

REVISED & UPDATED

THE ONLY

GRANT-
WRITING
BOOK

YOU'LL EVER NEED

Top Grant Writers and
Grant Givers Share Their Secrets

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FIFTH EDITION

Safe Schools/Healthy Students application, which was first issued around the time of the 1999 deadly attack on students at Columbine High School in Colorado. The application package explained that its significant discretionary grants would provide communities "with federal funding to implement a coordinated comprehensive plan of activities, curricula, programs, and services that focus on creating safe school environments, promoting healthy childhood development, and preventing youth violence and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use." The Department of Education grant (described in the Opening Remarks at the beginning of this lesson) clearly explained what the department meant by "out-of-school youth," as the novice grant writer would have seen if she had done more than speed-read through the application.

Answers to questions raised at a bidders' conference. Government agencies usually send a transcript of all questions raised at a bidders' conference (or technical assistance meeting or teleconference), with answers to those questions. This becomes a part of the application package, often called an *addendum*, and generally is posted online as well as sent to those who attended. If you read this addendum as carefully as the rest of the package, you will pick up a number of useful tips.

Format and other instructions. No government grant-application package—nor those from a fair number of foundations—would be complete without dire warnings about sticking to a page limit, font and margin size, deadline, number of copies that must be submitted, and instructions about where to send the proposal. One RFP we've seen actually gave examples of spacing that is *not* double spaced and fonts that are *not* 12 points—to show the applicant what would be rejected. These details do matter! When the grantmaker specifies type size and margins, it's for the good of the people who will be reading the proposal. Some reviewers may read dozens of 50-page proposals in just a few days. You do not want to irritate them by giving them eyestrain from type that is too small. Yet one of us has seen a federal

a large number of points to be more important than a section with fewer points—but every point counts; in fact, every fraction of a point counts. In most government programs, grants are awarded starting with the proposals with the greatest number of points and are awarded to each successive proposal until the money runs out. So you can see that when there are hundreds or thousands of proposals for a particular grant, you want to get every fraction of a point that you can. We suggest allocating the pages in the narrative roughly in proportion to the number of points to be given for that section (unless the application package gives you different instructions). For example, if the question asking you to explain the community's need for the project is worth 10 points and you're allowed a total of 20 pages for the proposal narrative, consider allocating about two pages—10 percent—to the need section. This won't always work (there may be times when you *must* write more than just two pages to fully describe the need or when you can easily say what you need to say in half a page), but it will force you to focus on the grantmaker's priorities.

When one of us first started writing proposals, she actually thought it was fine to leave out the answer to a question asked by government funders—especially if it was only part of a two-part question or only worth a small number of points—because there were so many convoluted questions. The first request for proposals to which she ever responded asked for a complicated evaluation plan worth five points. She figured that without the five points, her excellent proposal would still get 95 percent, which was a good score. Because she didn't really know how to write an evaluation plan for a government grant proposal, she just left it out. Needless to say, she did not win that grant.

Another serious mistake is to change the order of the questions. We actually have seen a proposal with a small box at the top saying: "In order to explain my program in the best possible way, Question 1 will be moved down to become Question 7. Question number 7 will now be Question 3...." One of the authors of this book is a

LESSON 3

MAKING (DOLLARS AND) SENSE OF GRANT-APPLICATION PACKAGES: WHAT GRANTMAKERS WANT

OPENING REMARKS

When I first started writing grant proposals to the federal government, I hardly paid any attention to the grant-application package. It was usually cumbersome and uninviting. The print was small, the pages packed with mysterious words in tiny print, bizarre numbering systems like (iii), and a slew of public laws that meant absolutely nothing to me. I would skim over the thing quickly and not look at the application again until I actually needed to write the proposal—weeks later.

One particular proposal I worked on was for a program for “out-of-school youth.” Because I had never heard that term, I figured they were youth who were sometimes in school and sometimes not in school. Children who had chronic asthma, perhaps... or who played hooky (do they still say “hooky”?).

I wrote the proposal with my kind of out-of-school youth in mind—students who were absent a lot—and my proposal was disqualified the second it arrived at the US Department of Education headquar-

when tax revenues are down and spending has been cut. Most grant announcements stipulate the approximate amount of funding that will be awarded. Some announcements just tell you what the total amount will be and approximately how many grants will be given, and let you do the math. Others give a maximum possible award or an estimate of the average award. Some, especially foundations, leave it to you to assess what a reasonable request will be.

Some foundations don't specify the maximum grant they will award, but they may describe different procedures for proposals requesting \$500 and under (groups looking for small awards can use a short form); such grants may be easier to come by than if you make a larger request. Or the process may differ for those seeking, say, \$50,000 and over, perhaps because the larger grants must be approved by the board of directors (and therefore also may take longer to be awarded). If a foundation has a procedure for larger awards, it gives you a clue that such grants are possible. But if you've never received a grant from this foundation before, you may want to be fairly modest in your request.

It is very tempting to ignore the amount of money that the grant-maker wants (or can afford) to give. After all, you need \$50,000 and you can make a good case for why the project costs that amount. But think about it. If you told your daughter you were going to give her a generous graduation gift of a two-week trip to Venice and instead of kissing your feet she informed you that she would much prefer an eight-week African safari, how would you react?

Do I Have to Answer All Those Questions?

The short answer is yes. Many grant applications include a list of questions or topics that the applicant is expected to address in a specific number of pages—sometimes a specific number of pages for each question. Some requests for proposals even restrict the number of words per question. You may be asked to describe your program, explain the problem the program is addressing, how you will judge its impact, and how much it is expected to cost—in no more than

fill in at their websites, and usually there is a limit to the number of words the form accepts. (This can be much more of a challenge than keeping a proposal to a specified number of pages.) Most of these forms can be saved so you can return to finish or correct something you didn't get to when you started the process. But in a few cases, you have to finish the entire form at one sitting—or do it all over. You will need to know how to download or print the form from the website so you can fill it in by hand, then go back and fill it in online. Get familiar with the process; online applications will be even more common in coming years.

Am I Even Eligible to Apply for the Grant?

First and foremost, you must find out whether your organization is (or you are) eligible to apply for the grant described in the package. Somewhere deep in every application is a word or two—or 200—about eligibility. And even these words can be misleading!

An eligible applicant for a US Department of Education grant initiative that one of us applied for is “a local educational agency (LEA) or a consortium of LEAs that partner with their local public mental health, law enforcement, and juvenile justice agencies.” The package indicated that the key to successful implementation is “partnership.”

By the way, “local educational agency” was not defined until page 56 of the application in Appendix D: “A public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township.” It is clear that if you were a small, neighborhood-based, grassroots after-school program, this would not be the grant for you—unless you worked with several much larger partners. We'll discuss how to do this in Lesson 10.

It's not unusual for foundations and corporations to establish geographic target areas, and extremely rare for them to give grants to organizations outside those boundaries.

former teacher—and self-anointed test constructor extraordinaire. She would not have been at all pleased if one of her junior high school students had reorganized her examination. She would have tried to like the child, to find the self-confidence and proactive resourcefulness appealing. But she is nearly certain that she would have resented the student and made every effort to give the student an extremely low mark both on the test and for the class. We all have our pride. The people who write the RFPs and guidelines are proud of their documents. Keep that in mind during every minute you spend on the proposal-writing process.

What If There Are No Actual Questions in the Application Package or Guidelines?

Some funders describe what they want you to tell them without asking specific questions, or they suggest, sometimes in a seemingly casual way, what they would like to see in a proposal. In one foundation's annual report, the following paragraph constituted the grant application:

We are interested in learning as much as possible about the applicant. This includes budget (past, current, projected), audited financial statements, an IRS letter explaining tax status, names and occupations of trustees, and examples of past accomplishments. The individual project proposal should include, in addition to the planned work, a budget, expected outcomes, plans for evaluation, background of those involved and a statement of plans for future support. The main body of the application should not exceed 15 pages. A one-page summary is required.

Take these instructions literally and include everything the funder asks for in an order that is as close as possible to the order in which the instructions are given.

Sometimes a grantmaker will indicate that a specific application form is not required but that one (like the Washington, DC,

may not—no, almost certainly does not—care what you have in mind, unless it happens to mesh exactly with the terms of the RFP or guidelines.

You may need funding to start a chorus in a neighborhood day-care center. You may feel passionately about the importance of getting children excited about music at a very early age. Unfortunately, the RFP insists that the program this agency wants to fund in day-care centers must focus on computer technology and use of the Internet. You feel that the grantmaker is off base and would be wise to give money to the chorus. And you may be right. But don't give this grant any further thought. You may have research suggesting that little children are too young to fool around with computers—and should, instead, be singing. Don't bother. Not only will your grant be rejected, the program officer will think you are unable to read instructions, and this will put you at a serious disadvantage the next time you happen to apply.

But do bring your interests to the funders outside the grant cycle. If you want to discuss your point of view with the grantmaker, it is reasonable to call and ask whether there are plans for issuing RFPs for music anytime soon—and you can explain how excited you and your colleagues are about a children's chorus. For federal and some state and local grants, there is often a comment period during which you can express your opinion about their proposed guidelines. Furthermore, throughout the year, you (or, preferably, a coalition to which your organization belongs) are entitled to talk with elected officials and government agency representatives about needs that you see for your community or your target population.

What Projects Has the Grantmaker Funded Recently?

The Foundation Directory, among other references, generally lists the amounts of the largest grants given by a foundation in a recent year and the names of organizations that have received them. Government websites often list the winners of recent competitions. Application packages and funding guidelines also may mention past

ters. One intense month—days, nights, weekends—was wasted on a proposal for which my organization wasn't eligible. All because I did not read the dense, critically important application package that defined "out-of-school youth" in no uncertain terms: DROPOUTS. —EK

LEADING QUESTIONS

How Do I Get What I Need from the Grant Application Package?

No two application packages or proposal guidelines are the same. In previous editions of this book we analyzed a number of different sample applications from an array of federal and foundation grantmakers—most of which have changed or disappeared. These days, many things change rapidly—politics, economics, world events, unexpected calamities, and funders' priorities—and so do the availability, content, and format of grant applications that once were somewhat more predictable. So in this edition we're offering an overview of the most important things you need to know in order to get the most out of any application package you are confronted with.

Read the whole application (and all the guidelines) carefully. No matter what the funding climate is, grant applications vary wildly. Federal grant application packages are often huge—they can be 150 pages or more, with long, detailed, tables of contents. And, at the opposite end of the spectrum, at least one foundation grant notice we know of fits on a postcard. But don't be fooled by their length. Even the smallest package contains enough information to keep a proposal writer chained to the desk for days or weeks.

There is a tendency (as one of us knows well) to skim an application package, to speed-read it just as you might scan the eye-strain-inducing pamphlet that comes with your new allergy pills. With the latter, you ignore just about every other paragraph until you get to the part about your new drug causing death if taken with alcohol. That you read carefully. In a grant-application package, most people cut right to the chase—well, actually, three chases: the amount of

500 words. The proposal questions can be simple ("Tell us about your program") or complex ("Explain in detail how you will use the logic model in your program").⁵

One foundation we know requires a preliminary letter of inquiry and makes it clear that proposals are accepted only if the letter of inquiry has received a positive response (essentially a personalized request for a proposal). If the proposal is requested, the foundation's website will offer very detailed suggestions about what should be included in the seven-page narrative: a proposal summary that describes the organization, the project, the grant amount being requested, and the grant period; organizational information, including the organization's history and mission, population served, current programs, recent accomplishments, and details about staff; program and project information, including five specific items that must be described completely and in detail; information on collaborations or partnerships for the project; a description of the evaluation process; and a list of required attachments.

We'll say it one more time: You must answer every question and address every topic that is included in the application. Not only must you answer every question, you would be wise to outline your proposal with subheads that reflect each question to make it clear to the reader that you are very responsive to the funder's interests and concerns and that you have answered all the questions. In Lesson 6 we address the challenges of writing clear, well-organized responses to funders' questions.

Many government requests for proposals contain a description of the criteria the agency will use to score the proposals and often assign a specific number of points for each section of the proposal. The funding agency obviously considers a section that is assigned

⁵ The logic model is a tool for planning and evaluating your program. We can't get into a discussion of it here, but there's plenty of information about it online. Because many funders use it, or something like it, we suggest that you take the time to learn about it.



projects that have been funded by the grantmaker, especially if a foundation includes application information in its annual report. The annual report may organize grants into topics and include a brief description of the programs funded and the amount of funding. As discussed earlier, every private foundation and public charity is required to file an annual tax report (Form 990 or Form 990-PF, depending on how the organization is set up). The forms generally are just called 990s. They list the principals of the foundation, the foundation's resources, and its expenditures. Most foundations list the names of organizations or individuals that received grants and the amounts awarded; some also describe the project for which the grant was awarded and a contact person. Some include projects for which grants have been approved but not yet paid (such as the second year of a two-year grant).

Sometimes you will get lucky and an application package will not only provide useful tips but also include links to winning proposals that applicants would be wise to study carefully. It always makes sense to check out a grantmaker's website when you are thinking of applying for a grant because you never know what useful information you'll find that isn't in the application package.

Again, if you feel that the various descriptions, definitions, warnings, suggestions, and hints about what activities and purchases are allowable are unclear after several readings and discussions with colleagues, call or email the contact person listed in the application package. Don't try to guess what an "allowable activity" is—or, for that matter, what anything else is—because the likelihood is that you'll guess wrong!

How Much Money Is the Grant for, and Will It Cover My Expenses?

Proposal writers are often so excited about their projects that they lose sight of the sad truth that grantmakers do not have an unlimited amount of money to hand out, especially when there is a downturn in the economy (because income from investments drops), or

Common Grant Application form in Appendix 4) would be accepted. It's probably a good idea to follow the outline of the "accepted" form, even if you don't have to use the form itself. It will ensure that your response touches on all of the topics that the funder expects to see.

Try a letter of inquiry. If a funder does not set forth guidelines, instructions, or specific questions, you may want to initiate contact through a letter of inquiry (LOI). Like the abstract, which we discuss in Lesson 15, an LOI is a brief summary of your organization, its mission, the need in the community that you want to address, the program you want to implement, its total cost, and the amount you are requesting from this funder. In this letter, you should explain why you are writing to this particular funder; talk about the ways in which it appears that your program fits into the funder's overall interests (which should be clear from its annual report or list of grants already awarded). Yes, all of that in one page (or a little more)! Follow up with a phone call.

Some grantmakers, especially foundations, require you to submit a letter of inquiry before you submit a proposal. If they accept the letter, they will request a full proposal. This process will be spelled out in the foundation's guidelines, and you must respond appropriately.

Keep in mind that the abbreviation LOI refers to both *letter of inquiry* and *letter of intent*. The latter, a statement that you plan to apply for a grant, is requested by some funders, especially federal agencies but also some other government agencies and foundations, to determine approximately how many applicants they may hear from and therefore how long the review process will take or how many reviewers they will need to hire.

What Else Is in the Application Package?

Background information. Some grant applications contain discussions of research on the topic or a historical perspective that explains why the RFP has been developed and why funds have been earmarked for a certain kind of program. An example of this was the

money being given away, the questions that the applicant must answer in the grant proposal, and the deadline for submission. We'll get to why these items are critically important, but it is a mistake to cut to the chase. There is no chase; the whole package should be read carefully again and again. Each reading will reveal something you missed during an earlier reading. There just may be some concepts, words, or hints that, if taken to heart, will dramatically improve your chances of winning a grant.

Because application packages come in all shapes and sizes, it is obvious that they can't all contain exactly the same information organized in precisely the same way. But each package should answer a slew of important questions; you just have to know what to ask.

Common application form. This is a good place to remind you that some foundations require applicants to use a "common grant application" format (such as the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers' Common Grant Application in Appendix 4). A common application is intended for use with every foundation in a region that accepts or requires it, but eligibility requirements are not specified and differ among the foundations that use the form. Clearly, grant seekers who plan to use a common application form still must go back to an individual foundation's website, annual report, and guidelines to be sure that they are eligible for grants from that foundation.

A Note on Using Technology

We know that most of our readers these days are very familiar with the Internet, so this won't be new to you. When we said earlier that you must become comfortable with the Internet, we were (mostly) talking about searching for grant opportunities and background information. But here's an equally important reason: More and more grantmakers are requiring that you submit your proposal online. Frequently they just want you to email the proposal and all attachments (although some attachments, such as your latest audited financials, can be mailed). But, increasingly, they provide a form for you to

As you read the eligibility requirements, you can look back at the exercises you completed earlier. Are you a government agency or a local educational agency—as the package defines it? Are you a not-for-profit organization with proof of your status? Are you located in the specified geographic area?

If you are clear about who you are but you can't make heads or tails of who you should be in order to compete for the grant (which sometimes happens with complicated requests for proposals from government agencies at all levels, but much less frequently with foundation guidelines), call the program officer whose name, telephone number, and/or email address appear in the package and ask about your eligibility. Sometimes you will have to address written questions to a fax number or email address, or leave messages in a voice mailbox. But don't get frustrated. Call again (and again) if you don't receive a response in a reasonable amount of time—say, 48 hours. Don't be shy; you have a right to know. But don't ever be rude, either. Remember, the people who develop, write, and oversee application packages and foundation guidelines take their work seriously and are likely to get offended if you call and say something like, "Why in the world would the West Kentucky Community Foundation refuse to give grants in Tennessee? It's not that far from Kentucky, right?" (This may sound silly, but, according to grantmakers, people say things like this all the time. So be forewarned.) If this foundation ever does decide to make grants in other parts of the area, your organization will find itself very low on its list of priorities!

Does My Idea for a Grant Mesh with the Grantmaker's?

This is where proposal writers can get snagged. Proposals are developed in response to a request for proposals (RFP), request for applications (RFA), or other guidelines issued by a grantmaking government agency or foundation. The RFP and RFA stipulate in no uncertain terms exactly what the grantmaker has in mind. A foundation's guidelines may be a lot less detailed and a little more flexible, but generally its priorities are equally clear. The grantmaker

proposal in which the writer tried to meet the page limitations by typing all the way to the edges of the pages (no margins at all) and using a tiny typeface that needed a magnifying glass to be read. It wasn't funded. Often there is nothing about a proposal you are submitting that is left to the proposal writer's imagination. Except, of course, the imaginative program you are submitting.

For applications that must be submitted on paper, pay attention to things like the deadline instruction that might say either "postmarked by" or "received by." If a submission must be *received by* a certain date, you have less time to prepare the proposal than you do for one that must be *postmarked* on that date.

Remember that if instructions are not followed exactly, the proposal will be disqualified from consideration. We hope we've stressed this sufficiently (but we'll say it one more time): Details matter, even if they seem trivial. We sometimes think that grantmakers are testing applicants to see if they know how to read and follow instructions—to see if potential grantees can be trusted with vast sums of money. You can't blame the funders for that, can you?

POP QUIZ

True or False?

1. Grant-application packages may come in all shapes and sizes, but they all contain the same basic information.
2. Don't ever call a program officer to ask a question about the application package. The officer is not permitted to provide any information to grant seekers.
3. Most grant applications will have at least one question that will not pertain to you or your organization. You are not expected to answer every question.