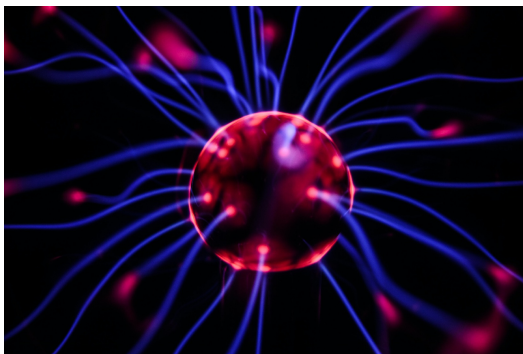# Grant Writing: 101

By Jennifer Shannon

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For my children, who endured late dinners and my complaining while I wrote.

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Grant Writing: 101 is designed for the inexperienced grant writer who needs a general guide on how to write a grant proposal. It covers general background information on non-profit organizations, as well as a step-by-step process for what is expected in a grant proposal. Each section of a grant proposal is covered in detail. This guide gives the writer a road map to the basics of grant writing.

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Jennifer Shannon

Grant Writing 101

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

What is a grant proposal? For anyone who has ever worked for a non-profit, from the smallest PTA to the largest charity, grants are a big part of the income stream. So how do you get someone to give you a grant? It starts with a grant proposal. A grant proposal is exactly what it sounds like, a proposal for a grant. "Generally, a grant proposal outlines a project idea, explains why the organization needs grant money, and provides evidence that demonstrates the need and worthiness of the project." (Fagon, 2023)

It is not unlike a business plan a "For Profit" company might take to the bank to get a loan. It is a summary of your organization and an opportunity to highlight what makes you special. It is a way to show potential foundations and donors who you are and why they should give you money. There are many organizations requesting the same funds, so you want to find ways to make yourself stand out.

There are several kinds of grants. There are project grants, which are used for a specific purpose. There are also operations grants which are used to pay for the general operations of the organization. Grants can be restricted by the donor. These are called donor-directed funds, whereas grants without direction by donors are referred to as unrestricted funds. These will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. The type of grant you apply for and whether it is restricted will largely be controlled by who is giving the funds. It is a good idea to understand the differences.

So, what's in a grant proposal? That can be a tricky question. Grant proposals can vary depending on who is asking for money and who is giving it. They can vary in length and complexity. The more money the grant, generally, the more extensive the proposal. Some organizations will have web portals with very specific guidelines, and some want you to submit a written proposal. Regardless of the system, there will be some basic pieces that most grants should contain.

1. Summary of your organization
2. Grant Use
3. Organization Structure
4. Financial Information
5. Other Information

These five pieces will form the basis for your grant. Each one will be covered in greater depth in later chapters. Other considerations will be touched on such as formatting and how to apply for grants.

So, let's get started.

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Chapter 2 – Summary

To start your grant proposal, you will want to create a summary of the grant. "Also known as a proposal summary, an <u>executive summary</u> is essentially a brief synopsis of the entire proposal" (Fagon, 2023). In this summary, you will want to introduce your organization, your current programs and toot your horn a little by including any awards, honors, or special achievements.

Include in the beginning of your summary your mission statement. This helps to summarize what your organization is about. It is a good way to introduce yourself and your mission. You can include your vision statement if you have one, but the mission statement is more important.

You will also want to give a brief description of why you are applying for the grant and what it will be used for. This will be done in greater detail later in the grant, but you will want to summarize it at the beginning as well to cover the entire scope of the proposal.

Organizational History

You want your grant reader to get an understanding of who you are as an organization. The best way to begin this is at the beginning. Give a history of how your organization got started. When did you first begin doing your charitable work? You can even start your history before you were an official non-profit. Where were you located, how many people did you have at the beginning, what was your first program or event, etc.

You can also include such things as whose brainchild this was or what was the need you sought to fill and why. Give color and context to your organization. Avoid being too personal in your "origin story" but give the reader a chance to see how your organization evolved.

Bring your story to the present by discussing how you have grown. What new programs or events have you added since the beginning. Have you changed or expanded your location, added employees, or expanded your reach in other ways.

You want to show that you are thriving and growing and how the grant will continue this process, whether it is for general funding or a specific project. You may also want to give a brief history of the problem your organization is hoping to solve. Don't get too technical or go too far into the weeds, but some background is useful in connection to your own history.

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Current Programs

Give an overview of your programs, classes, events, etc. Describe the whole organization's projects, not just the one you may be seeking funds for. In the next part you will go into greater detail on the specifics of the grant, but in the summary, you are summarizing, after all, so cover all of what you do.

You don't need to give a complete calendar of events or syllabus of every class. But you do want to show the complete scope of your programs. How many people served, or animals cared for. What types of classes do you offer and to whom. How many events do you have in a year and what is the attendance, etc. You can give a brief overview of what you expect for the coming year if you are making significant additions or changes.

This is also where you can show how your organization is unique. Do you have a specific niche within the category as a whole? What makes you special. Do you fill a specific need that no one else is? Do you do something differently than other similar organizations? Be sure that you focus on what you are doing, not what others are doing. You want to show your uniqueness, but don't want to appear to be slamming other groups. Everyone in the charitable space is trying to do good work and you certainly don't want to offend a donor who has a fondness for another organization too.

Awards, Honors and Achievement

Along the lines of showing your uniqueness is highlighting awards or achievements. These can be anything from association honors to community or government awards. They can be awards for individuals in your organization or to the organization itself. Even if they are several years old it can add to the appeal of your charity.

You can also highlight interesting things that you have done. Where you featured on television or in a new article. Has your organization traveled to other states or countries. Have you made videos, sold recordings, or published books? Do you have videos on YouTube or do live streaming? These achievements all show how your organization stands out. And you are competing against other organizations for the grant money so standing out is the goal.

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Chapter 3 – Grant Use

Now it is time to describe what your grant money is going to be used for. This is the nuts-and-bolts part of the proposal. Although the organization's history and structure are important, this is the section that describes the use itself. As previously mentioned, there are two main categories of grants. General operations grants and project grants.

General operations grants are monies that are given to cover the day-to-day operations of the organization. It can be for rent, payroll, taxes, and utilities, etc. It can also be for program expenses and projects. There are no restrictions on what the money can be used for or how much can be spent on any one category. This is providing they funds are not donor advised, which will be described later in this chapter.

Project grants are monies given for a particular project. This could be an event, a category of programs or even a season of programming. A project usually has a finite time frame, budget, and specific goal.

Operating and project grants can be either restricted or unrestricted. Restricted grants, often referred to as Donor Advised Funds, are grants in which the donor has set guidelines or conditions under which the funds are given. The funds can only be used for the purpose set out by the donor. Funds that are restricted must be kept separate and the use of the money must be tracked separately, so that the donor can see that the funds are being used only for the purpose laid out in the restriction. There can be consequences if donor advised funds are not used properly.

Unrestricted funds can be used however the organization needs them. Generally operating grants are unrestricted, so the money can be used for anything the organization needs to use it for. Project grants can be restricted or unrestricted, depending on the wishes of the donors.

Purpose of Grant

When describing the purpose for an operation grant, you will want to describe the organization's charitable purpose in greater detail than in the summary. Discuss your various programs and projects, how you impact the community, and what your goals are. Since you are not applying for money for one program, you need to be broader in your description and cover the whole organization. Outline specific outcomes you hope to achieve and under what time frame. Generally, you want to keep your focus on the upcoming year or whatever period the grant covers.

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If you are applying for a project grant, you will want to be more specific about where the money is going to go. Outline the project in as much detail as you can. Give dates, projected attendance, location, goals, and potential outcomes. List speakers or performers and give background on their qualifications. Identify the audience or group to be impacted or describe the need you intend to address and outline how you intend to meet it. This is probably the most important part of the grant, so give real thought to how to describe it and give as much detail as you can.

Projected Impact

When describing why you need the grant, you want to be sure to include in as much detail as possible how you plan to make the world a better place. Non-profits by their very nature are created to fill a need. You want to show how your organization can do that better than someone else. Impact can be achieved and measured in different ways depending on the organization or project. If you are an arts organization putting on a festival, the impact can be the enjoyment of the audience, the money raised, the number of people served, the promotion of the artist, and so on.

Try to show all the areas in which your project will impact the community, both directly and indirectly. If you have done the event or program before, then you can use historical data. If you have not, then research the impact of similar events on similar groups. If you are doing something that hasn't been done before, then give your best estimation based on your experience.

Measurement of Success

When you are describing your impact, you will need a way to quantify it. This can be the tricky part depending on your program. While it is easy to measure quantified outcomes like funds raised and number of attendees, it can be much harder to measure qualitative outcomes like audience enjoyment or how much was learned. If you are an animal shelter, you can quantify how many animals were given new homes, but it is more difficult to show how you have improved the lives of the animals in the shelter. Are they happier or healthier? "Delineating the impact is important because funders want to see that you've clearly established the realistic benefits of your work along with how you plan to verify and assess your achievements" (Vieira, n.d.).

Measuring impact or success is important, not only for grant purposes but planning purposes. You want to improve or get rid of programs with low impact and expand those with greater impact, so you need to have a way to measure

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it. Keep track of attendance, sales, and other quantifiable data by event as much as possible. Depending on the event, consider social media analytics and computer tracking. Use audience surveys whenever possible to get feedback. Research ways to measure how much is learned in classes or student improvement metrics.

Regardless of what community you are trying to serve, you will need to be able to show how you are achieving your goals. Outline your plan for measuring success in your grant to give credibility to your program and your organization. It shows that you are serious about the process of continuing to improve your programs. Try to have a matrix that addresses quantitative and qualitive impacts. You don't just want to have more of something, you also want it to be better.

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Chapter 4 – Organizational Structure

Why would a donor care about your organizational structure? The answer is that who and how your organization is run affects how effectively you would use the money you are given. Experience matters. Charities are complex and it is easy to make mistakes. If someone is going to give their money, they want to be sure that it is going to be used well. They would want to know that it is going to be spent on the purpose for which it is given and not squandered away. Which is why you want to show that your organization has experience and efficiency.

Board of Directors

What is a Board of Directors and who should be on it? A board of directors is a group of people who work in an advisory capacity, usually as volunteers, to help the officers of the organization. These are usually people with various backgrounds, who can bring experience to charity, but don't have to be on the payroll. So, who should you have on your board?

Your board should be made up of a variety of different groups. You should choose people who are experienced in your work, stakeholders in your purpose and have relevant experience. For example, if your organization is a dance school, you want to have people who work in the dance industry such as former dancers or dance teachers. You would want to have some parents or dance students. You would also want people with non-profit experience like an accountant who specializes in non-profits.

You might want to have demographic diversity if possible. This not only shows your willingness to be inclusive, but it gives you valuable insights from a variety of perspectives. Different ages, gender identities, disabilities, and races will help you best serve a wider range of communities. To obtain board diversity you may need to actively recruit board members from specific demographics. Donors or foundations who serve a broad range of individuals may not look as fondly on an organization that doesn't have a diverse board.

Now that you have your board, you want to put them in your proposal in a way that highlights their relevant experience. Give a short resume of each member highlighting the experience that most closely relates to your project or purpose. Give their years of experience, schooling and jobs history that show their best qualifications. Personal details such as having children, owning pets, being a cancer survivor, etc. if relevant to your purpose, can show how these people are good advisors. Keep it short and concise. One to two paragraphs per person should be enough.

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Employees and Volunteers

The staff of the organization is as important as the board, if not more so. The top staff such as Executive Director, Chief Financial Officer and those who run the programs are going to be the ones you want to highlight. You don't need to give the resume of every employee unless you only have a few. Readers of the proposal are interested to see that the day-to-day operations are in good hands.

Like the description of the board, highlight both the work and non-work experience that made you hire these individuals in the first place. Detail the years of experience, schooling, awards, and any other details that are relevant. Again, keep it short and concise. One or two paragraphs should be enough here as well. You want to avoid reader fatigue, since you are throwing a lot of information at the donor.

The description of volunteers can be more general. You can highlight specific volunteers who work on a regular basis and have strong backgrounds. But you can also just describe how many volunteers and what they do for you. If you don't use volunteers, you can omit this section. Not every organization can utilize volunteers, so don't be concerned if you don't.

Facilities

Facilities or your workplace may or may not be relevant to your proposal. If your grant is an operating grant, you may want to describe the facilities it will help pay for. Things such as your capacities, specialized equipment or other relative facts may be useful, helpful, or important.

Not all organizations' workplaces are useful information. If you work out of an office, it probably isn't necessary to describe it. If, however, you have a large and impressive facility, you might want to include it in the description of your structure.

Small charities or those just starting out may have humble facilities, but that doesn't necessarily mean they aren't worth mentioning. If you have innovative use of space, or you do a lot with a little, it still might be worth talking about.

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Chapter 5 – Financial Information

Now we have come to the financial portion of the grant. This is where you are going to describe the budget for your project or, if applying for a general operating grant, the budget for your organization. Budgets need to be clear and easy to read. You don't want to have pages and pages of budget information. This can be confusing and again cause reader fatigue.

Budget for the Grant

Keep the budget simple and concise. No more than one page for the actual numbers. You will want to outline the basic sources of income, such as attendance, sponsorship, donations, etc. Keep the topics general. You don't need to list each donor or sponsor. Unless the grant instructions require it. For the income use round numbers in your budget for simplicity's sake. This is an estimate. Total the projected income and move on to expenses.

Similar process for the expenses. List categories such as labor, advertising, facilities, supplies and so on. Again, use round numbers even if you have bids with pennies. You are projecting the overall cost of the event or project and don't need to drill down to every cent. Total the expenses as well and give the net of the two. You can include the money you are requesting in the proposal and title it "requested grant" or something similar or show the budget as having a deficit. You can enter income and expenses either largest to smallest or in alphabetical order, which ever seems to make the most sense.

Sample Budget for Jazz Festival

Revenue

Ticket Sales:	5,000
Sponsors:	5,000
Concessions:	1,000
Requested Grant:	**5,000**
Total Revenue:	**16,000**

Expenses

Performer Fees:	8,000
Event Staff:	2,000
Supplies:	2,000
Venue:	1,000
Advertising:	500
Total Expenses:	**13,500**

Net Event Revenue:	**2,500**

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The most important thing is to be sure that the numbers are as accurate as possible and that you do the math correctly. If your numbers are unrealistic or exaggerated, your proposal will lose credibility. If your numbers don't add up, you are going to look unprofessional. Remember, you are competing with other grantees for this money.

Current Financials

Many grants will request your most recent year end or even month end financials. Depending on the size of your organization and the size of the request, you may even be required to provide audited financials. These are financials that have been independently reviewed and compiled by an outside accounting firm. Not all donors will require this, but some will.

As with your budget, the presentation of your financial statements will go towards your credibility. You can provide a printout straight from your accounting software, but these are not always the easiest to read or the most attractive. They can be lengthy and have too much detail. Printouts with general ledger account numbers can be cluttered.

You may want to consider putting the information into a document where you can simplify the information and present a more professional appearance. Just be sure that the information is still correct. The numbers need to add up and the Balance Sheet needs to balance. Some of the things the donor may look for are reserves, administrative expenses, and liabilities.

Best practices dictate that you have savings enough to cover expenses for 3 to 6 months. This is your reserves. It shows your ability to weather unexpected financial events.

Administrative expenses should be 15% or less of your overall expenses, the rest being program expenses. This is sometimes a matter of how you code or allocate expenses. But give some thought to how you present this.

Liability (what you owe) is another area where donors are going to be looking. If you have too much debt, it may indicate financial instability. You may need to explain this in notes at the end of the statements.

Projected Financials

Some grantors will require you to make projections for your next year. Like the budget, this is an estimate of what you think your organization will do in the coming year. You will want to format this projection like your financial statements, keeping roughly the same categories of income and expenses. This will make it easier for the grant reader to compare your recent year to your projections. Again, round the number for easy reading.

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Base your projections on the past and estimate any changes based on what you know about your future projects and circumstances. Again, keep these projections realistic. If you are showing a 200% increase in revenue, you better have a good reason for it. If you anticipate any drastic changes in your financial position, either good or bad, you should add some notes explaining it. You will probably be asked about it anyway so you might as well provide the explanation up front.

The bottom line is that you should be as honest and accurate in all your financial information as you can. Non-profits routinely run very close to breakeven and sometimes at a deficit. Donors expect that. Unrealistic projections aren't going to help you convince donors and may have the opposite effect. A donor may think, "If they have so much money coming in, why do they need me?" Inaccurate financial may make a donor worry about how well your organization is being run. Spend time on this section to ensure accuracy.

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Chapter 6 – Other Information

What other information may be required? This is where it starts to be specific to the donor and the organization. Some donors are going to require different information than others depending on the industry and the foundation involved. There are some general categories that may come up more often. We will cover a few of them here.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusiveness, and Accessibility

Sometimes referred to as DEIA, is your organizations policies on making your events and organizations open and welcoming to all groups and demographics. Not all donors or charities are going to want to know about your DEIA policies, but governmental donors and larger charities will likely want this outlined.

Your DEIA policy is something you should give thought and effort to, not only for grants, but for your own betterment as an organization. You want to make sure that your events are accessible to people with disabilities. You want your employees to feel comfortable regardless of who they are. You want your board to be diverse to give you guidance from all perspectives, and so on.

Your policy should address all these areas. You want to consider age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and level of abilities. You should consider getting formal training because you don't know what you don't know. It is hard to create a policy for a demographic you don't share. You will want a written policy and action steps. Even if you haven't fully implemented all the aspects yet. Show that you have given the policy thought and you take it seriously, because your donors do.

Succession Plan

A succession plan may not be applicable to all organizations. If your charity is one that was started by and run by a single individual or even a family, you will need to have a succession plan. This is most likely going to be for small organizations where the officers and board are family members or close friends. This isn't necessarily a bad thing or a problem for donors, but they are going to want to know what happens when the founders age out or die suddenly. Who will take over? Will the organization stay in operation or close?

A succession plan doesn't have to be complicated or detailed. It should at least cover the basics. Will the organization stay in operation, who will take over as the executive director, how will board seats be filled, etc. Problems can arise if the founder has several heirs and there isn't a clear plan as to who will be in charge. These decisions need to be made in advance and put into writing not

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only for grant purposes but for the continued operation of the organization. The plan should contain financial instructions as well. Who will be check signers and who will oversee financial operations. It should consider all major operational personnel. All department heads should be made aware of the plans so everyone knows what will be needed whether the changes are from a planned departure or a sudden one.

Other Information

What other information might be required? This is where specific donors may have specific requirements depending on the industry. Educational organizations may ask about specific educational methods. Animal welfare organizations might want specifics about state compliance issues. Medical charities may have a whole host of requirements. You will want to read the grant guidelines carefully to be sure you understand the expectations.

Contact other organizations in your industry who have applied for similar grants for insight. Talk to donors you may have received grants from in the past for their suggestions. Try to get feedback wherever you can to improve your presentation.

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Chapter 7 - Other Considerations

What other information or questions should you consider? Formatting, submission protocols and deadlines should all be researched. This is where specifics of the grant will come into play the most. Read the grant requirements carefully and seek help if you have questions. Don't guess and hope you're right. If a donor organization is processing many grants, they may be looking for reasons to reject some. Don't give them reasons to reject yours.

Formatting

What is the proper format for a grant? A grant is a business document, so basic formatting should comply with normal business or technical writing standards. Keep fonts simple. Don't make them too large or too small. Have a table of contents for easy navigating. Be sure to have headings and subheadings where appropriate.

Keep the language simple and concise. Don't use language that is too technical. This is where knowing your audience is important. If you are speaking to experts, then some technical vocabulary may be helpful, but if the person who is going to be reading the grant is not someone with a strong background in your field, then you want to keep the terminology simple.

Site your sources and use proper referencing. This may be an internal document, but if you are quoting surveys, experts, or other information not your own, you still need to give credit to the authors.

Submission

How are you supposed to submit your grant application? This also will vary depending on the grant instructions. If you are submitting your grant on paper or as an electronic document, have a cover letter. The cover letter will be a brief summary of your grant and what you are applying for.

Some governmental or larger donors will have portals for submitting your grants. They will often have sections set up for the different parts of the grants and the ability to attach documents like financial statements. They will have word count restrictions and may have specific questions that you will have to answer. During Covid for example some donors wanted to know how organizations kept programs going during the pandemic.

If you are mailing the document rather than uploading or emailing it to a site. Send your grant by some method that you can track. Overnight mailing, certified or return receipt is a good idea. You want to be able to verify that the

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grant has been received. The mail is not always reliable, so if possible, submitting electronically is probably safest.

Timing

Timing is another area where you can get your grant rejected if you are not careful. Read the grant instructions carefully and be sure to meet all deadlines. Most grants will have a cutoff date for submission.

Always submit your grant as soon as you are able. Then if you find you need to update information or make any other changes to the document, you will have time to send an amended copy.

Waiting until the last minute is never a good idea. Give yourself plenty of time in case you run into issues with technology or the postal system. Follow up with a representative to verify that your grant proposal has been received.

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Chapter 8 - Conclusion

If you are part of a non-profit organization, you will want to consider having a grant proposal draft available. Even if you are not ready to apply for a specific grant. You should have parts of the proposal prepared that you can use on any grant, such as the organization's history. And prepare other portions of the grant proposal specifically for each grant request.

Keep financial data up to date and available. Keep the board of directors' information current and have program information prepared. These elements can be useful in other areas of your communications such as newsletters or websites.

Lastly, don't get discouraged if your grant proposal is denied. It will likely have little to do with the quality of the proposal and more to do with the number of applications. Keep applying. There are thousands of grants available for most types of organizations.

That being said, continue to look for ways to improve your proposal. Consider adding photos or charts, if appropriate. Have peer reviews. Even contact the donor and ask for feedback. Asking for money isn't easy and it takes practice. Grant writing is a process that continues to evolve.

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Jennifer loves spending time with her children, watching sports, and cuddling with her dogs, often at the same time.

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Grant Writing: 101 is a step-by-step guide to grant writing which used plane language free from technical jargon. The guide is written in a friendly tone, while explaining each part of the grant proposal in detail. In addition to laying out the major parts of the proposal, the writer gives general advice and best practices. I would recommend this guide to anyone who needs a quick guide for putting together a grant proposal.

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