

Getting the Grant 101

Building a Logical Proposal

By Patty Hasselbring

The process of “getting a grant” or “writing a grant proposal” can sound mysterious, like an old family recipe with secret ingredients. For over 40 years The Grantsmanship Center has been helping people demystify this process and to understand that like a recipe, creating a compelling proposal simply requires common ingredients put together in a logical and understandable sequence using tried and true techniques.

First, let’s talk about what a grant is and is not. In most cases a grant is support that does not need to be repaid. Usually it is in the form of money, but it may be technical assistance or training. Grants are usually awarded after the submission of a written proposal. So, the “grant” is the funding or other assistance that is received as a result of a grant proposal (also referred to as an application). A grant is not the written document that we submit to a potential funding source!

Each funder sets its own eligibility criteria for grant applicants, and eligible applicants are typically nonprofit organizations or public agencies. Nonprofits are often required to be 501(c)(3) organizations under the IRS. [Click here for IRS information on nonprofits.](#) Grants to for-profit entities or to private individuals do exist; however, they are far less common.

Each funder will also have its own application process and the degree of detail required will vary. Here, we’ll talk about the basic recipe for a grant proposal, understanding that some funders may require extra or different information – special ingredients. Let’s take a look at the basic ingredients required in a typical proposal, and how to include them.

Proof that the applicant organization is strong and viable

Funders look carefully at the applicant organization’s history, leadership, and track record. Offer factual and objective descriptions of your organization’s accomplishments, including statistics and examples. Highlight achievements that will be most meaningful to the potential funder. “Season” your proposal with a quote from someone in the community who values the contributions of your organization. If your organization is new and its track record brief, look to the background of the staff and board of directors to provide credibility, and stress community partnerships to build the funder’s confidence in the new organization’s ability to achieve results.

Consider this section of the proposal as a resume for your organization – your goal is to impress the reader with the organization’s credibility and qualifications.

Compelling description of the situation your organization will address

This section of a grant proposal may be called the problem statement, statement of need, or something similar. Your discussion of the problem to be addressed lays the foundation for the program plan, and if this section is weak, so goes the rest of the proposal. A strong statement of the problem will address the following:

- **Who is affected?** What are their qualities or characteristics? How many people are affected and where do they live?
- **In what ways are they affected and to what extent?** How do you know? Be clear about this. Quantify the problem using hard data and cite your sources. Provide context about the problem to elicit the funder's empathy and create a sense of urgency. Your understanding of the target population is critical. There's a story to tell and it's your job to tell it.
- **Why is the problem significant?** Why should the funder care about what's happening? There are urgent and compelling problems all around us. Why is it important to address this situation now? If there is credible research on the subject, discuss it. It can sometimes be useful to show how the local problem compares with the state or national situation.
- **Why is the problem occurring?** Identification of the causes of the situation will lead you directly to possible solutions. Remember to ask those affected by the problem why they think it exists. Their direct experience is invaluable and can help challenge preconceived notions that you, your team, or even a potential funding partner might have about the situation. Avoid assumptions.

As you explore the problem and its causes, a helpful question to ask is: How do we know this? One final note: the situation for which your organization is seeking a grant should generally not be about your own organization. Rather, it should be about those you are proposing to serve.

Clear statement of expected program results

After you have clearly identified the situation that needs to be changed, it's time to specify the outcomes you hope the grant-funded program will achieve. Funders used lots of different terms and may call these program outcomes, objectives, or even goals. Whatever they are called, think about this: what do you expect to result from the program your organization will run? Propose outcomes that are specific, measurable, and that will be accomplished within a set time frame. If you have defined the problem well, the outcomes will follow logically.

Well thought-out plan of action!

Next, lay out how your organization will accomplish the projected outcomes. Funders may call this section methods, approach, plan of action, program plan, or something else. No matter what they call it, this is what your organization plans to do when it

gets the grant. Include who, what, when, where, and how. Explain it like you would explain a program to someone who knew nothing about it.

- **Who** – Who will be in charge of getting the work done? What are their qualifications? Who will be served or affected? How many people will be involved? Are there any specific criteria for people to be involved in this project? Discuss any collaborative efforts that will be part of the program.
- **What** – What will be happening? What are the specific strategies that will be used?
- **When** – What is the timeline for activities? It's helpful to lay out a graphic timeline, whether it is a GANTT chart or a simple chart with three columns that describes who, will do what, and when.
- **Where** – Where will the work take place?
- **How** – How will the work be accomplished? What resources will be used to get the job done?

Finally, one more question to answer – Why this approach? Have others used this approach and been successful? Is this approach considered to be a best practice or a model in your field? Share your rationale. It adds credibility to your proposal if you can demonstrate that you have a broad understanding of what other organizations in your field are doing and have learned. Note: you might end up with more information in this plan than what you ultimately have room to include in the proposal. That's okay! Submit the key points, but keep all the detail in your files. It will become the program management plan, and when you are ready to implement the program you'll be glad you put the time into planning!

Plan to evaluate

Nearly every funder will ask for a description of how you will evaluate the grant-funded program. Funders want to know that their investment in your organization was a good one. This stumps a lot of people, but it doesn't have to be overwhelming. Simply put, the evaluation plan describes how your organization: (1) will measure the level to which the program is achieving the expected outcomes; and 2) will document that program activities unfolded according to plans, as well as any course corrections you're making and why.

First, think about the projected program outcomes. How will you know when you have accomplished them? Are there benchmarks along the way that will indicate that you're headed in the right direction? Describe those benchmarks and what they will tell you about results. Describe what data will be collected and analyzed and by whom. Then describe what you will do with what you are learning. Will you be able to use those results to help guide future program development? If so, describe how that will be done. Remember that outcomes are all about results, so how will you monitor results? This is what many funders call the "outcome evaluation" plan.

Then, think about how your organization can improve the program from day one. How will the organization know whether the program approach is working? Or when revisions to the plan are warranted? Typically, some of the things that may be monitored are client participation, community support, feedback from clients, collaborators, and others, client satisfaction, and staff feedback. For example, if the plan was to conduct community forums about a particular issue, and few people attended, this would tell you something. Maybe the forums were held at the wrong time of day. Maybe people couldn't find the place. Maybe the subject was not of interest. Maybe childcare was a problem. Analysis of the situation can help you modify the approach so that it's more effective. This part of the evaluation plan is often called "process evaluation."

Plan for sustaining the program

Grants are wonderful (usually). But they are generally short-lived! What is your organization's plan for the program after the grant ends? If this is a program or service that should continue, what are your ideas for funding it? Aside from seeking more grants! Think about potential funding mechanisms that can be explored for long-term sustainability. Perhaps your organization excels at community fundraising. Maybe there is potential for contracts with government or for-profit corporations who need your service. A social enterprise might be something to explore.

In this section, also describe who else will be supporting the program. Support from other sources, whether cash or in-kind, may provide leverage for the grant. Don't forget about what your own organization will contribute, like office space, administrative support, or whatever you are able to provide.

Realistic budget

Now it's time to put dollars to the plan. How much will this cost? Be specific and account for all the ingredients in your program recipe.

Start by making a chart with four columns:

- **Column 1 – Line Items:** Use your organization's chart of accounts to list the line items that must be addressed in budgeting for the grant-funded program.
- **Column 2 – Total Program Budget:** This column shows the cost of everything that will go into the program, even if it's already covered by other sources.
- **Column 3 – Other Funding:** For each line item, show funding and the value of other resources that will be contributed from sources other than the requested grant. Be sure to include what your own organization will provide. The amounts in this column are sometimes called "matching resources," "leveraged funds," or "cost sharing."
- **Column 4 – Amount of The Requested Grant** – The difference between Column 2 and Column 3 is the requested grant amount.

Learning to use spreadsheet software well will make budget calculations faster, easier to adjust, and more accurate.

A few more points about the budget:

- Typically, grant proposals include budgets for one year time periods. If you are submitting a multi-year request, calculate each year separately and include a summary that shows the multi-year total.
- Remember you are projecting a budget. Therefore, you want to think not just about what the line items would cost today, but what will they cost when you actually incur the expense. Will salaries go up? Will benefits change?
- The value of donations should be calculated in the total program budget and then indicated in the other funding column. Value should be based on what you would actually pay in your community for that item if you had to pay cash for it.
- Be certain that there are no expenses in your budget request that are unexplained. Some funding sources will ask for a budget narrative, which gives you an opportunity to explain each item, how you calculated it, and how it is important to your proposed program.
- Check your math!

Summary

Once you've completed the budget, you've completed the body of the proposal – the main dish! Now you're ready to write a summary.

A summary is brief and may be just a few sentences. But it gives an overview of the entire proposal. And, while it is written last it almost always placed at the very beginning of a grant proposal. Since it is usually the first thing that reviewers will see, craft it with care! Pick out a key point from every section of narrative and write a sentence about it. Then, summarize the budget and how much you are requesting. That's it.

Attachments

Sometimes funders require that you send additional attachments along with your proposal. Typically requested items include brief resumes of key staff, job descriptions, letters of support or commitment from collaborating organizations, your organization's current operating budget, and a copy of your organization's 501(c)(3) letter from the Internal Revenue Service. Have these typical attachments on hand and keep them up-to-date so they're ready to go when you need them.

A Few General Tips for Preparing the Grant Proposal

1. Use short sentences and paragraphs.
2. Edit, edit, edit. Get rid of excess words.
3. Write so that anyone can understand what you mean.
4. Have someone who is not familiar with your organization or the proposed program read the grant proposal. Can they understand what you are saying?
5. Use simple language. A grant proposal is not the place to dazzle others with your vast vocabulary.
6. Avoid acronyms or jargon. In fact, don't use them.
7. Make your point at the beginning of each section and at the beginning of each paragraph. This prepares the proposal for skimmers. Remember, reviewers usually have many proposals to read. They appreciate your getting to the point.
8. Include "the human face" – quotes, brief anecdotes and examples can make your proposal more readable and understandable. Remember that reviewers are human, and the more interesting we make our proposals, the more likely the readers are to read them thoroughly.

Take Time to Produce a High Quality Proposal – This Isn't Fast Food

Finally, remember that a grant proposal isn't fast food or even a ten-minute recipe. It requires careful thought and planning. The better you plan on the front end, the greater the likelihood that the program will be successful – not just in obtaining a grant, but in making a difference in the lives of others. And that's really what it's all about!

