

How to Write a Successful Grant Proposal: A Guide for the Special Librarian

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Introduction

A grant is money that allows you to do certain very specific things that usually meet very specific guidelines that are set out in painstaking detail and to which you must respond very clearly in your grant proposal.

- Ellen Karsh

So what, exactly, is a grant? Some people see it as a source of free money. Some think it's a way for outsiders to meddle in their organization. And some just want to forget the whole thing. Don't listen to any of these people. Grants are not a way to get free money. It's a lot of hard work and it takes commitment. If you do it right the granting organization will be supporting your mission, not imposing their ideas on your work. And don't forget about it either. Although grants only account for about fifteen percent of the annual charitable contributions to not-for-profit agencies, for successful groups that fifteen percent can represent a sizeable source of income. There are hundreds of foundations and government agencies with billions of dollars to give away. Someone has to get it. Why not you?

Although many people talk about "writing grants," what you are really writing is a proposal to get a grant. The grants aren't written – they're awarded, by one of a number of different types of organizations. These include foundations, trusts, and government agencies. A foundation is a private company, usually a not-for-profit, set up for the sole purpose of giving away money to support certain goals or causes. But within this broad outline there are a number of different types of foundations. There are family foundations, which often have no staff and are run by members of the family that began them. There are independent private foundations, which are, as the name implies, independent and privately run, often with large staffs and a clear business structure. There are federated foundations, which are pools of money from individual donors. (The United Way is a good example.) And there are corporate foundations and community foundations, and charitable trusts. And of course there is the government, which has any number of granting organizations (the NEA, the NEH, the IMLS...). Each of these organizations will have its own rules and regulations, and its own mission to support. With all of these options, there is sure to be one out there for you.

Grants take planning and commitment. But the payoff is that grant money can help your organization accomplish things that you couldn't fund otherwise. They aren't for every project (don't look to grants for emergency funds or operating expenses), and they may not be right for every organization. There are drawbacks to grants: limited funding, limited duration of support, no input into the funding decision, the necessity of adhering to the granting organization's schedule, the time invested in writing a proposal... But in the right situation grants can be a vital piece of the puzzle when it comes to accomplishing a special library's goals.

Getting Started

The most important thing to keep in mind when beginning the process of finding a grant is that you must know your own organization. The first thing to do is not to rush out and ask for money wherever you can find it. The first thing, and the one that you will need to return to throughout the process, is to consider your situation. What are your library's strengths and weaknesses? What programs do you need? Most importantly, what is your mission and what are your goals and objectives? Conduct an "organizational audit," considering all of these things. When you have figured out what you do well and where you could use a change, and once you have a good picture of your library as a whole, and once you have connected these things to your mission, then you will be ready to move on to the next step.

That step is brainstorming what you would like to accomplish. What things should your library be doing in order to meet its mission? What needs can you document? Take all of those things and prioritize them. Determine which of them will best help you meet your library's mission. Then figure out which of them you can actually do. There is no point in applying for a grant when, even if it was awarded to your library, you couldn't actually accomplish the program you said you would. And consider whether the things you have listed are ones that the staff and the institution will support.

Now you have a list of programs that further the mission, that you can accomplish, and that the library staff and the organization can truly support. Now what? Now you brainstorm some more. What ways can you accomplish the goals that you brainstormed above? There is never only one solution to a problem. Figure out every possible way to get to where your library wants to be. Obviously, some of these will be impossible because of the size of your organization or the feelings of the administration. But compile a list of all of the reasonable possibilities, and add that to your prioritized list from the previous step. Look long and hard at the first thing on that list, and at the list of solutions that go with it. Now you're ready to start looking for an organization that might support your goals.

Finding the Money

There are a number of ways to determine which granting organizations will support your project. A good starting place is the Foundation Center, which works to increase knowledge about philanthropy in the United States. A major part of this is their dedication to providing information about philanthropy to the public. One of the ways in which they do this is by publishing the annual *The Foundation Directory*, which is available in print format in most public or academic libraries and also online at the Foundation Center website, <http://www.foundationcenter.org/>. This directory gives information on every foundation in the United States, along with information regarding the types of projects they support and financial information on the foundation itself.

For government grants, look at *The Federal Register*, a periodical published five days a week and containing information about every federal grant opportunity. It is also available online, at <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html>. State and local government websites also have information on grants awarded through their offices. The State Single Point of Contact Office will have information on available funding.

And don't forget about word of mouth. Start with the obvious. Has your library been awarded a grant for a similar project in the past? Or has another special library in your area gotten support from a foundation? Ask your friends and colleagues what they

know about granting organizations. If you attend a program at another library, look at the promotional material to see who has supported it (most granting organizations will require that their logo or name appear on such material). Above all, keep your eyes and ears open.

Once you have identified a few possibilities, start researching them. Before you approach the foundation or the government agency you want to know as much as possible about them. Being ill-informed is not the way to make a good impression. Find financial data such as annual reports, learn what projects and organizations they have funded recently, and most importantly figure out what their mission is. Even if an organization has funded a project like yours in the past, if it does not explicitly meet their mission they may not do so again. On the other hand, a number of organizations that say they will fund libraries don't do so in actual practice. And some that make no mention of libraries do fund library projects regularly. This is why it is important to know what types of proposals they have funded in the past.

Only once you have done thorough background research should you approach the granting organization. For many foundations, a letter of interest is required, while government agencies may simply post the necessary paperwork on their websites. Your research should have told you what the procedure is for the organizations you are considering. If you are still unclear, however, or if you have questions about the organization that your research simply will not answer, it is always acceptable to call the organization directly and ask for more information. Be prepared for any questions they may ask you – be ready to answer questions about your own organization and the project you are planning to propose to them. And also be prepared for staff who are just as overworked as you are and may not have more than a few minutes to give you. Have clear, well-thought questions and ask them without wasting either their time or yours. Making friends with the staff can pay off in the long run, since they are the ones with the inside knowledge of how the process operates.

Throughout this process, it is important to remember that all fundraising should come from the mission. The availability of funds should never drive the programs your library offers. Somewhere there will be an organization that will fund your mission and goals. Put in the time and effort to find it. Otherwise you run the risk of allowing outside

organizations to determine the direction of your library. It is possible to tailor your proposal to the interests of a foundation, by changing wording, for example. But don't lose sight of what you really want to accomplish. Your library and you as an individual are responsible for determining that the proposal you submit is an accurate reflection of your mission.

Writing the Proposal

Now that you have determined what your organization needs and you have some idea how to do it, and now that you have identified organizations that might fund your proposal, it's time to start writing. Having all of your information in one place will be an enormous help during the process. Put copies of all of the relevant documents in a binder or a folder. Having them all together saves you time and also makes it easier to pull the information in response to questions.

An even bigger help will be reading the instructions provided by the granting organization. These may be long and tedious, and are often written in tiny font with extensive notes and cross-references. Read them all anyway. One proposal writer failed to do so and wrote an entire proposal, sent it off, and then discovered that her interpretation of a key term was markedly different from that of the foundation. By assuming that "under-schooled youth" meant those who skipped classes, rather than dropouts, she doomed her proposal from the start and invested an enormous amount of time and energy for nothing. Had she read the instructions carefully, however, she would have found the term clearly defined partway through the packet.

The most important thing to remember is that you must follow the directions the foundation or the agency has provided. The National Institutes of Health, for example, instructs applicants not to use the first person in the abstract, although it also states that the first-person is acceptable in the body of the proposal. Failure to follow these instructions means automatic disqualification. Some organizations will make these directions simply to narrow the field of applicants. Some do so because they have three thousand proposals to wade through in three months and they want to make their task a

simpler one. One foundation says on the first page of its instructions that proposals over five pages in length will not be considered. The first thing the secretary does to incoming proposals is count the pages, and those over the limit are simply thrown out. So again, FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS. This is the single most important part of applying for a grant and the one that the most people fail miserably.

There are other aspects to writing proposals that seem equally obvious but that many people forget. Keep your proposal simple. The people reading it are most likely not experts in your field. Tailor your language and your terminology accordingly. Make your proposal easy to read and understand, and the tired brain of the panelist reading his fortieth proposal of the morning will thank you. Also, make sure that the different parts of your proposal agree. If you request \$50,000 in the body of the proposal but your budget worksheet shows a need for \$75,000, you need to explain the discrepancy. It is perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, to say that you are applying to another foundation to make up the difference. Funding organizations don't want to carry the whole burden themselves. Show that your project has appeal to a larger audience and that you are not relying on just one organization to get it done.

The "afterthoughts" like the table of contents and the abstract are often just that. The writer focuses on the body of the proposal and then dashes off something at the last minute just so they have all of the required sections. This is a way to ensure that your proposal will be rejected. Put thought into all of the sections of the proposal. An abstract can set the tone for the rest of the proposal. Making your table of contents thorough means that your proposal is easy to navigate and can get you bonus points for considering the reader. It is often the details that make a difference.

Most of these problems can be caught through careful proofreading and editing. Don't do it all yourself. Ask a colleague to read the instructions and then your proposal to be sure that you have followed the instructions exactly. Ask someone outside your field to read your proposal and make sure that it is comprehensible to someone with no knowledge of what a special library does. The more people you ask the better. Just make sure that you leave enough time to get all of this proofreading and editing done, get the signatures you will need, and get the proposal in by the deadline.

Follow-Up

Once you have mailed in your proposal you may think the work is over. It isn't. You've gotten the longest part of the project done, but there is still more to be done. Many organizations will request a site visit to follow up on your proposal. Some of them will tell you exact dates and times, and some will give you a vague idea and then drop in. Some of them will want you to come to them. Either way, the basic procedure is the same. Know your material, know your library, and know how your project complements the mission of the granting organization. Be prepared to demonstrate all of this to the committee. Above all, be professional. Even if something goes horribly wrong, you must be prepared to compensate. One childcare center was in the midst of a site visit when the power went out during a thunderstorm. The sudden darkness was immediately followed by howls from terrified children. The director asked the visitors to wait a moment while she checked on each classroom, then found flashlights and continued her tour of the building and her presentation. The visiting committee was so impressed with her ability to deal with unexpected crises that they funded her proposal. Had she been less well prepared, of course, the outcome would have been different.

Some organizations will send you a notice that your proposal has been received. Some won't. If you are really concerned about your proposal's arrival, call and ask if the organization has received it. But don't expect any other information. Even if you call five weeks after the decision deadline, the most you will be told is that decisions were mailed on a certain date, or that the committee is still working. No organization will tell you whether your proposal was funded or what your chances are over the phone. Don't ask. Be patient – eventually you will find out.

Rejection

Inevitably, some of your proposals will be rejected. In fact, in most organizations a success rate of one in four is considered extraordinary. A rejection rate of eighty to

ninety percent is more common. Don't take the rejection personally. Instead, try to learn from the experience and apply the lessons to the next proposal you write.

Many foundations and government agencies will discuss your proposal with you once you have received a notice that it was not funded. Call and ask if someone is willing to talk with you for a few minutes. Sometimes they will make an appointment so that they can have your proposal in front of them during your conversation, and others they will have a few minutes right then, so be prepared for either. Remember that being angry or defensive will not help. Have your proposal in front of you, and have a few questions to ask that will best help you understand why your proposal was rejected. And avoid making it personal. Ask things like "were there any questions regarding the program that I needed to address?" Granting organizations are in the business of giving away money. Many of them are required to give away a certain amount every year. They would much rather see successful proposals than poor ones, and most of them are very willing to help you improve.

You can also ask for other opinions. If you know someone who writes a lot of grants for their organization, ask for their help. They may catch something that you missed. And of course, go back and read the instructions again. You may have done something as simple as forgetting to include a supporting document. It's important to figure out how you can improve so that the next proposal you write will be a successful one. It may be a good idea to implement an evaluation system for your grants-seeking program so that you can systematically determine what works and what you need to improve.

Success!

Congratulations! Your proposal was funded!

Now comes the hard part. Making that program you proposed a reality. Most granting organizations will have explicit instructions on the ways in which you can use the money they give you, and even more detailed ones on how to report to them. Just as with the proposal writing process, it is vitally important to follow these instructions. Not

doing so can have many results, all of them negative. At best, you may have to engage in a mad scramble in order to find everything you need and invent the records the foundation wants at the end of the year, causing other projects to fall by the wayside. You may sour your relationship with the funding organization, meaning that they will not fund your library again. And at worst, failure to follow their instructions can lead to the foundation demanding the money back.

Remember two key points. Most organizations insist that the grant money be kept separate from the rest of your library's funds. And all of them are adamant on one point. You can't use that money for anything except what your proposal said you would. One company made this mistake with federal funds, assuming that since a project came in under budget they could use the rest for other things. At the end of the year, they were hit with a bill for the \$25,000 that they had spent on projects their proposal did not cover. They are still trying to make up for the loss of that money. If by some miracle you have extra money, call the granting organization and find out exactly what you can and cannot do with it.

Tips for Successful Proposals

- Let your mission drive your proposal. Just because there is money available does not mean you have to develop a program to get it.
- Follow the directions. It is not possible to stress this enough.
- Be sure that your project will have a lasting effect; don't develop a proposal for something that will be a long-term money pit without accomplishing anything.
- Consider whether the money you will get from this proposal is worth the time and effort it will take to develop it. Related to this is the question of whether the amount requested will actually fund the project.
- Be organized. Know where to put your hands on the information you will need. Better yet, make copies and store them all in one place.
- If your organization has internal guidelines, follow them.

- Be specific. Don't say "most," say "70%."
- Edit, edit, edit. And follow the directions!
- The key factors for success are having a good project, a good match with the funding organization, a well-thought approach, and a well-written proposal.
- Remember: if you don't write the proposal, you won't get the grant.

Where to Go for More Information:

There are a number of books on grant seeking and proposal writing. Among the best is Ellen Karsh and Arlen Sue Fox's *The Only Grant-Writing Book You'll Ever Need: An Insider's Guide* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003). Liane Reif-Lehrer's *Grant Application Writer's Handbook* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1995), although intended for those in the health sciences, is also an excellent guide to proposal writing. And for a good picture of grants and how they fit into a larger fundraising picture (as well as a vast amount of other useful information) see Michael Seltzer's *Securing Your Organization's Future: A Complete Guide to Fundraising Strategies* (New York: The Foundation Center, 1987).

If you think a workshop or class on grants may be what you need, contact your local arts council. Many of them offer workshops open to anyone. While these will vary in quality, they can be excellent starting points. The Foundation Center also has centers in New York, Atlanta, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and San Francisco, as well as cooperating collections in other cities including New Orleans, Chicago, Charlotte and Boston. These offices and collections will have publications relating to grant seeking and proposal writing, and will often offer classes for those interested in learning more about the process. And finally, check your local community college or university for courses on the subject.

Conclusion

Writing a successful proposal and getting your program funded requires research capabilities, salesmanship, communication skills, creativity, flexibility, administrative ability, political savvy, and integrity – and more. It can take a lot of work to have a successful proposal, but the rewards can be immense. Not only in terms of funding; being able to implement a project that your library needs or starting a program that will help your patrons can give a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. While grants can have drawbacks, and while it is important to let the mission drive your grant seeking, they can be vital sources of funding for the right project and the right institution.

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