

Nonprofit Grant Writing: How to Secure Grants for Your Cause

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Nonprofit grant writing is a vital part of any smart and healthy fundraising strategy. However, before we jump into the fine details of successfully writing grant proposals, let's review exactly what it is.

Grant writing is the process of applying for funding provided by a private, corporate, or government grantmaker. To acquire a grant, you must submit a well-written proposal to one of these entities in order to be considered eligible. Grant seeking is highly competitive. It's especially difficult when requesting support for a new program or organization for the first time.

Part of what makes grant writing so challenging is that typically every funder wants something different in the proposal. The essence of what a funder wants to see in a grant proposal is the same: what your organization needs the funding for, what difference it will make, and where the funder fits in. However, the narrative configurations, space limits, and the formats in which funders want this information can vary substantially. That's why you need to take special care when crafting each grant proposal.

To help improve your grant writing efforts, the experts here at Grants Plus have compiled a list of effective grant writing tips:

When it comes to nonprofit grant writing, there's not a formulaic approach. Rather, you'll need to customize your approach for each funder you pursue. Using the tips we propose below, you'll be well on your way to winning that vital grant funding.

If you're ready to take your grant seeking plan to the next level, let's get started!

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How to Write a Grant Proposal

Learning how to write a grant proposal is the first step to securing funding. Put the time in *now* to learn the best approaches for appealing to funders. Otherwise, a poor proposal can make a bad impression on funders and weaken your chances of winning grant funding.

As a general rule of thumb, know that good grant writing is simply good writing. To create a convincing ask, you'll need to tailor your proposal, communicate ideas clearly, convey a core compelling idea, and write to persuade.

However, simply remembering these phrases is not enough. You actually need to apply these tactics when crafting your proposals in order for them to be effective. Let's take a closer look at each of these components of successful nonprofit grant writing.



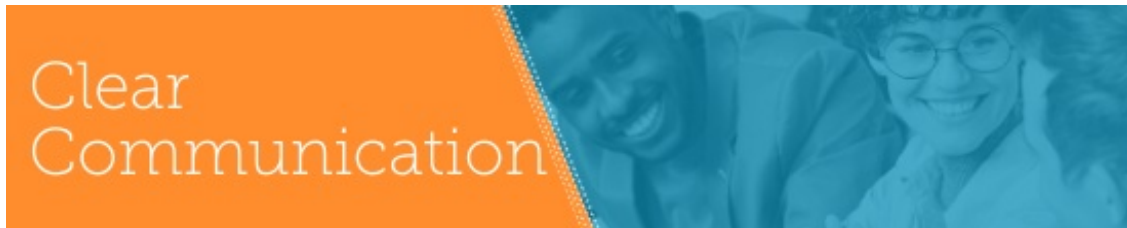
Tailor Your Proposal

There's a common saying in the world of grant seeking: "If you've met one funder, you've met one funder."

Requesting grant dollars can be quite intimidating, especially when you're new to the grant seeking process. **There's no one-size-fits-all approach to requesting grant dollars.** In other words, don't create one generic proposal and then "shop it out." Rather you need to tailor each proposal you craft. To stand a chance at securing grant funding, you'll need to do the following:

1. **Tailor the format.** Each grantmaker has different instructions for composing and submitting a grant request. When going for a grant opportunity, make sure that your application follows every guideline. Even if you have a solid relationship with the funder, don't be tempted to believe that you can cut corners. Disregarding their instructions can land your proposal in the reject pile.
2. **Tailor the message.** Writing a truly compelling proposal means tailoring your content and message, too. You'll need to brainstorm the unique *alignment* between your organization's mission or project and the interests of the funder. Then, *articulate* this in key places—especially the cover letter, introduction, and conclusion of the narrative. Finally, *acknowledge* your appreciation for the funder's vision and *attribute* future success to them, stating how you envision your partnership. Showing gratitude can go a long way in grant seeking.

Overall, keep in mind that funders don't exist to fund your organization's mission. Rather, they exist to fulfill their own missions by supporting relevant organizations. Maybe supporting organizations like yours is simply part of their philanthropic initiatives. Tailoring your proposal format and message is just the first step in showing a funder that your organization can be trusted, putting you one step closer to securing the grant.



Communicate Ideas Clearly

When you're under pressure, it can be tempting to skimp on the review and revision process to save time. Instead, take a step back and consider how clearly you're communicating your ideas. They may make perfect sense to those who are directly involved with your organization, but you need to write for an outside party.

Letting clear writing fall through the cracks is *not* a challenge you want to create for yourself. Write your grant proposal to be clear and easy to follow.

Make it part of your grant writing discipline to communicate complex ideas simply. To communicate in a straightforward but compelling way, try the following:

- **Think *before* you write.** Clarify what your intent is before putting it on paper.
- **Use familiar, concrete words.** Avoid pretension and unhelpful jargon as these can bog down the reader.
- **Limit sentences to a single idea.** Choose several short sentences over a single overly complex one. Quick and simple sentences are easier to follow.
- **Write in active voice.** Active voice is when the subject performs the action. For example, "The Board approved the request," not "The request was approved by the Board."

When constructing your nonprofit grant proposal, how you shape and sequence your ideas is key. It enables the reader to gradually build a better, more logical understanding of the reasoning behind your request. Follow these suggestions to achieve a compelling, logical flow:

- **Don't bury your points.** Clearly articulate your main ideas. Lead paragraphs with topic sentences to orient your reader.
- **Develop transitions.** This helps you link ideas, arguments, paragraphs, and sections instead of abruptly jumping to a new topic.

- **Organize using signposts.** Use headings, lists, and bullet points to help the reader navigate your ideas.

Remember, one of your main goals is to make your reader's job easy. The hard work should be on your end, not theirs. Aim to create a compelling proposal that's clear and logical.



Convey a Core Compelling Idea

What *really* sets your proposal apart is a unifying narrative thread. Once you're comfortable clearly articulating your thoughts, you can apply these skills to express your core compelling idea.

Simply put, a core compelling idea is an overarching theme that sticks with the reader. In the case of nonprofit grant writing, it's an idea that clarifies how your organization's work is important, urgent, unique, and deserving of funding. It's the answer to why the funder should want to fund your request, helping them to picture their own mission coming alive. This is simple to understand but difficult to master.

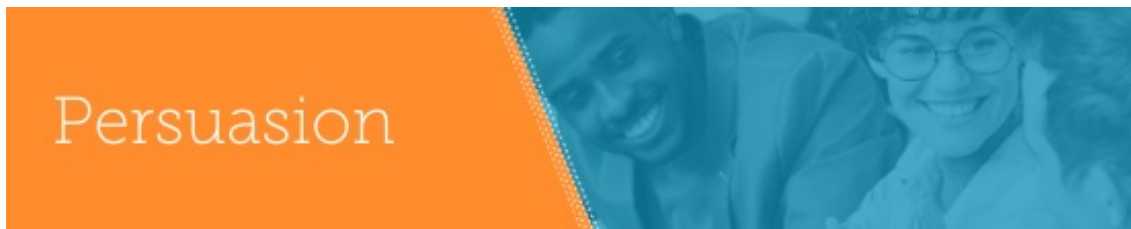
Knowing how to write a grant proposal means centering your writing around the idea you wish to stick with the reader. By anchoring your nonprofit grant proposal around a core compelling concept, you'll stand a better chance of persuading the funder and cutting through the competition.

First, aim to make it memorable. While facts and figures are significant for conveying urgency, the program officer will likely soon forget these numbers—no matter how impressive they are. Think of it this way: the program officer's job is to boil down the main ideas of each proposal and then summarize what's *most important* to the foundation's board of trustees.

Consider this: an hour after reading the proposal, what's the bottom-line impression or message you want the reader to remember?

Once you've answered this question, **define a core compelling idea that is unique and will distinguish your organization from your competition.**

Keep it intentionally simple and memorable, while summoning the reader's attention with powerful language. Most importantly, your core compelling idea should respond to what the grant funder cares about. For instance, if you're writing to a local community foundation, orient your core compelling idea around the distinct impact that your organization or project will make in the community. After stepping away from your grant proposal, the reader should be able to understand and remember exactly what a difference your organization proposes to make.



Write to Persuade

A grant proposal must not only inform but also inspire. It's up to you, the writer, to create a proposal that convinces the reader that your organization is worthy of funding. A well-written grant request should convince the reader that your organization or project addresses an urgent need, is staffed by qualified professionals, and has achievable goals.

Persuasive nonprofit grant writing begins with remembering that you're writing for a real person who can be converted to belief and action. Consider appealing to your reader through three different modes of persuasion:

- **Ethos: The Gut.** *Ethos is an appeal to ethics.* Give the reader the gut sense that you can be trusted by establishing your competence and credibility. Achieve this by including impressive credentials and qualifications that showcase the best about your organization and staff.
- **Logos: The Head.** *Logos is an appeal to logic.* Use well-supported facts, data, and testimonials to back up your claims. This gives your reader a reason to believe that your compelling claims are true. Use bulleted lists, explain facts via narrative, and insert graphs to help data stand out.
- **Pathos: The Heart.** *Pathos is an appeal to emotion.* Show, don't just tell. Instead of explaining the impact of your programs in the abstract, use real-life examples to make your proposal more gripping and memorable. When possible, use vivid imagery and powerful quotes to put the reader in the story.

At its best, nonprofit grant writing should be lively and motivational. To stand the best chance of acquiring grant funding, appeal to the reader's gut, head, *and* heart.

If nonprofit grant writing isn't your strong suit, Grants Plus is here to help. The Grants Plus team can help you pinpoint potential funders and craft powerful proposals. They offer other

comprehensive services to fulfill all your organization's needs as well.

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Nonprofit Grant Writing Dos & Don'ts

Grant seeking is highly competitive. There is a strong possibility of being declined the first time you approach a grant funder. Educate yourself on the misconceptions surrounding grants. Knowing the following tips will help your organization rise above the competition—even if you've never dabbled in nonprofit grant writing before.

Don't: Submit a Grant Application "Cold".

Before submitting a grant application, cultivate a relationship with the prospective funder. Search for a pre-existing connection between a person at the foundation and a member of your board, staff, or donor circle.

If you don't have a connection, create one! First, call the funder to introduce yourself and your organization. Outreach can go a long way to warm up the funder to receive your proposal. Stepping your engagement off on the right foot can put you substantially closer to winning a grant!

Do: Get a Green Light to Apply.

Before spending the time writing your proposal, research the foundation's *current* funding priorities and restrictions. For instance, they may have a specific list of the types of funding requests that are likely to be denied. Grantmakers' areas of focus constantly change, so make sure you're up-to-date on what they're aiming to fund. It may turn out that they're not quite a match to your organization. Figuring this out early on means you won't waste time writing a tailored proposal just for it to be rejected.

To really improve your chances of funding, call or email the funder to introduce your organization and discuss the project or initiative. Prepare in advance what you plan to say to make the most of this crucial initial phone call. This helps to ensure your proposal is a good

fit on both ends before time is spent crafting a proposal. Plus, this may help you determine exactly which angle to take with your grant writing. Don't guess at the best fit or proposal strategy—get the green light to apply!

Don't: Overlook Basic Application Instructions.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is not adhering to a funder's specified proposal requirements. Well before the deadline, review the foundation's current application format, submission process, required attachments, and other instructions. This way, you won't overlook important requirements.

Never cut corners! This will come across in your writing, indicating to the reader that you didn't put enough thought and care into it. Ultimately, veering from the directions could land your proposal right in the reject pile without any further thought.

Do: Match the Foundation's Funding Period.

Even worthy proposals will likely be disqualified if they're not submitted within a foundation's funding period. Just like foundations have guidelines for formatting your grant proposal, they have rules for when you can submit your requests, too.

Before submitting or even writing your grant proposal, confirm the grantmaker's timeline specifications. This way, your efforts will not be in vain.

Don't: Skip a Compelling Financial Narrative.

A well-designed proposal budget is one that follows the foundation's required format, matches the application narrative, and establishes that your funding plan is sound and achievable. To accomplish this, provide a financial outlook that's accurate, supports a clear need, and reflects a healthy and sustainable funding strategy.

Take it a step further by demonstrating which expense(s) will be supported through the foundation's grant. Remember, the best grant proposals are those that evoke emotion and instill a need to take action through a compelling narrative.

Do: Prove the Last Grant Was an Investment Well Made.

Part of a smart grant seeking strategy is demonstrating that an organization deserves a foundation's financial support. Achieve this by providing an impressive, timely report for any previous grant awarded by the funder. Conversely, one of the quickest ways to get declined is by submitting a request without first meeting reporting requirements.

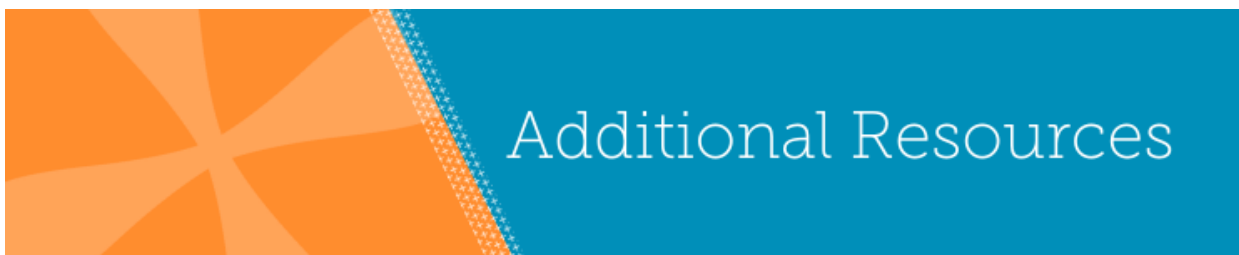
Foundations view grants as investments and grantors as partners. Because of this, you need to show them that their contributions to your nonprofit are smart, well-made investments. Remember to be upfront about any shortcomings and explain how you've improved on them. By providing clear and honest reports, you showcase your organization as a smart bet for continued funding.

Don't: Let Expectations Exceed Capacity or Probability.

One of the most crucial parts of a grant seeking strategy is knowing the funding environment and adhering to projections accordingly. Set realistic but aspirational goals. Start by researching the likelihood of a foundation's support. This will help keep your expectations in check.

Know that if your organization has received funding from a foundation and reported successfully before, the likelihood of continued support is higher. On the other hand, if it's your organization's first application *and* the grant opportunity seems highly competitive, your chances of winning a grant are lower.

In other words, the more competitive the opportunity, the harder it is to secure funding. Build a grants plan that balances many low-risk, higher-probability prospects with some higher-risk, lower-probability targets.



Additional Nonprofit Grant Writing Resources

While these tips can strengthen your organization's grant-winning odds, even outstanding proposals sometimes get declined. As a final word of advice, instead of getting deterred when your nonprofit receives a rejection notice, turn it into a growth opportunity. Ask the foundation for feedback and *listen to their advice for improvement*.

Now that you know the best nonprofit grant writing tips, apply them to your grant seeking strategy. Soon enough, you'll be on track to winning more grants!

To continue your nonprofit grant writing research, explore our comprehensive resources for all your grant needs:

There's a lot that goes into grant seeking. Whether you need assistance with pinpointing funders, crafting your proposals, or any other part of the process, Grants Plus is here to help!

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