



WRITING SMART IN A SHIFTING FEDERAL LANDSCAPE: ALTERNATIVE PHRASING IN GRANT PROPOSALS

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Writing Smart in a Shifting Federal Landscape: Alternative Phrasing in Grant Proposals

Grant writers have always had to read the room. Today, that room includes a federal administration that has made clear - both through rhetoric and policy actions - that certain diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)-related terminology may draw heightened scrutiny or outright resistance during proposal review.

For nonprofits that have built strong, mission-driven programs centered on fairness, access, and community responsiveness, this moment can feel unsettling. The good news: you do not have to abandon your values or your impact to remain competitive. What does need to evolve is how those values are articulated in federal grant proposals.

Let's explore practical ways to use alternative phrasing that preserves program integrity while reducing the likelihood of triggering keyword-based red flags during federal review.

Why Language Matters More Than Ever

Federal grant review has always been shaped by political priorities, but recent shifts have increased sensitivity to specific terms associated with DEI frameworks. In some agencies, proposals are screened - formally or informally - for alignment with administration priorities long before technical merit is fully assessed.

That means proposals that rely heavily on charged or politicized terminology may face additional hurdles, regardless of program quality.

Importantly, this is not about "hiding" your mission. It's about translating it into language that emphasizes outcomes, compliance, efficiency, and public benefit - concepts that remain broadly acceptable across administrations.

High-Risk Keywords vs. Safer Alternatives

Below are common examples of language that may raise flags, paired with alternative phrasing that communicates the same substance in a more neutral, outcomes-focused way.

Instead of "Diversity"

Use:

- Broad community representation
- Service reach across populations
- Community-wide engagement

Example shift

INSTEAD OF "This program increases diversity in service delivery."

USE "This program expands service reach to reflect the full range of community demographics."

Instead of "Equity"

Use:

- Fair access
- Proportional resource allocation
- Needs-based service delivery

Example shift

INSTEAD OF “Our approach centers equity in health outcomes.”

USE “Our approach addresses fair access in health outcomes using needs-based service delivery.”

Instead of “Inclusion”

Use:

- Reducing barriers to participation
- Client-centered services
- Broad-based participation

Example shift

INSTEAD OF “We prioritize inclusion of marginalized populations.”

USE “We reduce barriers to participation through client-centered program design.”

Instead of “Marginalized” or “Historically Oppressed”

Use:

- Underserved populations
- Populations with limited access
- Communities experiencing service gaps
- High-need populations

These alternatives align closely with long-standing federal grant language and are frequently used in Notices of Funding Opportunity (NOFOs).

Anchor Your Narrative in Data and Statute

One of the safest and most effective strategies is to let the data do the talking.

When describing populations or service gaps:

- Cite census data, agency reports, or community needs assessments
- Reference statutory or regulatory mandates that require serving specific populations
- Tie program design directly to documented conditions, not ideology

Example

Rather than framing a program as correcting “systemic inequity,” describe how it responds

to:

- Higher incidence rates
- Lower service utilization
- Geographic or economic barriers identified in federal or state data

This positions your proposal as responsive and evidence-based, not philosophical.

Emphasize Outcomes, Not Frameworks

Federal reviewers consistently prioritize:

- Measurable outcomes
- Cost-effectiveness
- Program scalability
- Compliance with authorizing legislation

When possible, shift language away from abstract frameworks and toward concrete results.

Example

INSTEAD OF “This initiative advances social justice.”

USE “This initiative improves service utilization rates and reduces preventable negative outcomes.”

The second statement is easier to score, easier to defend, and harder to politicize.

Reflect the Language of the NOFO

Perhaps the most important rule: mirror the funder’s language.

If a NOFO avoids DEI terminology, you should too - even if the underlying goals are aligned. Federal agencies telegraph acceptable framing through:

- Section headings
- Evaluation criteria
- Statutory citations
- Required outcomes

Using their vocabulary signals alignment, professionalism, and compliance.

A Final Word of Caution (and Encouragement)

This moment calls for strategic adaptation - not self-censorship or mission drift. Strong grant proposals have always translated nonprofit values into funder priorities. That skill is simply more critical now.

By focusing on:

- Neutral, outcomes-based language
- Data-driven need statements
- Efficiency and public benefit

Nonprofits can continue to secure federal funding without compromising who they are or whom they serve. Don't believe us? We have a 6-figure, 2025 federal grantee we honestly doubted we could get funded, but we did, using exactly the strategies we have shared here. We just spent the weekend walking them through their first required report.

At KFA Nonprofit, we've helped organizations navigate shifting administrations for decades. If there's one constant in federal grants, it's this: the strongest proposals meet the moment *without losing the mission*.

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