



# TIPS AND TRICKS FOR WRITING A GRANT PROPOSAL

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Your Go-To Guide for Writing Winning Nonprofit  
Grant Proposals



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# *What if we told you grant writing could be painless?*

If grants are part of your organization's fundraising plan, you know full well that creating compelling proposals can be time-consuming, intimidating — and totally worth it when they're accepted.

We get it, and that's why we've put together this guide full of tips, tricks and things to consider when planning and writing your next grant proposal.

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*Content courtesy of Emily Bratten, Director of Grant Development at Hackensack University Medical Center Foundation and Craig Shelley, Managing Director at Orr Associates, Inc.*





## HOW TO BE “GRANT-READY”

Although it would be nice, you can't just whip out a grant proposal in a day. The process of selecting grants, writing the proposals and submitting applications can be long and drawn-out. Here are five tips to help you be “grant-ready.”

- + **Be Proactive** – The grant process should begin long before the funding opportunity/application is released. Not the day or week before.
- + **To Thine Own Mission be True** – Only you and your leadership know if funding will truly advance your mission. Even if there's an open opportunity staring you down, should you go for it? Yes, you may get the funding you need, but at what cost in terms of drifting from your mission? Stay true to your mission and don't let the money pull you in a different direction.
- + **Have a Strategic Plan** – What is your organization's vision? Is the request for the grant advancing the strategic plan? It's important to align your requests with your overall mission and strategy. Along with this, it's important that all members of your team are on the same page. Don't be afraid to push back if they are drifting from your overall strategic plan.
- + **Have the Basics Ready to Go** – There are a number of items you'll need for your grant requests. These could include board lists, budgets, IRS info, audits and annual reports (often going back a year). It is critical to have these ready to go well before you need to submit applications. Nothing is worse than having your whole grant application ready to go for tomorrow's deadline and realizing you need one more document from someone who is on vacation.
- + **Look to the Horizon** – If you're not ready right now, then wait. Write down the opportunity so you can come back to it next year when you are ready and have more time to prepare and take full advantage of the opportunity.

## RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH

Research is essential when determining where to apply for grants. These four tips will help you do your homework efficiently and effectively.

- + Look at who is funding other nonprofits similar to yours.
- + Look at the 990-PFs of the foundations you're interested in.
- + Create a relationship map of your board members, advocates and stakeholders.
- + Automate the process. If you know you are interested in a specific foundation, set up Google Alerts and/or follow them on social media. This way you can stay in the loop and know when the opportunity is right.

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*TIP! Get used to hearing "no." Losing a grant can be a really great learning tool for improving your approach in the future. Go back and ask yourself, "why did we lose it and what can we do different next time?"*

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## MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER, MAKE ME A GRANT

When developing your grant proposals, focus on doing things the right way. You are much more likely to have a better outcome. Keep these things in mind:

- + As a grant writer, you wear a lot of hats — you are the synthesizer, the big thinker, the wordsmith. But, you should not be developing your organization's program or be deciding which grants your organization should apply for.
- + A grant writer can make a program sound better than it really is. (This is not always a good thing; present the best reality but not fiction.)
- + Funders can tell when you're only chasing the money.
- + Grants can help build or break your credibility. If you don't follow through on your grant and don't do what you said you were going to do with the money — or provide the data to back it up — you're going to give yourself a bad reputation.

### **Remember**

- + A grant is not a gift.
- + A grant is not free money.
- + A grant means more work.

When looking for a grant, ask yourself, “do we really want this grant?” Think of it as a job match or a dating match — you are both trying to find the right mutually beneficial partner to add value. Although you work in charity, don't think of the funder as doing charity by awarding you a grant. They are looking for a partner to help them achieve their goals as well. You are not a beggar, you are a partner in carrying out activities to provide some sort of transformation in society that they are looking to make. They want ROI, and you better provide the data to prove it.

Also, think transformationally and collaboratively. Ask yourself — how is our work addressing needs and goals beyond our own? Who can we partner with to increase the good we are doing in an organic way? What sets us apart from our partners or other organizations doing similar work? Don't try to be everything to everybody, but be authoritative about what you are good at and own that.

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*TIP! Position your grant proposal in a strategic way. Your grant isn't going to be used to buy computers for an under-served classroom because you simply don't have the budget for them. It's going towards tools that will help level the playing field in education, foster creativity, promote STEM and pave the way for career readiness. That should be what you are selling, not the computers.*

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## RELATIONSHIPS REALLY MATTER

Funders aren't some untouchable creatures behind a computer screen. They are humans too, just like you. You don't need to be their best friend, but it's important to be responsive and real, and to keep in touch. Now, this doesn't mean you should send them a 20-page report of what you are doing each month. But maybe every so often you send them a card or an image of something your organization has done recently with a short message attached. Maintaining your relationships will help keep you top of mind.

Finding new connections is also important. Do your research and find connections through board members, donors or foundation grantees that you already have connections with. That said, don't assume that they already know who you are. Chances are, if you've sent them a grant request, they may not have read it yet or don't remember it.

Relationship Science is a great tool that you can purchase to help you develop your relationships. Learn more at [RelationshipScience.com](https://www.relationshipscience.com).



## FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

Funders get a lot of applications, and they are looking for any reason to narrow them down. Don't let sloppiness give them a reason to cut yours. It's important to pay attention to detail.

- + Take their guidelines seriously.
- + Send an email, make a call or send a one-page letter if you think you should be on their radar but might not fit their guidelines (don't waste your time writing a whole proposal if you might not fit their guidelines).
- + Answer their questions, not the questions you wish they asked.
- + Tailor your approach for each foundation. Often, it's just a shift in emphasis that is needed.

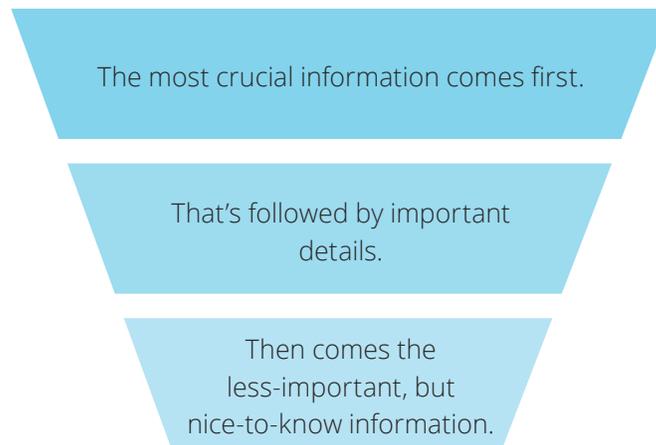
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*TIP! If you go back to the same funder, don't go for the same exact thing year after year. Change it, expand it, and show how you'll build on your successes.*

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## WRITE LIKE A JOURNALIST; DON'T BURY THE LEAD

Think of the “inverted pyramid” used in journalistic writing:



Use facts and data when writing your proposals. You might be tempted to tug at funders' heartstrings, but don't. Your facts and data will create the pull in much more effective way. That's not to say you can't tell your story or paint a picture — that can actually be very effective — just be sure to not overdo it. Make your facts and data the main focus.

### ***A couple more helpful tips to help you improve your grant writing:***

- + Attend seminars on grant writing.
- + Read examples of successful proposals.

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*TIP! Have someone who knows nothing about your grant proposal look at it. They'll be able to tell you if it makes sense and if they understand what your point is.*

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## FIVE SECTIONS OF A GRANT PROPOSAL

- + **Summary/Abstract** – It often makes sense to write this part last, after your idea is fleshed out or changed during the writing process.
- + **Needs Statement** – Use data. Document the need in greater society, not just your organizational need.
- + **Goals/Objectives** – Objectives are concrete activities to be carried out to help meet greater goals.
- + **Measurement/Evaluation** – Learn the difference between outputs and outcomes. Outputs are tangible actions you will do through a grant. Outcomes are changes in behavior, environment, etc., that result from the actions you take.
- + **Budget** – Don't neglect to document all costs (overhead/administrative costs, fringe benefits, in-kind costs) even if they are not part of the funding request.

## DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE!

We've all been there, working right up until the deadline to try to finish something up because you put it off too long. Don't let that happen with grant proposals! It will lead to a poorly done proposal that likely won't win.

- + Revisit your "masterpiece" a couple days after writing it — every time you look at it, you'll make it better.
- + Be open to criticism; leave your ego at the door.
- + Gather a team of reviewers and editors to look it over as well.
- + Give your subject matter experts or team members concrete internal deadlines far ahead of the real deadline.
- + Consider sending them Outlook calendar reminders. Many people need these deadlines, reminders and gentle threats to actually get their work done on a grant. Grants may not be natural to them. Try not to take it personally.

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*TIP! Put together a plan at the beginning of the year that outlines which grants you are going to target this year. It can change throughout the year, but will give you a good start and help you be prepared.*

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## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q: How can well-established and endowed nonprofits still make the point with grant requests that funding is critical to build programs?**

A: The key is to not hide from the facts. It is important to clearly define why you have a need for funding. Make them understand that you have money put away for tomorrow, but today you have a need that you originally did not account for. There are a lot of funders who will be understanding.

**Q: What resources are available if a nonprofit does not have the funds available to hire an agency to write grant proposals?**

A: [The Foundation Center](#) offers classes at a minimal cost that members of your staff can take to learn how to effectively write a grant proposal. Additionally, joining groups such as the [Grant Professionals Association](#) and learning from peers can be beneficial. You don't need to have a dedicated grant writer. Instead, you can educate and train your own staff members.

**Q: How can busy fundraisers create a relationship map?**

A: [Relationship Science](#) is a great tool that you can purchase, but you can also do this for free by simply using your connections. Meet the people your connections already know. Networking with your peers' peers can get you a long way.

**Q: Is it OK to include stories, imagery and videos in grant proposals?**

A: Grant proposals don't have to be boring and formulaic, but be aware of your application limits and guidelines. Graphics can work if done the right way, such as visualizing data with graphs and charts. However, think twice about including images and stories. Don't overdo it on your proposals—you want the numbers and hard facts to do the talking.

**Q: Many nonprofits are dependent on philanthropy. But not all programs are sustainable without gifts from multiple people. How do you navigate the sustainability question with funders?**

A: It's OK for some things to depend on philanthropy, but maybe they're not always dependent on one person's philanthropy. Funders can help grow the program to the point where it has consensus support amongst many funders. So, then it's still depending on philanthropy, but not dependent on specific people that your marketing funds for.

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▶ How can we help you and your nonprofit in your mission to make a difference? Call us today to find an agent or get a free, no-pressure quote and insurance proposal. **1.888.218.8561.**

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