Preparing to Write a Proposal

Managing the Research for Your Proposal

Part of the challenge in this phase of the proposal-writing process is organization. Before beginning, have a system for preserving the information you find, where you found it, and when. You might need to keep track of everything from research on wages for personnel to notes from phone conversations with the funding source.

Before you get started on all the research that will need to be completed for your proposal, discuss with your colleagues how information you find or create will be organized. Consider questions like these:

- Is there a specific location where information related to the proposal will be kept? And how will it be organized?
- How will we record where information came from, and when we received it? Do we need a system for this?
- Do we need to make copies or otherwise protect any of this information against loss?

Knowing beforehand how you will keep all this information organized will help you and your staff be more efficient as you prepare the proposal. Having this paper trail will also make it easier to double-check details in your application when you need to.

Letters of Support

Many grant proposals will need letters of support, which are written by any organizations that you will partner with. These letters serve as evidence that you understand the need your project hopes to address, and that other organizations working to fill that need have confidence in your institution's ability to execute the project.

If you require a letter of support from an organization, request one well in advance and agree on a reasonable deadline for submitting one. Sending a copy of the RFP to the partner organization can help them write a letter tailored to the grant in question, and give them some direction on what needs to be included. It might also be helpful to schedule a check-in a couple days before your agreed deadline for finishing the letter, to ensure that the letter is on schedule and answer any questions your partner organization might have.

An effective letter of support is brief and specific. They should not exceed one page in length. They describe the existing or intended partnership between the organizations, and it should describe what the partner organization will do to support your project. A letter of support should also explain your partner organization's typical activities and why they are a good partner for this project.

As discussed in previous modules, letters of support are especially important if you have a partnership with an organization that works with underrepresented or otherwise vulnerable people. In this case, the letter of support should detail what you and your partner organization will do to make sure your project is effective and culturally sensitive.

Proposal Preparation

Here we include a proposal preparation checklist and program planning worksheet. They can serve as a guide when writing your proposal and creating measurable goals and objectives. You should take care to check over the RFP again to ensure you are providing all the information that the funder requested, and that it is in the correct format.

- Program_Planning_Exercise (PDF)
- Proposal Checklist (PDF)

Introduction

Many grants require an introductory section to open your proposal, and it might be called the Abstract, the Summary, or the Introduction. It can be one of the hardest parts of the entire project to write, because you must convey a lot of information in a very limited space.

Because funders can expect different things to be emphasized in the abstract, it’s especially helpful to review abstracts from successful applications for the grant you're interested in, for an idea of what the funder is looking for. In general, though, expect that the abstract should cover the same topics that the funder asks you to cover in the main narrative.

If the funder requires an abstract with a very restrictive word limit, you might have to cover some or all of your points very briefly, and this requires you to be very selective about what supporting information you include. For instance, when describing the data demonstrating the need your project intends to address, you might cite one piece of evidence that requires little explanation, and frame this as an example of your more extensive supporting data.

Keep in mind that this introductory section might be read by more people than just the reviewers, so it is especially important that it is understandable to a wide audience without background knowledge about your institution or community. For example, the funding organization might have managers or executives who do not directly take part in evaluating grant proposals, but who must sign off on the proposals that the reviewers want to approve. These stakeholders will certainly read the abstract, but they might not read your entire proposal.

The Narrative

The core of your grant proposal will be a narrative describing the project you want to complete and the need it will address. The narrative will include background information about the target audience for your population and the surrounding community that supports the need for your project.

The narrative will also need to justify the resources you would spend the grant money on. It is important that the narrative discuss everything that you include in the budget; a mismatch between the narrative and the budget might confuse the reviewers or make them less likely to approve your proposal. Compare your draft budget and narrative side-by-side during the revision process.

Some questions that narratives typically address include:

- What concern or need will be addressed by this project?
- Why are we addressing this concern, and why at this time?
- Why is our institution qualified to tackle this concern?
- Who will benefit, and how?
- What specific objectives can this project achieve, and how will they be achieved?
- How will we measure the project's results?

How does this project relate to the funder's mission, priorities, and reasons for offering a grant? When writing the narrative, remember that your readers are likely to have little if any prior knowledge about your institution or the work that you do. For example, some of your readers might hold the all-too-common belief that the only service libraries provide is loaning books and other materials. If you are applying for a grant on behalf of a library, and the funder does not appear to have funded projects for libraries before, you might have to provide background on your institution's other services. For example, your narrative could describe other types of health information outreach you've done in the past, as proof that your institution is able to complete the project for which you are seeking the grant.

Similarly, the reviewers reading your proposal might not have prior knowledge of your community context or the target population you plan to serve. Even if both your project and the grant itself is intended for the needs of your local community, your proposal should still explain these needs with evidence to support your claims. Besides getting all of your readers on the same page, it shows that you have a good understanding of the need you plan to address.

The Budget

As you saw in a previous section, a well-planned budget shows that a project that has been thought through carefully. Be as comprehensive as you possibly can when forecasting the costs for different aspects of your project.

As you work on your budget, compare it with your narrative to make sure every expense described in the narrative is accounted for. Consider having a draft of your narrative out as you draft and revise your budget, so you can cross-check your budget and confirm that it matches the narrative.

Many funders require a standard template or form for a grant proposal's budget. Before you begin drafting the budget, determine if something like this exists for the grant you're applying

for. You might have to ask the contact person for the grant about this If there is no standard budget template, it’s still a good idea to look at proposals from previous projects that the funder has approved, so you have an idea of what the budgets from successful proposals look like.

This is also a good time to review the allowed and excluded expenses for the grant again, to ensure that everything you request in your proposal is permitted.

It’s possible that the funder will approve your project, but only for a portion of the funds you requested. If this happens, be flexible and work with the funder to form an agreement on how to change the project budget. The funder might have thoughts about more cost-effective ways to cover one or more items listed in your budget.

General Writing Tips

The writing process can be intimidating. Luckily, you do not need to produce beautiful literature for your grant application; instead, aim for writing that succinctly and clearly spells out the purpose and details of your project.

Here are some writing tips for drafting your proposal.

- Make it clear where your readers are in your proposal at any given time. Use headings and subheadings to break up sections, as long as they are allowed in the funder’s format. As much as possible, start each paragraph with a sentence that summarizes that paragraph's main point.
- Use language from the RFP to make it clear how your project relates to the purpose of the grant. If the funder’s stated reason for offering the grant is improving information literacy in the general public, then describe your project’s impact in those terms. Otherwise, the connection between your project and the grant’s mission might not be clear to the reviewers.
- Be concise. Funding organizations often put word limits or page limits on grant proposals, so every word needs to count. The reviewers will likely be reading a lot of grant proposals in a limited amount of time. Write your proposal so that reading and understanding it is as easy as possible.
- Avoid using jargon, even if it is commonly understood in your field. There’s a good chance that some of your reviewers will not have worked in an institution like yours. If there’s no way to avoid using a certain specialized term, define it clearly on its first use.
- Leave time for proofreading, preferably by someone who has not worked on the proposal. Including someone who is reading your proposal for the first time might notice places where your thoughts could be explained more clearly. In addition, if you are not fluent in the language the grant is written in, it’s a good idea to include someone who can read and write the language fluently for the last round of proofreading.
- As part of the final proofreading, review all of the requirements for the grant proposal again to make sure that all required materials are included, and that they're in the right place in the proposal.

10 Common Mistakes in Proposal Writing

As we finish this lesson, we leave you with 10 common mistakes in proposal writing.

1. Poor writing
2. No project planning
3. Inaccurate costs
4. Typos
5. Buzzwords
6. Budget doesn't match narrative
7. Last-minute writing
8. Assuming reviewers are experts
9. Ignoring instructions
10. Idea ≠ purpose of award

Funders may offer more information about common mistakes, as well as writing tips. Here are some examples from NIH:

- Important Writing Tips (NIH Central Resource for Grants and Funding Information)
- Common Mistakes in Writing Applications (National Institute of Mental Health)

After You've Submitted Your Proposal

You and your team just completed a major project that required a lot of time and effort. Take some time to commemorate your success!

The funding organization should give you a timeframe for their review process and when you will receive their decision. Avoid pestering them in the meantime, but if that deadline passes and you haven't heard from them, it's reasonable to check in.

If your project is approved, that's great! Follow up with the funder about what to do next. This is a good time to review requirements for the grant, such as reporting your activities to the funder. You can also use this time to learn specifics about how the funding will work, such as the procedures for getting reimbursed for project expenses.

If your proposal is not accepted, it doesn't mean your project was a bad idea or poorly planned. There are many possible reasons a proposal might not be accepted. The funder might have perceived a mismatch between their mission and the project. It might also be simple competition: many grants are very competitive, and funders can't approve every proposal that they might want to.

You can request feedback from the funding organization, including suggestions for improving the proposal. Keep lines of communication open, because this organization might be an option for funding a different project in the future, or they might be able to direct you to other funding opportunities. Be sure to communicate with all stakeholders at your institution and share

feedback that the funder provided. A debriefing meeting among the staff who worked on the proposal can be beneficial.

If you seek funding for your project through other grants, avoid simply submitting your current proposal to the new funder after minor changes. Part of what funders evaluate is how well your project connects to their specific mission and goals, and effectively communicating that connection requires studying the funder in question. In particular, the abstract and narrative should be substantially revised or rewritten to reflect your project's relevance to the new funder.

More Resources on Writing Grant Proposals

If you want more information about writing proposals for grants, you can start with these resources:

- Applying for a Grant, from Community Toolbox
- Grant Writing Basics, from the Grants.gov Community Blog
- Grant Writing Tip Sheets, from the National Institutes of Health (NIH)
- How to Write a Winning Grant Proposal, from The Balance Small Business
- Introduction to Project Budgets, from Candid.org