AICC
Agricultural Innovation & Commercialization Center

Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

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EXPERT REVIEWED

Introduction

For many people, applying for a grant is a mysterious process. You may have the feeling that those who are successful and receive grants are either lucky or have "inside connections." But grant writing does not have to be mysterious. In most cases, grants are awarded based on a careful review process with criteria that everyone has access to.

In this publication, we help you break down the mystery of preparing a more competitive grant application. In the following sections, we outline the steps you need to complete. The examples that we use in this publication are oriented towards grants to assist new business ventures. But because the steps to completing a successful grant proposal are the same for all grants, this publication will be useful even if you are considering a grant in another area. At the end of the publication, you will find a series of worksheets to help you with the process of writing a successful grant proposal.

Ensuring a Good Fit

Let's face it—when you are applying for a grant you are asking an agency for money. Agencies generally award

Audience: Business managers seeking grant funding to support their business activities

Content: Explains the steps involved in completing a successful grant proposal and presents specific examples for new business ventures

Outcome: Readers will understand the necessary steps in writing a successful grant proposal.

funding to solve problems or address issues that are important to them. Therefore, to maximize your chance of success, be sure your proposal indicates you will be addressing a problem or improving a situation the agency funding the grant thinks is important.

There are different ways to ensure a good fit between your proposal and the funding agency. First, you are off to a great start if your goals are consistent with the agency's goals. Next, check the call for proposals (sometimes called "request for proposals" [RFP] or "notice of funds available" [NOFA]). In the remainder of this publication we use the phrase "call for proposals."

Check and see if the objectives for this particular grant coincide with your objectives. Keep in mind that there are different objectives. For example, sometimes job creation is the goal, while another time increased regional income is the focus. While job creation and increased regional income are related, it is possible to have higher income in the region with no new jobs. Therefore, it is critical that you identify what outcomes are important for this agency and this grant proposal and make sure your proposal addresses these objectives.

So, what do you do if your project is not a good match for a particular agency and grant? Sometimes, you may be able to effectively change your proposal to meet the expectations of the funding agency. But be careful! It is easy to fool yourself

Example: Jane's Winery

Jane owns a small winery. Her business currently involves a vineyard and wine production. All of her current sales are through distributors. She would like to open a tasting room and sell her wine directly to consumers, but she is not sure if there is sufficient consumer demand to be successful. Jane is going to apply for a grant from a government agency to fund market research to determine the market feasibility of her business idea.

The call for proposals from the government agency is as follows:

> The objective of this research is to identify an array of innovative marketing strategies to increase sales of agricultural and related products. The research will assess and evaluate the type, size, and location of market opportunities and enable the decision maker to develop strategies to gain entry into these markets. Examples of appropriate topics for research include, but are not limited to: Assessment and Specification of Marketing Opportunities, Development of Marketing Systems, and Development of Innovative Real-Time Systems.

Because Jane's project involves the assessment and specification of the market potential for direct sales of wine from a tasting room, it is a very good fit for this funding agency. This is further confirmed after she watches a Webcast of a presentation by the program administrator and during a brief phone conversation with the program director. Knowing that her interests align well with the program, she is now curious as to how well her proposed idea will score with the proposal reviewers.

into believing you have made all necessary changes to fit the call for proposals. However, the people reviewing the proposals can quickly figure out that you are really trying to "fit a square peg in a round hole" and place your proposal towards the bottom of the pile.

Also, be sure to protect your integrity. Determine what your goals are and what you want to do. Make sure that the proposal you submit is consistent with your goals. If you have to adjust your proposal so much that you sacrifice your core goals and objectives, you will not only have tarnished your integrity, but you won't be successful in the long run.

If your proposal is not a good fit for the grant, look for other funding sources rather than prepare a proposal with little chance of success. Just because you decide not to develop a proposal now does not mean that you have given up on your project. You are simply looking for another funding source that is a better fit.

Proposal Preparation

Before you begin to write your proposal, there are several steps you should take to prepare. Although the temptation is strong to immediately begin writing, your proposal will be much more effective if you do some "homework" first.

List Goals and Objectives of the Program

Begin by determining the priority areas of the funding agency. Carefully examine the call for proposals, because the goals and objectives of the specific grant are often explicitly listed there. Also, pay attention to what the granting agency is doing and what they are saying publicly. Take a look at recent press releases from the funding agency. Review recent speeches or public presentations given by leaders from that agency. You will gain important insight about their priorities.

Of course you don't have to follow through on every one of the above suggestions, but gathering background information from different sources is a useful way to identify the goals of the program. When you have a clear sense of what the agency values, you can adapt your proposal accordingly. We have provided a worksheet to help you capture the agency's goals and objectives, and determine how your proposal fits them (Agency's Goals worksheet, p. 7).

List Proposal Evaluation Criteria

Most grants have specific criteria that the reviewers use for evaluating all of the proposals. These criteria are often explicitly stated in the call for proposals. Reviewers are instructed to evaluate all of the proposals accordingly. In some instances, the number of points that the reviewers could potentially assign to each criterion is also listed. Make sure that your proposal matches the criteria set out by the funding agency.

As you are preparing your proposal, pay careful attention to these criteria. Put yourself in the position of a reviewer, and evaluate how well you would rate your proposal according to each criterion. We have provided a worksheet for you to list the evaluation criteria and rate your own proposal based on them (Evaluation Criteria worksheet, p. 8).

Seek Clarification

When you first read the call for proposals, you may have the feeling that it is filled with jargon, and, if so, you are not alone. Grant programs often have a set of definitions and language that are unique to that program. To assist you, there is usually a list of definitions somewhere in the call for proposals. After reviewing the list of terms, you may have

questions about terminology, as well as other aspects of the grant. If so, write them down.

Once you have your questions written down, you are ready to call or e-mail the contact person at the funding agency. The name and contact information are usually listed in the call for proposals. Often, the preferred form of contact (e.g., e-mail or telephone) is also listed. Naturally, it is a good idea to use the preferred form of contact. The contact person at the funding agency will be very pleased to work with you if, when you call, your questions are well thought out and written down. After all, the agency wants to award grants to people or organizations that take preparing the proposal seriously because that is a sign that you can complete good work and meet their stated goals.

List Tasks to Be Accomplished

Preparing a grant proposal is often an involved process. Begin by developing a plan of attack. We suggest you generate a list of tasks and assign different members of your team to different tasks, along with specific due dates. This will help you monitor the progress of your grant proposal.

Then begin to execute your plan. In laying out the plan, consider what things you have control over and what things

Example: Evaluation Criteria for Jane's Winery

Jane explores how highly her idea will rate with the program reviewers by having an objective person score her idea based on the program's criteria. The call for proposals from the government agency lists the following evaluation criteria and possible points.

- **Feasibility:** (0-15 points)
  Are the stated objectives logical, and will they lead toward proving the type, size, and location of the market opportunities? Does the research plan offer an original and innovative approach to the problem? Can the research plan reasonably be completed in the requested grant period?

- **Importance of the Problem:** (0-15 points)
  Does the proposal provide sufficient justification for the importance of the problem and clearly indicate the anticipated commercial potential of the proposed research?

- **Investigator and Resource Qualifications:** (0-10 points)
  Is adequate bibliographic information provided to document

that the project director, other key staff, and any consultants have the appropriate training and experience to carry out the proposed research plan?

- **Budget:** (0-3 points)
  Is the budget appropriate for the proposed research plan, and is sufficient budget detail provided to indicate clearly how the funs would be used?

- **Commercial Potential:** (0-5 points)
  Does the proposal provide sufficient explanation of the commercial potential for the project?

Jane fills out the Evaluation Criteria form, detailing how her project fits the scoring criteria of the program. She believes—and the person helping her critique her proposal confirms—that her only weak area is the "Importance of the Problem," which is not clearly defined. Therefore, she has decided to rewrite that section of the proposal.

you don't. In addition, pay attention to those things that must be done before you can complete subsequent tasks. Put the tasks in the proper order, and start gathering the external items sooner rather than later. Remember that in most cases due dates for grant proposals are final. If your proposal is late, it will be eliminated no matter how good it is. Good planning is key to on-time delivery.

Writing the Proposal

Many funding sources are highly competitive and only fund a small percentage of applications. A top-quality proposal, one that gets funded, delivers a logical and consistent message that matches the evaluation criteria laid out in the call for proposals, involves a team that is well qualified for the proposed work and has a positive track record, and includes a budget that is appropriate for the work proposed.

The text that you write is the "guts" of your proposal. A top-quality proposal contains a message that is easily understood and believable. This message must be convincing to the reviewers. Keep in mind that reviewers are often reviewing many proposals and that one way to make it easier for a reviewer to go through your proposal is to present your information in a consistent format. When the funding agency suggests a format in the call for proposals, follow it. Sometimes you can find a template for a particular grant on the Internet. If you do use a template, make sure you check for completeness, because, after all, you are the one responsible for what you submit. In the following sections, we cover four keys to success in writing proposals in more detail.

Priority Problem

By this point, you should know that the project that you are proposing addresses a problem that is a priority with the funding agency. As noted earlier, you are asking this agency for money, and the agency wants to direct money towards problems that they deem important. Make sure that the text of your proposal is written so that the reviewers can easily see how your project addresses the agency's priority.

Partnerships

One person cannot do everything or be all things to all people. Therefore, you need partnerships to complete most projects, and developing linkages with appropriate partners can be a key to success. Identify the weaknesses in your team, and seek new team members to fill those "holes." Sometimes, partners bring matching funds, and it is important to document that in your proposal. Other times, partners bring essential technical expertise, and you can demonstrate that by describing the activities your partners will take leadership on. Also, make sure a letter of support from each partner is provided that explicitly states his or her intended contribution.

When you write your proposal, you need to demonstrate to the reviewers that you have all of the components in place. You also want to highlight how the team will be able to work successfully together. For example, by highlighting the success of previous work, you can demonstrate that your team is action-oriented and will make sure to deliver on deadlines. To demonstrate that you have the necessary expertise on your team, you may want to insert a section that highlights the main skills and experience of each team member and identify how that team member will contribute to meeting the objectives of the project.

Draft, Review, Edit, and Repeat

There are some things you can do to make your proposal easier for the reviewers to read. A happy reviewer is usually a more positive reviewer. Make appropriate use of headings and sub-headings. When possible, ensure that your headings and sub-headings correspond to the sections identified in the call for proposals. This makes it easier for the reviewers to find specific sections. It is often helpful to support your text with facts and figures. Make sure that your data is current, and cite the sources for facts and figures. Failure to do so can cause the reviewer to question your ability and integrity.

Your first draft will not yield a proposal that is easy to read. You need to plan on writing and rewriting your proposal several times. Each round of editing moves the proposal one step closer to a proposal that is easy to read. During the process, be sure to get feedback from others who are not afraid to be totally candid with you. Wouldn't you rather have your feelings hurt a bit during the writing and rewriting process than not get selected for funding because your proposal was weak? You may also want to get assistance from an editor who has experience putting proposals together.

There are many different things that you have to do when writing a grant, and it would be easy to get caught up in doing all of those and leave the actual writing of the text until the last minute. This is not a wise use of time. Usually,

reviewers spend the majority of their time evaluating the written text, so make sure your text is well written. Well-written text is free from spelling and typographical errors. It flows easily and is a pleasure to read.

Developing the Budget

The budget is a critical piece of any grant proposal. In preparing your budget, be careful to satisfy all criteria laid out in the call for proposals. Some items (e.g., capital items) are not allowable expenses. Often, a maximum budget value is identified in the call for proposals. Make sure that your budget requests are reasonable and calculated/estimated (as opposed to guessed). Reviewers can sense when numbers are made up. Keep in mind that the reviewers of your proposal understand that it costs money to make things happen, so you don't need to apologize when you include costs that are fair.

There are different ways that you will communicate your budget in your proposal. The funding agency may provide a specific budget form for you to complete. You will most likely also need to write a budget narrative that is included in the text of the proposal. Keep the budget narrative succinct and to the point, providing just enough information to build credibility.

Pulling It All Together

By now, you know that there will be several components to your grant proposal. For some components, you will have to simply fill in the blanks on different forms. For others, you will have to write a narrative to explain your ideas. Pay careful attention to the components that you are responsible for but have no control over, such as letters of support and partnership commitments. These are critical to your success, but you are dependant on others for them. Be aware of deadlines, and notify others of deadlines when you ask for outside assistance.

Documents

The call for proposals usually gives detailed instructions about the packet you need to put together as your submission. It is important to get this packet correct. Some granting agencies are very strict, and applications that are missing even one element or contain an incomplete element will not be considered for funding. Don't put yourself into the position of having done all the work to prepare a great proposal but, because you missed submitting one component (e.g., budget

narrative), having your proposal moved to the "Incomplete proposal, do not consider further" pile.

Your application packet will include items like a cover page, a table of contents, project narrative, budget and budget narrative, reference list, and bios/resumes of key personnel. The grant announcement will identify which components are required. Keep in mind that the program administrators often take this list and generate a checklist that they and the reviewers use to sort through and rank hundreds of proposals. Also, your instructions may include requirements on the number of copies of the application you need to submit. Once again, be sure and deliver exactly what they ask for.

Matching Funds

Some grants require matching funds, and those grants usually require verification of funds available. There are often instructions on how to provide that verification. If you have further questions, this is something you can add to your list of questions to ask the program contact person.

Letters of Support

Letters of support and partnership commitments are critical to your success, but you are dependant on others for them. Note that it is your job to solicit and submit any letters of support. You can even go so far as to draft the letter for people so that all they have to do is edit the letter and print it on their letterhead. The Letters of Support Plan worksheet (p. 9)will help you keep track of the letters you want to include in your proposal.

Meet the Deadline

Generating your own checklist helps you understand all of the components necessary for a complete grant proposal package. The Application Package Checklist (p. 10) will help you develop your list.

Regardless of the tasks you need to complete, start by developing a plan of work, and begin to execute it. Consider what things you have control over and what things you don't. Put the tasks in sequential order, and start gathering the external items as soon as possible. Remember that the final deadline is final. When you put your plan together, back schedule from the final deadline, and determine your own deadlines for specific tasks. The responsibility of meeting the final deadline is entirely yours.

Remember, some deadlines refer to a postmark, while others refer to physical delivery, and still others involve electronic submission. Pay close attention to both the date and time of the deadline. Once, a group of researchers worked on a grant application for over a year. When they submitted it a blizzard hit, and their packet was stuck on a FedEx truck in a snow bank. They missed their chance for that year. Don't take chances, and, if possible, get the application in early.

You Can Do It

Applying for a grant can seem like a mysterious process. Begin by using the worksheets and ideas from this publication to break down the mystery. If you are willing to put in the time and work, you can write a successful grant proposal.

Example: Plan of Work for Jane's Winery

Now the real work begins. Jane knows she will need a marketing researcher and a project director. State University has a couple of agricultural marketing professors in the Applied Economics department, and one happens to specialize in on-farm retail. The professor has agreed to help. Jane can take advantage of the off season to fill the role of project director. So she schedules a meeting to plan their proposal. At their meeting, they developed the timeline below, complete with tasks and who is responsible. Of course, all of their plans are targeted to be completed one week before the due date of the program, leaving room for one last external review and providing some slack.

Task	Responsible	Due	Completed
Review the Call for Proposals	Jane and Professor	January 1	
Evaluate Agency's Goals using the Worksheet	Jane	January 10	
Complete the Evaluation Criteria Worksheet	Jane and Professor	January 15	
Develop the Application Package Checklist	Jane	January 15	
Identify appropriate partners	Jane and Professor	January 20	
Contact partners and ask for their interest and secure commitment for letters of support	Jane and Professor	January 22	
Prepare your questions for the Contact person at the agency	Jane	January 30	
Make contact and obtain answers to your questions	Jane	January 31	
Revise worksheets as relevant with this new information	Jane	February 5	
Draft, Review, Edit and Repeat	Jane and Professor	March 15	
Develop Budget	Jane and Professor	March 20	
Collect Letters of Support from Partners	Jane	March 1	
Finalize Text	Jane and Professor	March 30	
Complete all forms	Jane	April 1	
Make copies of final proposal	Jane	April 5	
Submit proposal at least 3 working days before the April 15 deadline using a courier service.	Jane	April 10	

NewVentures

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Agency's Goals

In this worksheet, list the goals of the granting organization. These goals may be explicitly listed in the call for proposals, may be intertwined in the narrative, or you may have determined them from other sources. Be as specific as possible. Then, identify where and when you found out about this goal. If you need to go back at a later time, this information will be useful. In the final column, note how your proposal will fulfill each goal. By targeting your proposal to correspond to the priorities of the funding agency, you will increase your chances of having a successful proposal.

Granting Agency's Goals	Where and When You Found Out About This Goal	Describe How Your Proposal Contributes to This Goal
EXAMPLE: Help independent agricultural producers enter into value-added activities	Federal Register, Vol. 70, No. 43 / Monday, March 7, 2005 / Notices	Our family farm (independent producer) will investigate the feasibility of creating a vegetable puree processing business (value-added activity).
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

New Ventures

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Evaluation Criteria

In this table, complete the first column by listing the evaluation criteria of the grant program. If the agency lists the points or percentages that will be used in scoring, fill those values in the second column. In the third column, describe how your project fulfills these criteria. In the last column, you have the opportunity to put yourself in the role of the reviewer and evaluate how well your proposal will rate according to each evaluation criteria. You may also have someone else critique your proposal. Use a rating of 1-10, where 1 is low and 10 is high in the last column.

Refine Ideas: As you write and revise your proposal, pay close attention to how you can position your proposal to earn the largest number of potential points.

Evaluation Criteria	Points	Describe How Your Proposal Matches This Criteria	Rating
EXAMPLE: Project Leadership	0-10 pts	Project leader has 10 yrs of operations management experience, overseeing 5 expansion projects totaling $12.5 million dollars.	10
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

Letters of Support Plan

In this table, list the organizations or individuals who will write you a letter of support. For each letter of support, identify how that organization or individual will support the objectives and purpose of your proposal. In the third column, note the date when you requested the letter, and in the final column, note the date when you received the letter.

Organization & Contact Information	Objective	Letter Requested	Letter Received
EXAMPLE: State University	Pledge to assign Prof. Ling to conduct a market survey.	10/31/06	12/3/06
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			

Application Package Checklist

In the first column of this table, list the components of the application package you must submit. Some of these components will be forms, some will be parts of the text (e.g., Table of Contents, Introduction), some will be support items (e.g., Letters of Support), and some will be further information (e.g., Budget Narrative). In the second column, indicate who from your team is responsible for the completion of the particular item. Fill in dates in the third column to help you plan for the sequential aspect of completing your application. Finally, the last column acts as the check to make sure you have a proposal that is indeed complete.

Item	Who Is Responsible	Due Date	Completed
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			
12.			
Total Application Package		Due Date:	Date Submitted:

Notes

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This material may be available in alternative formats.