

GRANT WRITING: A BEST PRACTICE GUIDE: by Bridget Newell, Ph.D.

Many law enforcement agencies today utilize grants, which are available from a variety of sources including the federal government, to fund their programs. *Public sector grants* are primarily federal and state grants made to local and state governments or to government agencies. The process of securing grant funds requires the completion of a *grant proposal*, a process that is summarized in this outline.

Grants can be both competitive and non-competitive. *Non-competitive* grant applications are approved if the grantee meets the requirements or formula established for the grant program. *Competitive* grants are only awarded when a grantee successfully meets preset criteria, through a written proposal submitted in competition with other prospective grantees.

I. Purpose of the Grant

A grant proposal is a formal, written request for funds to support a specific program or project. While the exact content of a grant proposal is determined by funding agency guidelines, most grant proposals include information that explains (1) why the funds are needed, (2) what the funds will be used for, and (3) how the funds will be managed.

When planning and writing a grant proposal, it is important to remember that most proposals are submitted in a highly competitive forum. No grant proposal is guaranteed to receive funding, hundreds of grant proposals may be submitted to the same organization to compete for the exact same funds. Given this fact, grant writers must view their grant proposal as a document with at least two goals: (1) *to inform the reader of their plans*, and (2) *to persuade the reader that their project is worthy of funding*. That is, they must sell their readers on all of the following points:

- The need or problem they will attempt to “fix” with the grant money is significant and worthy of funding.
- The project or program the funds will be used for is well planned and has a good chance of success.
- The agency requesting the funds is capable of successfully managing the funds and completing the proposed project on schedule.

Finally, grant proposals must respond to readers’ needs and expectations. This means that grant writers must:

- Include details sufficient for clarifying plans to a reader who is unfamiliar with them and who may be reading several other grant proposals at the same sitting.
- Include good reasons for funding the proposed project.
- Ensure that the proposal is well written and easily accessible. Readers who have trouble accessing or understanding important information will not be convinced that the proposed project deserves funding.

II. Content

Most funding agencies provide guidelines (directions) that identify the information they expect to find in grant proposals submitted to them. These guidelines are invaluable resources and should be viewed as the final word on what should and should not be included in the grant proposal. Do not omit information required by the guidelines. Failure to adhere to the guidelines can be justification for rejecting the proposal.¹

Despite differences in grant proposal guidelines, most grant proposals require the same general kinds information. The overview below outlines a number of pieces you can expect to include in most grant proposals.

Application Form: In some cases, grant proposals can consist of only a form that must be completed by the grant applicant. In other cases, a completed application form must accompany a more detailed written proposal. In either case, the grant writer’s responsibility is to include all requested information.

Cover Letter: A cover letter (also called a letter of transmittal) serves as an introduction to the proposal and can be used as a screening tool for readers. Given that it might be the first component readers see, this letter can be viewed as the initial tool writers use to sell their plans to the funding agency. A typical letter of transmittal includes three sections: (1) an opening that identifies the proposal, (2) a middle that introduces and sells the proposed project or plan, and (3) a closing that contains contact information.

Grant agency requirements differ, however, many detailed written proposals are required to be composed of the sections outlined below:

Section	Purpose	Questions Answered
<i>Abstract or Summary</i>	An abstract provides a concise summary of the grant proposal and therefore includes significant information from each section of the proposal. Because it functions as a stand-alone overview of the proposal, readers may also use it as a screening tool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Why are you writing this grant?▪ What is the purpose of your grant?▪ How will this grant meet your need?

¹ Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, page 163.

Section	Purpose	Questions Answered
<i>Problem or Need Statement</i>	This section of the proposal thoroughly describes the need (or problem) that will be met (or solved) through the use of the grant funds. When writing this section, writers should attempt to show that they understand the need/problem and that it is significant or worthy of immediate attention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the problem? ▪ Why does it exist? ▪ Who is impacted by it?
<i>Solution or Scope</i>	Also called the problem description, this section provides a detailed explanation of how the funds will be used to address the problem or need. In other words, what do you propose to do with the funds? When writing this section, writers should attempt to show that the plan they advocate will successfully resolve the problem or address the need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will you solve the problem (or meet the need)? ▪ What are the details of your plan? ▪ Why is this plan appropriate?
<i>Methods</i>	Sometimes a stand-alone section and sometimes part of the solutions section, the methods section explains how the project or plan will be implemented. When writing this section, writers should strive to provide details rather than assume that readers will know what they mean.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What methods will you use to implement this plan? ▪ What justifies the use of these methods?
<i>Benefits</i>	Like the methods section, the benefits section is sometimes a stand-alone section and sometimes part of the solution section. Because this information helps to sell the proposed solution, this section (like all others) should be clear, focused, and detailed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who will benefit from the proposed solution? ▪ How will they benefit?
<i>Qualifications</i>	Also called the capabilities section, this section includes information that persuades the reader that the agency or organization requesting the funds is capable of under-taking and successfully completing the proposed project. To supplement this section, writers often include a collection of resumes in an appendix.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who will be responsible for under- taking, overseeing, and completing the project? ▪ What are the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of the involved?

Section	Purpose	Questions Answered
<i>Evaluation Plan</i>	Funding agencies sometimes require that writers include a plan for evaluating the success of the project. Some agencies require the use of an outside evaluator to ensure objectivity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How will the success of your project be evaluated? ▪ What justifies the use of this evaluation strategy? ▪ Who will evaluate the project?
<i>Time Line</i>	This section of the proposal identifies when each segment of the proposed plan will begin and end. Whether presenting this information in a table, Gantt chart, or calendar format, the writer must show that time will not be wasted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the specific scheduled begin and end dates of each component of the plan?
<i>Budget</i>	To some readers, this is the most important part of the proposal. It explains how the money will be spent and justifies the need for the proposed amount. Many guidelines require that this section be presented in the form of a line-item budget, and some require a budget narrative that provides a written justification for (or in place of) a line-item budget.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exactly how will the money be used? ▪ Is the requested amount reasonable? Why?
<i>Conclusion</i>	Not always requested, but sometimes helpful, this section allows writers to reiterate the key components of their proposal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highlight issues from problem, solution and benefit sections.

As indicated above, grant agency requirements differ. Therefore, it is best to view the above information as an introduction to grant proposal content or, as discussed below, a planning tool to use when developing a project plan.

III. Strategy – Planning and Writing

Writing a grant proposal is a challenging task, not only because grant proposals include a significant amount of detailed information, but because there is more to submitting a grant than writing the proposal. Before writing the proposals, writers should

- **Develop a solid plan of action, preferably outlined in writing.** Rather than piecing together a proposal at the last minute, agencies seeking grant funds can plan ahead by (1) identifying a need or problem that must be addressed, (2) determining how they might address it, and (3) drafting an outline of the plan. The plan and draft can be developed by

responding to the question presented in the previous section of this document. This proactive strategy is more likely to result in a clear, complete plan, and having an outline of the final grant proposal makes the grant writing process easier.

- **Identify potential funding agencies.** Identify agencies or organizations that fund the kind of project identified in the plan. Grant funds may come from government agencies, private foundations, or corporations. Grant writers can undertake an Internet search to identify potential funding sources. One option is to review web sites that contain information about grants and grant funding such as the National Criminal Justice Reference Service's Justice Information Center's web site (<http://www.ncjrs.org/fedgrant.htm>), the Grantsmanship Center's web site (<http://www.tgci.com/>) and the Foundation Center's web site (<http://fdncenter.org/>). Writers can also use a search engine (e.g. HotBot, Yahoo!, or Infoseek) to search the Internet for law enforcement grants. For best results, read the search engine's guidelines for effective searches.

Additional Funding Agency Resources

Information presented in the World Wide Web can be incomplete. Writers may want to access one of the following sites to identify criteria for evaluating the credibility of web site resources: Westminster College's Evaluating a Web Site (http://www.wcslc.edu/library/Online-info/web_eval/web_eval.htm) or Widener University's Checklist for Information Webpage (<http://www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/inform.htm>).

In addition to web site resources, grant information can be obtained from the Federal Register System, which consists of two publications: the *Federal Register*, published daily, is used to announce new grant programs; the *Code of Federal Regulations*, published annually, is a compendium of all government regulations, programs, and announcements. The Federal Catalog of Domestic Assistance (FCDA), published by the OMB, provides extensive information about grants to those seeking federal funding. FCDA contains information such as: a listing and description of federal agencies, a list and description of their programs, who is eligible to apply for grants, the criteria the applicant must meet to be considered for the grant, application deadlines, and changes to existing programs. There are four ways to identify grants and federal assistance programs in the catalog:

- 1) agency – the federal agency administering the program
 - 2) function – the categories that identify the specific area of interest covered by the grant
 - 3) subject – lists the programs by topic, name, function and category of services
 - 4) applicant eligibility – specifies criteria that must be met to be approved the grant
- **Request and review grant guidelines from those organizations.** In addition to providing information regarding content and format, grant guidelines often include significant information regarding the kind of projects funded by the organization. A

Careful review of an agency's guidelines usually reveals whether an agency is a viable option for funding a particular project.

- **Select an appropriate funding agency.** Selecting an appropriate agency (i.e. the one most likely to fund a particular project) becomes easier after thoroughly reviewing grant guidelines and making initial contact with funding agency representatives. Some writers have indicated that they use this initial contact to discuss their ideas and determine whether submitting a grant at that time is worthwhile. After identifying agencies that appear to fund projects similar to their own, writers can request guidelines from them.

When these tasks are complete, writers can draft and revise the proposal according to the guidelines. It is probably best to then have it reviewed by someone unfamiliar with the project.

- **Draft and revise the proposal.** Experienced writers do not tackle a large project all at once. Rather, they chunk their writing projects, drafting one section at a time until the whole is complete. Grant writers at all levels can do the same; because the guidelines provide specific information regarding content requirements, they can be used to develop an outline of each section of the draft. After making an outline, writers can work on one section at a time until the grant is complete.
- **Review the proposal.** Most writers have a difficult time reviewing their own work. Because they know what they meant to write, they often have difficulty seeing how different what they meant is from what they actually wrote. For this reason, it is best to ask someone unfamiliar with the project to read the draft to identify unanswered questions, unclear statements, or errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

IV. Writing Style Tips

A well-written proposal adheres to the standards of good professional writing. Therefore, grant writers should strive to make their proposals clear and easy to understand. Below are ten tips for good business writing. Writers should be aware that these tips are only guidelines; good reasons for ignoring some of them exist, so writers must use their best judgement when finalizing their proposals.

1. **Remember the reader.** Reader expectations are established by the grant guidelines, so it is best to include information that is asked for in the order in which readers expect it. Also remember that some readers may not be familiar with law enforcement jargon, so including it may confuse rather than clarify the message. Finally, readers are busy. Many readers review more than one proposal in a sitting. To ensure that a busy reader is left with a good impression, writers should strive to make their writing clear and easy to access.
2. **Begin with the main point.** Readers should not have to hunt for important information. Forcing them to do so makes their task more difficult and potentially frustrating. By

beginning each paragraph with the main point, writers provide context for readers, and they make accessing important information easier.

3. **Be concise.** Redundant or long-winded sentences and paragraphs are distracting (and sometimes annoying). Use enough words to convey your point, but no more. For example, *To begin this project we will etc.* is preferable to *In order to undertake the beginning of this strategic project, this agency will commence to etc.*
4. **Use clear specific language.** Big words and jargon often complicate rather clarify a message. Plain, straightforward, English is often the most effective approach. For example, it is often preferable to write *begin* rather than *commence* and *end* rather than *terminate*.
5. **Write in a friendly, professional style.** An extremely formal or an extremely casual tone often detracts from the message. As a guideline, grant writers can write in the same style they would use to speak to an important, intelligent colleague or supervisor in a professional setting.
6. **Prefer active voice.** Active voice (She threw the ball.) is preferable to passive voice (The ball was thrown) because it clearly conveys the sentence's subject (she) and verb (threw) in the order in which most people expect to receive them (subject before verb). When possible, write in active voice to let the reader know who did (or will do) what.
7. **Move from known information to new information.** Good writers provide context for new ideas. They do not simply "jump into" a new topic without warning. Including transitions that connect new ideas to those already present enables readers to follow the discussion and understand how ideas are connected.
8. **Avoid complicated sentences.** Too many complicated sentences make a document overwhelming and hard to follow. Writers should strive to limit the number of long, complicated sentences by varying sentence length. Clarify messages by adhering to tips 3 and 4.
9. **Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.** Whether good or poor, writing reflects on the writer. Sloppy writing indicates carelessness; and clear, correct writing suggests that the writer is clear thinking and careful. To make the best first impression, writers should ensure that the final draft is written in correct English.
10. **Use signal words.** Good writers guide their readers through their documents by including transitional words that tell them what to expect. *Therefore* indicates that an important conclusion follows; *because* indicates that a reason is being presented; *first*, *second* and *third* indicate chronology or steps in a plan; and *in addition* indicates that the point that follows is directly related to the previous point. These and other signal words can be very helpful to readers, if they are not overused.

V. Format

Many grant guidelines include information about formatting the grant proposal. In these cases, the best option is to follow the guidelines. If no formatting guidelines are provided, writers should follow the basic standards for good professional writing presented below:

- **Use different font sizes and styles for headings and body text.** *Body text* can be presented in a 12-point serif font such as Times or Times New Roman. *Main headings* can be presented in a 12- to 16- point bold sans serif font such as Arial or Helvetica. *Subheadings* can be presented in a bold version of the body text (This document models the recommended format. Body text is in 12 point Times New Roman, main headings are in 14 point Arial Bold, and subheadings are in 12 point Times New Roman bold.).
- **Use vertical lists when appropriate.** Vertical lines allow readers to skim for information and they help clarify meaning. Use bullet lists if the order of list items is not important; use numbered lists to reveal chronological order or rank.
- **Use one-inch margins and align text on the left** (also called ragged right alignment). This is standard professional format.

VI. Resources and Assistance

Undertaking a grant research and writing project can be overwhelming and time consuming, but no writer has to do all of the work alone. Writers should consider options for delegating tasks within their agency, and they should consider contacting the following resources, all of which can offer a wide range of assistance:

- **Colleges and universities:** Writers can contact local colleges and universities to determine whether they offer classes in grant writing, editing, professional writing, business writing, statistical analysis, and/or research methods. If such courses are offered, writers can contact professors who teach those courses to determine whether they would be willing to develop a class project in which students help with writing, editing, and project evaluation. Many professors strive to incorporate real world experience in their classes and would be glad to help if given time to plan.

Some colleges and universities offer internship programs that allow students to receive college credit for work they do outside of school. Again, writers can contact professors or college representatives in student services to determine whether an internship (paid or unpaid) can be arranged to help with grant writing, Internet research, etc.

- **Professional organizations:** Some local and national professional organizations for writers, fundraisers, and retired professionals may provide free help or advice on grant writing and research. Again, writers could contact professors at local colleges for information about these resources.

As with most complicated projects, planning ahead and utilizing available resources help to make the grant writing task much more bearable. Additional tips can be found in the resources listed in the bibliography that follows.

Bibliography

Brusaw, C., Alred, G.J. & Olin, W.E. (1996) *The Concise Handbook for Technical Writing*. NY: St. Martin's Press.

Coley, S.M. & Scheinberg, C.A. (1990) *Proposal Writing*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Evaluating a Web Site. Westminster College Giovale Library web site.
http://www.wcslc.edu/library/Online-info/web_eval/web_eval.htm .

The Foundation Center web site. <http://fdncenter.org/>.

Grantmaker Information. The Foundation Center web site.
<http://fdncenter.org/grantmaker/index.html>.

The Grantsmanship Center Center web site. <http://www.tgci.com>.

Locke, L.F., Spirduso, W.W., & Silverman, S.J. (1993) *Proposals That Work: A Guide for Planning Dissertations and Grant Proposals*. (3rd ed.) NY: Sage Publications.

Locker, K.O. (1997) *Business and Administrative Communications*. (4th ed.) NY: Irwin McGraw Hill.

A Proposal Writing Short Course. The Foundation Center web site.
<http://fdncenter.org/onlib/shortcourse/prop1.html>.

Checklist for an Informational Webpage. Widener University Wolfgram Memorial Library web site. <http://www2.widener.edu/Wolfgram-Memorial-Library/inform.htm>.

Williams, J.M. (1994) *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. (4th ed.) NY: HarperCollins.