



A QUICK GUIDE TO GRANT WRITING

for Minority Serving Institutions

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“Grant seeking is a process, not an event. Grant making is not a charity. It’s an investment. Your only real relationship with the potential funder is the problem. You are both trying to solve the same problem. The proposal tells the potential funder how you intend to do it and why they should invest in you.”

–Central Piedmont Community College, Grant Writing Tips

Grant writing is a skill that has become increasingly important for academics at all levels but especially for those hailing from institutions that are traditionally under-resourced, like Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). For those working at MSIs and others in similar positions, this short guide outlines the steps necessary to effectively write grant proposals and secure grant funding. For the sake of keeping this document true to its name—quick—the advice covered below has been organized and boiled down to the most important points. For more in-depth information, please see the references list for the sources from which we derived these essential steps.

It goes without saying that grant writing takes a lifetime to master because the terms and conditions of the grants themselves continue to change. Each successful grant proposal requires customization with regard to context and audience. That said, this guide will provide all the basics you need to get started.

Start Early

- The process almost always takes longer than you think it will. Count backwards and make sure you have time to complete the following: get internal institutional approval, collect letters of support from partners and participants, collect the data needed to argue your case, get feedback on various drafts, get approval on the budget (if needed), and engage in final proof-reading/copy editing. Don’t underestimate or skip any part of this process.

Do Your Homework

- Look for funding sources whose philosophy and focus are consistent with your project’s goals and objectives. Although you will eventually have to tailor your project to the funding guidelines regardless, if it’s a bad match to begin with, your time is usually better spent looking elsewhere.
- Read the Request for Proposals (RFP) carefully, and at least several times, before you decide to apply. Your proposed project must solve a problem in which the grant maker is interested and meet all of the guidelines for a particular RFP.
- Even if you have worked with this grant maker before, go to the grant maker’s website and make sure you have the most up-to-date information about them: annual reports, staff/board lists, other posted RFPs/areas of interest, summaries of previously funded grants, reports on funding

“The Three Ps—Most successful grant writers give the same advice: begin your search for a grant with a project, a plan and permission.”

–Linda Starr, “Show Me the Money: Tips and Resources for Successful Grant Writing”

initiatives, newsletters & press releases, etc. All of this background information provides clues that will help your proposal meet the guidelines and stand out amongst other applicants.

- Be familiar with funders’ submission/approval processes for the specific grant opportunity to which you are applying. For example, some funders do not accept “blind” or uninvited proposals. Others may require you to apply for a planning grant before applying for a larger implementation grant.
- Call or email the funder for clarification as needed. Try to talk to the Program Officer in charge of the grant you will be applying for, rather than a general administrative person. Before you call or email them, be prepared to clearly and concisely describe the general idea you want to get funded or the problem you are seeking to address. Be sure you are not asking questions that are already answered in the literature (RFP, funder’s website, etc.)
- Make note of how the application must be submitted (e.g., hard copy, email attachment, etc.) and whether the funder requires you to pre-register or use their electronic application process. With regards to the latter, make sure you are fully informed of any documentation (e.g., registration, tax ID numbers, etc.) you will need.

Letters of Support

- It can take a long time to get a letter of support, especially if university presidents need to sign them. So start right away, check on the process regularly (but professionally), and, again, leave extra time.
- Write a template or “sample letter” that busy people can personalize, but be sure it doesn’t read like a form letter. Ask prospective letter writers to highlight their contribution or how your proposal speaks directly to their needs and interests.
- If you have a connection that is extremely pertinent to the grant proposal you are writing – reach out. For example, if you are writing a grant on increasing the college readiness of Latino students and one of your board members heads a nationally recognized Latino after-school organization, then email or call them. You never know what advice, contacts, or resources they might be able to offer.

Working With a Team

- At the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions (CMSI), we often work in teams! Working in teams allows for more ideas and creativity.
- Typically, when writing a grant proposal, we meet to: 1) brainstorm and discuss our best ideas; 2) outline the various components of the project and the grant; and 3) discuss feasibility and alternatives (Plan B).
- Once we choose a project, we divide responsibilities for initial program development, data collection, outreach to partners, and grant writing, assigning each subtask to team members with the most expertise in that area. If no one on staff has that expertise, we contact and bring aboard people that do.

“Try to have a hook – something different that will make your grant stand out from the many submissions.”

–Central Piedmont Community College, Grant Writing Tips

- We also make sure to contact any people/organizations directly involved in the grant to get their input, assess their interest, and secure their support.

Proposal Title

- Your title should be intriguing and eye catching; it should not be totally mysterious or ambiguous. It is better to be clear than coy. Think of the title like a mini-abstract: it should include all the key elements of your grant.
- Don't settle for the first title you think of. Get ideas and feedback from colleagues.

Abstracts and Objective Statements

- It's a good idea to write your abstract LAST even though it will be the first thing readers see in your proposal. The abstract should accurately reflect the proposal as it has evolved rather than how you first envisioned it.
- The abstract should be as succinct as possible. If funders have a word limit, always stay within the limit.
- The abstract should inform the people who are sorting the grants for review, as well as those reviewing multiple grants, with everything they need to know in a nutshell: who, what, why, where, when, how, how much, to what end(s).
- Similarly, before you start writing the grant narrative, everyone involved should agree on and be able to articulate your objective. See some examples of clearly written objectives below:

We will provide 800 low-income, African American male students at three urban public high schools in Chicago with weekly college and career counseling during their junior and senior years (2016-2017). At the end of this time, we anticipate a 35% increase in college applications and acceptances.

Between 2016-2018 we will conduct three week-long summer professional development workshops for STEM faculty at [NAME] University. Faculty will learn about innovative engagement and retention strategies for students in STEM in gateway courses. At the end of each summer workshop, faculty will revise their upcoming spring courses accordingly.

Over a three-year period (2016-2018), at least 100 community volunteers will be trained in teen substance abuse prevention. At the end of this period, participants will co-author a handbook for teens, teachers, and families. The book will be distributed through 15 community organizations in the [NAME OF] area.

“Follow the rules set down by the funder. Don’t assume that more is better or that your way is better. Most funders know what they want and ask for it.”

–Linda Starr, “Show Me the Money: Tips and Resources for Successful Grant Writing”

Narrative

- Your main narrative should fully describe your organization and the program/project you wish to implement. Do not depend on appendices or support materials to fill-in key information, as these are not always read carefully. At the same time, most grants have strict word/page limits and you have to be very strategic about adhering to these guidelines. There is a delicate balance between being concise and sacrificing important information. Also, be sure to answer all questions clearly. A good way to start is to:
 - Cut and paste all the headings and instructions from the RFP/ guidelines into a blank document, so you know you’ll cover each one.
 - Match headings in the proposal to the RFP guidelines so the reader doesn’t have to “hunt for information.”
 - Reiterate funder’s goals and objectives and relate them to yours.
 - Use similar language to that which the funding agency uses in the RFP. For example, if the RFP stresses “civic outreach,” “community partnerships,” or “educational opportunities,” be sure to reiterate these concepts throughout the proposal. Vary your language, but stick to major themes.
 - Research winning strategies from previously funded proposals. Don’t plagiarize, of course, but try to learn the kind of language, organizations, and goals that funders have already validated.

Grant Matching Rubric

- You need to convince reviewers that your methods will allow you to answer your research questions or solve the problems you have identified. You may want to create a grant matching rubric or checklist such as the following:

Question	Yes	No
Matches prime objectives and goals of RFP?		
Solves a clearly identifiable and proven problem?		
Answers “need to know” questions?		
Demonstrates deep and nuanced understanding of issues?		
Matches required or desired demographics?		
Project directors have necessary skills and qualifications?		
Applicant has clear and strong record of dedication to project?		
Involved partners have clearly defined roles?		
Partners are familiar with grant and demonstrate full commitment?		
Necessary funds are or are likely to be available (direct + in-kind)?		
Goals can feasibly be completed in proposed timeframe?		
Evaluation methods are rigorous, compatible, and realistic?		

*“Make it interesting;
let every sentence do
a job.”*

*–Central Piedmont
Community College,
Grant Writing Tips*

Writing Style

- As noted previously, have clear sub-headers that relate to funders’ guidelines.
- Keep sentences short with key phrases underlined or bolded to make them stand out. Use bullets for lists.
- Resist the temptation to force a lot of information into limited spaces by using tiny fonts or narrow margins. This can make your proposal more difficult to read and can annoy reviewers.
- Switch-out phrases or words that are overused or repetitive, such as “indeed,” “therefore,” or “moreover.” The writing should seem fresh and energetic, not like a form letter.
- Break up run-on narratives and extra long paragraphs.
- Avoid using jargon or casually referring to scholarship in your field, especially if the reviewers are unlikely to be familiar with this literature.
- Don’t use too many acronyms or assume that reviewers know the meaning of all acronyms.
- It’s okay to have attachments and appendices beyond what the funder requests (unless not allowed), but don’t assume the funder will read them. Make sure they complement your main narrative rather than substitute for it.
- Use positive, active language such as “will” or “can.”
- Use your computer’s thesaurus for variations on ways to rephrase commonly used words.

Data Collection, Literature Review, and Use of Past Research

- Grant proposals generally do not ask for a full scholarly literature review, and, in fact, space constraints often make that impossible and inadvisable. You do, however, need to demonstrate that you are well read and informed about current and past research relevant to your topic as well as public policies, programs, and other attempts to answer the same questions posed by your grant.
- Prove your points. Provide facts and data to back up your claims. Consult various sources such as: the National Center for Education Statistics (Schools and Staffing Survey [SASS]), Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the U.S. Census (including American Community Survey), and the institutional research branch of the campus(es) that you are exploring.

“We want our work to appear scholarly, so we habitually inflate our prose with large words and complicated sentences in order to achieve the effect of serious thinking. Unfortunately, such tactics have the opposite effect on readers.”

– Robert Porter,
“Why Academics
Have a Hard Time
Writing Good Grant
Proposals”

Using Quotes from Scholars

- Use quotes from scholarly literature sparingly, but strategically.
- Try to choose quotes that are from highly visible and respected people in the area you addressing. The quote will have more weight if the funder recognizes the person you are quoting.
- Do not use quotes from people who are “polarizing” or aligned at either extreme of the political spectrum. Keep in mind that funders are accountable to their boards and to the public and generally don’t want to fund organizations or individuals that have the potential to generate bad publicity.
- If the funder quotes someone in its RFP, it is often a good idea to start your background research with this person. Why did they choose this person? What is it about this person’s work that the funder finds intriguing/promising? This can give you important clues as to what the funder is looking for in a proposal and/or most wants to accomplish.
- Consider using a different quote from the same person. If you can’t find a good quote from that person – or if it seems too obvious to use another quote by him or her – look to see whom that person cites in his or her own work. Follow the clues.

Using Quotes from the Target Demographic

- Quoting directly from the people involved, or from those who will be shaped by your grant, can be extremely powerful. For example, if your project is about helping bilingual, migrant students get into college, a short, well-chosen quote from a migrant student about his or her experience in school – either positive or negative – can be a compelling way to illustrate the people behind the data.
- These kinds of quotes also show that you are familiar with the groups that you are trying to help and that you are not approaching this work from a purely theoretical or paternalistic standpoint.

Feasibility

- Most funders require that you include a detailed work plan or timeline of activities. Even if they don’t, it’s a good idea to construct one for internal purposes. It is usually a good idea to format this information as clearly as possible, perhaps in a table or visual. A sample timeline looks like this:

Why	What	Who	When
Objective 1	Activities	Assigned Person	Timeline
Objective 2	Activities	Assigned Person	Timeline
Objective (etc.)	Activities	Assigned Person	Timeline

“Assume that your reviewer is reading in bed, falling asleep – which is likely true.”

–Central Piedmont Community College, Grant Writing Tips

- After constructing your detailed work plan, be sure to carefully consider whether the grant is feasible. With regard to a specific event, for example, ask yourself questions such as: Have I left enough time for event planning, invitations, and publicity? Are the events happening at a time/place where the targeted participants can attend? If there is a low turnout, do I have a backup plan? Do I have the budget for all the speakers I have identified? If I am counting on participant evaluation, will I hand out and collect the evaluations at the event itself? What kinds of issues regarding consent and confidentiality should I attend to in advance?

Outside Readers

- It is often helpful to get outside opinions on whether the grant seems feasible. It is a good idea to ask people with expertise in different aspects of the grant. For example, you might ask someone who has had a successful track record with the funder. Ask someone who knows a lot about the subject matter or problem you are addressing. Consider asking people from different disciplines or who work at different institutions to get the broadest perspectives possible. Ask someone who has worked closely with the demographics that you are trying to serve/reach out to. Ask someone who is a good writer and proofreader. Even consider asking someone who you think would disagree with your basic premise. If it's friendly criticism, it can be helpful.
- Don't assume. For example, if you are planning a program at an elementary school but work at a university, you should not assume you know the culture of the school. You need to coordinate with the school's contact person about space, time, transportation, food expectations, language translators, available technology, etc.
- Again, well-written and genuine letters from partners in the grant go a long way in convincing funders that you have the support you need and that your goals are feasible.

Partners

- List any organizations, individuals, policymakers, or other funders who will be involved in your project and the capacity to which they will contribute (e.g., advisor, liaison, evaluator, in-kind support, etc.)
- Describe as fully as possible how their support is critical to the project's success or, at the very least, how they will enrich the project in unique ways.
- For each person/organization listed, be sure to describe: 1) their qualifications for the role they are playing; 2) how you are connected to them; and 3) the extent of their partnership (e.g., a letter of support vs. receiving an honorarium or consulting fee).
- Obtain letters for support/commitment as early as possible.

“One of the most essential components of a grant proposal is not even written in words. It is the all-important budget. A budget is really nothing more than the translation of your agency’s narrative story into another language, the language of numbers.”

*–Cheryl A. Clarke,
Storytelling for
Grantseekers: A
Guide to Creative
Nonprofit Fundraising*

Constructing a Budget

- After you have developed your idea for the proposal, make a list of expenses that will be incurred throughout the duration of the grant.
- Cross-reference these expenses with the grant application guidelines or RFP to see if these costs are allowable on the grant and fit within any required criteria. Throughout the development of any grant budget, you should be in contact with your institution’s grants or sponsored programs office for guidance, as each institution has different policies. The staff should offer some insight to help you answer questions such as what is considered a direct or indirect cost, what is the fringe benefit rate, etc.
- Once you know what costs are allowable, you can begin to develop your budget.
- Put each expense as a separate line item in the budget; however, it is a lot easier to follow if you then group the expenses into categories. For example, you may include salary support for the principal investigator, a coordinator, and a research assistant. Each one should be listed on a separate line, but placed under one category—in this instance, “personnel.”
- After you complete the budget, you have to write a budget narrative. The budget narrative serves to justify the costs included in your budget. It is also an opportunity to explain to the reviewer/funder what the included costs are for specifically as well as how they are reasonable and necessary.
 - Describe who is included and a very brief statement explaining why they are included and how much, if not 100%, of their salary is included in the budget. Then, list the percentage of the individual’s effort that will be covered by the grant. For example, if a staff member will be dedicating 25% of their time at work on this project, then 25% of their salary should be included.
 - Mirroring the budget, you can structure the budget narrative by describing each specific cost but doing so by grouping them in a paragraph titled under a more general category. For example, under the paragraph titled “Personnel,” you can discuss the salary support you included for each person in your budget.
- After you finish both the budget and budget narrative, remember to submit them to your institution’s office of sponsored programs for review.

Budget Tips to Remember

- Make sure all of your costs are allowable, reasonable, allocable, and necessary.
- Round all numbers to the nearest whole dollar.
- Understand the difference between direct costs and indirect costs.
 - Direct costs are costs that can be classified as being specific and used solely for the particular project in your proposal.
 - Indirect costs, sometimes referred to as F&A (facilities & administrative) costs, are costs that can be identified with both the

“Design your proposal so that no matter how your research turns out, it will provide a contribution to knowledge and understanding.”

–Valian, Rabinowitz, and Nicols-Grinenko, Grant Writing Tips

proposed project as well as other initiatives at the institution, such as Ph.D. student support, tuition remission, grants management support, facilities usage, etc.

- The allowable indirect cost rate depends on the rate, if any, that the funder specifies in the RFP. The indirect cost is a percentage of the total direct cost amount.
- Make sure that the combined totals of the direct costs and indirect costs do not exceed the grant award maximum.
- Remember to account for inflation rates as well as for salary increases. Three percent per year is typical.

Evaluation and Dissemination of Data

- Consider how the proposal and project will be evaluated. What would you want to know about the success of an idea before you would consider adopting it?
- Your evaluation can be quantitative, qualitative, or both, depending on the funder and your objectives. Even if it is qualitative, however, you need to show you have a strong methodology, plans for triangulation, and a systematic method of coding and analysis.
- Note that if you are going to produce quantitative work, you may want to consult the What Works Clearinghouse standards for methodological rigor.
- Directly relate all your evaluation plans and data collection to your objectives. Likewise, do not promise data you cannot realistically or legally collect.
- Describe how data will be collected and by whom. Likewise, be sure to include the qualifications of the person(s) collecting data, including issues of access to collect data and all issues of confidentiality.
- Detail who will have access to view the data, who will be responsible for putting it together and analyzing it, and perhaps, most importantly, how you will use it.
- Continuation plans, while often projections that need to be flexible, are an indicator of institutional commitment.

Other Strategies for Reviewing Your Proposal Before You Submit

- Read the final draft out-loud to an independent but interested party. Or, ask them to read it to themselves without making any notes. Then ask them to tell you – from memory – what the project will do, how it will do it, why it is significant, and how it is different. Rewrite any parts of the proposal where these answers aren’t clear and correct or where they don’t flow effortlessly.
- Think Win-Win-Win! Ask yourself these questions: How will receiving this funding help the people my organization serves? How will receiving this funding help my organization? How will awarding this funding to my organization help the donor/funder?

“The ability to take rejection and use it to improve your grant-writing practice is the difference between many faculty members who write one proposal and give up, and those who persist to become funded principal investigators.”

*–Russell Olwell,
“Learning from
‘Missed Shots’”*

- Include a “clincher” and a “hook.” Think about what will make your project stand out from all the others. Provide information on why your project is needed and why you/your institution is distinctly positioned to do it. What do you bring to the table that no one else does? The funder wants to know that this project is important to you and you are not just “looking for money” or trying to generate press.

If Your Proposal Gets Funded

- As soon as possible, acknowledge the funder and write a sincere “thank you” note, reiterating your commitment and excitement about the grant.
- Let everyone involved in the grant know, including partner organizations, advisors, and organizations providing in-kind services or matching funds.
- If you are unable to keep to your original timeline – for whatever reason – construct a new timeline and get approval from the funder.
- Needless to say, do what you said you were going to do and spend money as budgeted. Again, if you need to make changes, let the grant maker know and clearly explain why.

If Your Proposal Doesn’t Get Funded

- Read reviewers’ and funding agency representatives’ comments carefully.
- If you are unclear on their comments, or if they did not provide enough data, it is okay to contact them, but try not to be defensive. You might want to apply again. Listen and take notes with the goal of finding out how you can strengthen and resubmit the proposal or to simply learn and become a better grant writer in general.
- Remember that at some funding agencies, program directors have some discretion and having a collegial and positive discussion can lead to new opportunities.
- If you are asked to re-submit your grant or to apply for a planning grant, respond as quickly as possible so as not to lose momentum.
- If you strongly disagree with a reviewers’ or funders’ comments, consider asking your colleagues what they think. They might be more objective. In the end, however, the final judgment of how to proceed is yours. It may well be that your goals and those of the funder conflict and they are not the right partner for you.

Final Piece of Advice

- “Adopt a Service Attitude: My epiphany came when I realized that grant programs do not exist to make me successful, but rather my job is to make those programs successful” (Porter, 2007, p. 39).

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