

Planning and Writing a Grant Proposal: The Basics

Grant Proposal Writing is Exciting, Imaginative Work

So, you want to write a grant proposal? This is exciting! This means that you have valuable research to do or a particular nonprofit to build or a community resource you're passionate about developing. You have a distinct vision for how something could be improved or advanced, and you're ready to ask for funding or other support to help this vision become a reality.

As you reach toward this unrealized vision by developing a grant proposal, you should think about successful grant writing as an act of imagination. Professor Kate Vieira, a composition and rhetoric professor at UW-Madison with considerable grant writing experience, describes grant proposal writing as a creative process akin to fiction writing—these are works of imagination. Professor Vieira recommends approaching the task of writing a grant proposal with an attitude of wonder and excitement as you strive to turn your ideas into something real. You have a great idea, and you think that you're the best person to achieve a specific goal. Now you just need to convince others to get excited about this vision as well.

Overview

On this handout, we offer some ways of thinking about grant proposals and advice about the process of planning and writing a proposal. We consider grant proposals' overall purpose, audience, and expectations in order to make this information applicable across a range of contexts. **However, this general approach has important limits.** First, you will need to get more tailored advice about grant writing within your specific discipline or sphere. Second, you'll need to follow very carefully the exact instructions about proposals from the granting agencies to which you are applying.

Talk with professors, mentors, previous grant recipients, the funding agency/group you are applying to, and trusted advisers in your field to learn more about what successful grant proposals look like in your situation and to get feedback on your plan and on your drafting process.

Before you start writing your grant proposal, you'll want to make sure that you:

- develop a specific, meaningful, actionable plan for what you want to do and why you want to do it;
- consider how your plan will achieve positive results;
- locate a granting organization or source that funds projects like the one you have in mind;
- research that organization to make sure that its mission aligns with your plan;
- review the organization's proposal guidelines; and
- examine sample proposals from your department, peers, and/or the organization.

When you've done all of this, you're ready to start drafting your proposal!

Additional Resources about Grants and Grant Writing

For students, faculty, or staff at UW-Madison, a great place to learn more about grants, grant proposal writing, and granting institutions is the Grants Information Collection at UW-Madison's Memorial Library. Check out their website (go.wisc.edu/grants) and our review of some of their materials as well as links to other useful grant resources on our online writer's handbook.

Considering the Audience, Purpose, and Expectations of a Grant Proposal

A grant proposal is a very clear, direct document written to a particular organization or funding agency with the purpose of persuading the reviewers to provide you with support because: (1) you have an important and fully considered plan to advance a valuable cause, and (2) you are responsible and capable of realizing that plan.

As you begin planning and drafting your grant proposal, ask yourself:

- **Who is your audience?**
Think about the people from the agency offering this grant who will read this proposal. What are the agency's mission and goals? What are its values? How is what you want to do aligned with what this agency is all about? How much do these readers know about what you are interested in? Let your answers to these questions inform how you present your plan, what vocabulary you use, how much background you provide, and how you frame your goals. In considering your audience, you should think about the kind of information these readers will find to be the most persuasive. Is it numbers? If so, make sure that you provide and explain your data. Is it testimonials? Recommendations from other collaborators? Historical precedent? Think closely about how you construct your argument in relationship to your readers.
- **What are the particular expectations for **this** grant?**
Pay attention to everything the granting organization requires of you. Your proposal should adhere exactly to these requirements. If you receive any advice that contradicts the expectations of your particular situation (**including from this website**), ignore it! Study representative samples of successful proposals in your field or proposals that have received the particular grant you are applying for.
- **How do you establish your credibility?**
Make sure that you present yourself as capable, knowledgeable, and forward thinking. Establish your credibility through the thoroughness of your plan, the intentional way that you present its importance and value, and the knowledge you have of what has already been learned or studied. Appropriately reference any past accomplishments that verify your ability to succeed and your commitment to this project. Outline any partnerships you have built with complementary organizations and individuals.
- **How can you clearly and logically present your plan?**
Make sure that your organization is logical. Divide your proposal into predictable sections and label them with clear headings. Follow exactly the headings and content requirements established by the granting agency's call for proposals.

Grant proposals are direct and to-the-point. This isn't a good place for you to embroider your prose with flowery metaphors or weave in subtle literary allusions. Your language should be uncluttered and concise. Match the concepts and language your readers use and are familiar with. Your readers shouldn't have to work hard to understand what you are communicating. For information about writing clear sentences, see the material on "Writing Clear, Concise Sentences" on our online writer's handbook. However, use a vivid image, compelling anecdote, or memorable phrase if it conveys the urgency or importance of what you are proposing to do.

Common Elements of Grant Proposals

Grant proposals are often organized in distinct sections. These sections have different titles depending on the guidelines specified by the granting organization, but they frequently serve the same purposes. In what follows, we identify some of the main elements of grant proposals, consider the work that section needs to do, and provide tips for successfully composing these sections. However, remember, **as you write your proposal, follow that grant’s guidelines and use the exact section headings provided by the call for proposals.**

<p>Short Overview (a.k.a. “abstract” or “executive summary”)</p>	<p>Here you present the most important elements of your proposal in as few sentences as possible. For longer proposals, you might be able to use a full page for this overview, but for other proposals, you might have to condense it to just one paragraph. Either way, make sure that you answer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose or goal of your project, the need you’re addressing, or the problem you’re solving? • What are the expected outcomes of your project, and how will you achieve them? • How will you assess or verify the success of your project? • Why is your project important? • Briefly, who are you? <p>Some granting institutions may also want you to clarify in this summary the kind and amount of funding or other support you are asking for.</p> <p>Let the mission and purpose of the granting agency inform your abstract. You might even want to incorporate key terms and concepts from the organization’s mission statement into your summary.</p> <p>While the summary or abstract may be the first element of your finished proposal, it’s often best to write it last. Wait to tackle this abbreviated version of your project until after you’ve written all the other parts.</p>
<p>Examination of a Need or Problem (a.k.a. “statement of need,” “problem statement,” “statement of problem,” “needs assessment,” or “literature review”)</p>	<p>Your project is important because it is responding to a gap in resources, knowledge, or opportunity that really needs to be filled. In order to establish the value of your project, you need to clarify the need or problem that your project responds to. Early in your proposal, make sure that you establish the context of this problem (i.e., the background). If this problem affects a particular population, describe that group of people. Include data if appropriate.</p> <p>Particularly for academic grants, this examination may take the form of a short literature review clarifying that you’ve read extensively on this topic and understand your project’s scholarly context and significance. But even for academic grants it’s important to clarify why this project will make a wider, positive impact and not just how it will answer a specific academic question.</p>
<p>Description of Your Project (a.k.a. “project narrative”; “project goals, objectives, and methodology”; or</p>	<p>Now that you’ve established a need for your project, you have to describe your project. Make sure you answer these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the goals of your project or your research questions? • What are the goals of your project? • What will your project’s outcomes be? <p style="text-align: center;">[As with many other kinds of outcomes, grant proposal outcomes should</p>

<p>“strategies and tactics”)</p>	<p>be SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely.]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you going to achieve those outcomes? What methods will you use? • How will you measure or recognize your project’s achievements? • How can you be sure that your project will productively respond to the need or problem? • What will the timeline for your project be? <p>Several of these questions focus on the impact your project will have. Delineating the impact is important because funders want to see that you’ve clearly established the realistic benefits of your work along with how you plan to verify and assess your achievements.</p>
<p>Budget (a.k.a “resources”)</p>	<p>Since you are asking for funding or other support, you need to clarify just what you’re asking for and why you are asking for particular amounts. Budgets are often formatted in tables and figures. Each amount should be clearly labeled, and you might need to directly follow your budget with a justification statement explaining why each cost, material, and equipment is valid, reasonable, and important for your project.</p>
<p>Other Sections Sometimes Required</p>	<p>Cover Letter</p> <p>Sometimes grant proposals are preceded by a cover letter. These often serve to personally introduce you as the grant-seeking individual/organization, establish your ethos and professionalism, briefly describe your proposed project, and convey enthusiasm for the project and appreciation for the readers’ consideration of your request.</p> <p>Organizational Qualifications</p> <p>When you are representing a nonprofit organization, sometimes you need to devote a full section to describing the nature, mission, and function of your organization. Often this comes near the section where you examine a problem.</p> <p>Supporting Documents</p> <p>You may need to provide a range of supporting materials at the end of your proposal—usually in the form of appendices. These might consist of additional records, endorsements, tax status information, personnel bios for your organization’s employees, letters of support from allied organizations or groups partnering with you in your project, etc. All of this documentation should be clearly related to your proposal and may be requested by the granting institution.</p>

General Tips

Pay attention to the agency’s key interests.

As mentioned earlier, if there are keywords in the call for proposals—or in the funding organization’s mission or goals—be sure to use some of those terms throughout your proposal. But don’t be too heavy-handed. You want to help your readers understand the connections that exist between your project and their purpose without belaboring these connections.

Organize ideas through numbered lists.

Some grant writers use numbered lists to organize their ideas within their proposal. They set up these lists with phrases like, “This project’s three main goals are . . .” or, “This plan will involve four stages . . .” Using numbers in this way may not be eloquent, but it can be an efficient way to present your information in a clear and skimmable manner.

Write carefully customized proposals.

Because grant funding is so competitive, you will likely be applying for several different grants from multiple funding agencies. But if you do this, make sure that you carefully design each proposal to respond to the different interests, expectations, and guidelines of each source. While you might scavenge parts of one proposal for another, **never use the exact same proposal twice**. Additionally when you apply to more than one source at the same time, be sure to think strategically about the kind of support you are asking from which organization. Do your research to find out, for example, which source is more likely to support a request for materials and which is more interested in covering the cost of personnel.

Go after grants of all sizes.

Pay attention to small grant opportunities as well as big grant opportunities. In fact, sometimes securing a smaller grant can make your appeal for a larger grant more attractive. Showing that one or two stakeholders have already supported your project can bolster your credibility.

Don’t give up! Keep on writing!

Writing a grant proposal is hard work. It requires you to closely analyze your vision and consider critically how your solution will effectively respond to a gap, problem, or deficiency. **And often, even for seasoned grant writers, this process ends with rejection**. But while grant writers don’t receive many of the grants they apply to, they find the process of carefully delineating and justifying their objectives and methods to be productive. Writing closely about your project helps you think about and assess it regardless of what the grant committee decides. And of course, if you do receive a grant, the writing won’t be over. Many grants require progress reports and updates, so be prepared to keep on writing!

Successful Sample Grant Proposals

One of the best ways to learn how to write grant proposals is to analyze successful samples. On our website we’ve annotated and uploaded three very different kinds of successful proposals written by colleagues associated with UW-Madison. We encourage you to carefully read these samples along with the annotations we’ve provided that direct your attention to specific ways each one is doing the work of a strong proposal. But don’t stop with these! Find additional samples on your own of successful proposals like the one you’re writing to help guide and further your understanding of what has worked and been persuasive.