

Tips on Writing a Successful Application

You have identified potential funders for your program.

Now it is time to create the best possible proposal or application.

(Note: Not all of these items may not be necessary or appropriate for all proposals you submit.)

1. Build relationships

- Introduce yourself to your potential funder.
- Invite them to visit your project/program/activity/neighborhood.
- Determine if this potential funder prefers collaborative programs, with two or more partners.
- Ask for recommendation on which of your programs to propose and how much to request.
- Ask for feedback if your proposal is not funded – how can it be improved?
- Write thank you letters.
- File required reports when due. Even if no report is required, do follow up with a report of the impact of the funding.

2. Preparation – the basics

These will vary depending on the size of your organization/group.

- A basic background document of your organization's history, activities, goals, and accomplishments. This list will be modified according to the guidelines for each proposal, but you will not have to create new introductory narrative each time.
- Board of directors/advisory board lists (address, phone number, email address, dates of board term)
- Brief résumés/background of key staff, volunteers, and consultants
- Materials that describe your program
- Needs of your organizational focus
- Organizational chart
- Audits or financial statements

3. Preparation – your potential funder

- Be familiar with funder's submission/approval process, as well as the funding timeline.
- Review the average size of grants made by the funder – go to www.Guidestar.org and review the funder's 990s. This form also will indicate the funder's priorities and, often, the location of their actual grants.
- Make sure your project meets the grantor's priorities.
- Self-evaluation: Is your project feasible? Does your project have challenges?
- Identify potential partners and supporters. If you need letters of support, which you may need to draft, REQUEST THESE EARLY. And follow up on your requests.

4. Proposal Organization : Request for Proposal (RFP) may include (and your proposal should be in the order indicated in the RFP):

Copy the RFP into your proposal or type the key texts into your Word document. These can then be developed into the lead sentence for each section. Highlight the RFP text in yellow (or another color) so it can be deleted before the proposal is submitted. Word can also be used for word and character count.

- Cover letter (include the amount requested)
- Table of Contents (if required or if the proposal is long)
- Abstract: state, in the future tense: (a) the general purpose; (b) specific goals; (c) significance. There may be additional areas to include, also. Be specific. Use statements such as, “The purpose is to ...”
- Organizational background (modified from your basic document)
- Project narrative -- Include a statement of the problem, data to demonstrate need, objectives or goals, implementation plan, intended results, evaluation process (if relevant), and future sustainability.
 - Introduction: cover the key elements of your proposal, including a statement of the problem, the amount you are requesting, and your principle goal(s).
 - Identify your needs and focus: Why is your project important? What is its significance? Who will benefit? How will they benefit?
 - Goal(s) and objective(s)
 - The need and data to support the need - make sure the need relates to the project.
 - Your experience and qualifications for the program
 - Personnel: qualifications of staff, volunteers, consultants required for project
 - Implementation plan and timeframe: When will you begin and complete each step? Consider using a visual, such as a chart or table, of your timeline.
 - Tables: use a table to organize a lot of information into a readable form (if this is not for an online form).
- Budget and descriptive budget narrative– be realistic
 - Budget table
 - An Excel spreadsheet with (one example)
 - A separate budget narrative. Include an explanation of all costs associated with your project; including in-kind items and services. The explanation should explain how the expense relates to your project and the math showing how you arrive at the budget number.
- Evaluation and reporting to funder: How is success to be measured?
- Appendices: Items to include depend on the RFP requirements.

Funding Source :>	Funder	Other resources	Total
Expense item			
Expense item			
TOTALS			

- A row for each item (travel, office expense, consultants, phone)
- A column for each funding source (this funder, other funders)
- A total column and a total row
- You may include items necessary for the project, but not fundable by this funder – include that amount in the other resources column
- Include other funding sources for your project; funders like to know that others funders provide support

5. Do's

- Do read the funder's requirements and priorities – is your program a good match?
- Do allow time to prepare, review, and rewrite.
- Do request a grant for a project that is appropriate for your group.
- Do answer each question in the order asked in the RFP.
- Do read your narrative out loud; ask a colleague to read it. And then, ask someone who is not familiar with your programs to read it. Does it make sense to this person?
- Do tell a story to illustrate needs; make it personal.
- Do use pictures, when possible.
- Do provide successful examples of your project.
- Do conform to page and word limits. Online forms make this mandatory.
- Do format the proposal so that it is easy to read. Use headings to break the proposal into sections. If it is long, include a table of contents with page numbers.
- Do include a cover letter.
- Do answer all questions.
- Do follow the application guidelines exactly.
- Do be explicit and specific.
- Do be realistic in designing the project.
- Do use charts and tables to organize information succinctly.
- Do use the key words found in the RFP.
- Do pay attention to formatting and document setup:
 - Use Times New Roman or Arial, preferably 12 point. Do not use unusual fonts.
 - You may use special formatting such as italics, upper case to emphasize key items. However, if the text is to be copied onto an online form, some special formatting may not transfer to the form.
Hint: when submitting for online forms, create your text in your Word document, and then copy and paste into the form. Use Word's character/word count function,
- Recommended margins: 1”
- Footer: include the organization name, project name, and page number.
- Do use action words (a few examples)
 - Do = Implement, achieve, initiate, accomplish
 - Get = obtain, procure, establish
 - Make = design, create, develop
 - Do use “will” and “can.”
 - Avoid “could,” or “would.”
- Do convert files to be submitted to PDF format if possible.

6. And don'ts

- Don't create a project just to get funding.
- Don't use jargon.
- Don't use too many acronyms. Restate the full name, with the acronym after it in parentheses if you haven't used it in several pages or if you've only used it once before.
- Don't assume. Anything.

If you never ask for the money, they'll never give you the money. Besides, the worst thing they can do is say, :No.”

A quote in a newsletter to a New York foundation board.

“If you do not ask the answer cannot be yes.”

Mary Linda Schwarzbart, Interim Director, East Tennessee Community Design Center
