

Writing a Successful Proposal

There are many ways to approach proposal writing. It's a rare thing to apply to only one funder and receive a grant that meets all your needs. It takes time to learn, revise, create new proposals, and finally compose a really good one that meets the need of a prospective funder. Though every proposal will vary, most foundations, organizations, and corporations will ask for similar information and follow a similar structure.

Take the time to find a funder that supports the goal of your project. Learn about other projects they have funded and how much they typically give. Funders usually provide guidelines for grant proposal writing, including letters of interest. If you have already chosen a funder that matches your project, read the guidelines carefully. The steps below are commonly required when applying for a grant but remember that the funders guidelines always take precedence over any other format or guide you may have used to write a proposal.

1. Cover Letter

Even though you will probably write your cover letter last, it will be the front page of your proposal and should be written with extreme care. It should be addressed to a specific person and cover the basics of what you need and how you intend to use the requested funds. Remember, this is an important opportunity to make a connection with those who might fund your project. Try to present your project goal in a way that will appeal to your reader and compel them to take action. Share your story. The only time you will not include a cover letter is for an online application or a large government grant.

2. Executive Summary

Your summary is the first thing in your proposal following the cover letter. It should be short and to the point, ranging from a few sentences to a maximum of one page for a lengthy proposal. Here is the place to convince the reader why your program/project is necessary and that you have the capability and expertise to accomplish your goal(s). The summary should be comprehensive and concise. An effective executive summary should:

- Outline the key points of your grant proposal
- Give a brief statement of your funding request
- Inform the reader that your team/organization is qualified to carry out the project and meet the goal.

3. Statement of Need

After introducing your project and what you are working to accomplish, your need statement is where you dive into your purpose and the issue you are addressing. Though need is in the title, this section should actually focus on your target population and their needs rather than on your needs. You can use this section to inform the reviewer of the problem and how you are addressing it. Include facts and/or statistics to support your request. You can also include references to published work on the topic. However, don't overdo the information. Keep it simple and compact, conveying the need and importance of the issue.

4. Goals & Objectives

Once you have introduced your project/program and communicated the need, it is time to present your solution. Here is where you share your goal (what you hope to accomplish) and objectives (the specific results or outcomes you plan to achieve). These two things are often confused but should both be addressed in this section. A goal is a broad statement of what you wish to accomplish. Goals are: big and broad, even visionary. A goal is really about the ultimate impact or outcome that you hope to bring about. Link the goal of your grant proposal back to your need statement.

A goal is only as good as the objectives that go with it. Your objectives represent the steps toward accomplishing your goal. An objective is narrow, tangible, and measurable. You can use the acronym S.M.A.R.T. to guide the creation of measurable objectives:

Specific answers the question “What will be done?”

Measurable answers the question “How will you know it meets expectations?”

Achievable answers the question “Can it be done?”

Relevant answers the question “Should it be done?” and “What will be the impact?”

Time-Oriented answers the question “When will it be done?”

5. Methods

The methods section of your proposal explains how you’ll reach your goal and objectives. It should include the details of your project/program, how you will implement each step, a timeline of your activities, partners you will work with, and the resources you need to carry out your project. This section should tie everything together. The following questions can help you think through this section:

- Do the methods logically follow the needs statement and goals?
- Are the activities, and who will perform them, clearly explained?
- Is our timeline reasonable and logical?
- Will your activities allow you to measure impact?

6. Evaluation

Your funders will want to know how the money was spent and the impact of your program. As you plan, make sure you invest time and resources to track your success and monitor the impact of your efforts.

7. Sustainability

Funders typically do not want to be the only means of support for your project and are interested in knowing that others are backing your efforts and can help sustain your program in the future. This section is the place to include a brief statement of what you are doing to garner support for your program in the future.

8. Conclusion

Close your proposal with a strong statement that summarizes how your project will make an impact. Thank the prospective funder for considering your proposal.