedback on your proposals from both your colleagues and others outside of your discipline. This is the best way to check whether you are communicating your ideas clearly and effectively. Also, ask for advice from successful grant writers.

It's a Process

Start early! The grant-seeking process takes time, practice, and patience. Last minute proposals are painful for everyone concerned and rarely produce quality work.

Don't give up. Grant writing is an acquired skill. If your project is not funded, request feedback from the agency so that you can learn from the reviewer comments. Seek advice on grant writing techniques. Then try again!