

## The Nuts and Bolts of Writing an Effective Proposal

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The focus of this workshop is on those people who have little or no experience in grant writing. Many of the things that I will describe are basic, but using these suggestions will help you present a favorable impression to the funder. Always remember who your audience is. Your goal is to present your case in a way that a funder can easily understand, and even better, relate to your organization.

Many of us use boiler plate proposals, in that we've crafted a set of paragraphs that aptly describe our organization, our programs, and goals. These paragraphs can be cut and pasted into grant applications, but if you're working from a boiler plate, be sure you carefully read the question, and make sure your response answers the question. It's better to answer a question directly than use a boiler plate that, in a round about way, gets to the question, eventually.

1) So the first rule to any proposal is to **answer the question**.

2) **Write clearly, grammatically and with correct spelling.** It's distracting to the reader to come across grammatical or spelling errors. I find that I want to correct and edit the prose.

3) **Repeat the question, before writing the answer.** When a grant reviewer reads several grant applications, it is easier to compare them when they are similarly formatted. As the grant writer, you should be aware of your audience. In this case, it may be a group of volunteers who sit on a grant committee. They appreciate it when their job is made easier, and they do not have to hunt and search for the answers.

Follow the outline provided by the funder. Answer the questions in the order presented.

4) **Think about your audience.** In most cases, it is safest to assume your audience does not know much about your organization, your industry. Avoid using acronyms, or define them. What values are important to your audience (hint: read the foundation guidelines.)? Weave into your story these values.

Don't make it difficult for the reader to figure out what you want. Say it up front, and build a case as to why you need the grant.

If you have a question about the guidelines, how many people in the audience call or email the funder? Asking questions presents an opportunity for you, as the grantee, to start building a relationship with the grantor. You may be able to present a case for your program and needs to the program officer. You can also save yourself and the grantor time and energy if you determine that you do not fit the foundation's guidelines at the beginning.

**5) Check and double check your proposal.** Before submitting any proposal, check and double check. Read over your proposal carefully, especially if you are cutting and pasting from a boiler plate. Include only relevant information, and make sure the organization that you are submitting is the same organization as described in your proposal.

Have someone else read your proposal. I usually have 2-4 people read my drafts, especially when I am describing a new program. These extra eyes will help you determine if you've answered the **Who, What, Where, When and Why**.

To recap, outstanding proposals begin with a few basic rules:

- Answer the question.
- Write clearly, grammatically and with correct spelling.
- Repeat the question, before writing the answer.
- Think about your audience.
- Check and double check your proposal.

### **Layout and design**

You are typically restricted by the amount of space you can use to tell your story. Help the reader by using some simple layout rules to make your document more readable.

**1) Use white space.** Presenting your narrative in one long paragraph can make it unpalatable to the reader. Break your narrative into paragraphs. If your narrative runs over the limit, there are ways you can gain a little more space. For instance, you can reduce the space between paragraphs, or choose a font that is more condensed.

**2) Make your document easy for the reader to scan.** You are limited in the amount of formatting you can do, but help the reader by using highlighting in bold or using bullets.

**3) Use pictures, if possible.** There's a saying that a picture is worth a 1,000 words. If you're in a sector where your work can be expressed in pictures, use them. Include pictures in the body of your narrative, or include as an attachment.

### **Resources:**

- *Storytelling for Grantseekers, The Guide to Creative Nonprofit Fundraising*, by Cheryl A. Clarke, San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2001
- *The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing*, by Jane C. Geever, 4th edition, 2004