



Grant Proposal Makeover

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Trainers, Consultants, Authors

Grant Proposal Makeover:

Transform Your Request From No to Yes



Workshop Objectives

- To demonstrate that proposal writing is **both** a technical and creative process
- To deliver the practical tools you'll need to write and edit proposals
- What are **your** expectations?



The Big Picture

How much \$\$\$ contributed annually from sources other than government agencies?

- \$260.28 BILLION!!!
- \$43.7 Billion in foundation/corporate grants



Competitive Environment

- How many nonprofits in U.S.?
- In the Bay Area?
- How many foundations in the U.S.?
- Ratio of proposals submitted to proposals funded?



What Do You Need \$\$\$ For?

- General Operating
- Programs/Project
- Capital/Equipment
- Endowment
- Seed Funding
- Technical Assistance/Capacity Building



The Question

What are the most common flaws in writing LOIs and proposals?

The Funders: Who was surveyed?

- 70 Grantmakers: community foundations, family foundations, corporate foundations*
- 1 to 30 years of experience as grant reviewers
- 78% have worked for grant-seeking organizations
- 91% have written proposals

* Thanks to Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

Top Ten Flaws: #1

- Requests that don't match their guidelines
 - 63% of funders surveyed named this as a "pet peeve".

Demonstrating a 'Good Fit': What the Funders Say

- Say *why* you think your request is a good fit
 - 69%
- Specify the funding category where the project/program fits
 - 57%

Funders' Comments

- *"The more mirroring of language there is, the less actual fit there is."*

Aaron Jacobs, Social Venture Partners

- *"Write as if you have read our guidelines, but without parroting what we have said."*

Sandra Sinclair, J.W. McConnell Family Fndn.

Tip:

Don't just **say** your project fits,
show that it fits!

What's an LOI (letter of intent)?

- Precedes a full proposal
- Used by funders to screen applicants
- 1 to 3 pages in length
- Demonstrates "fit"

Class exercise: Consider the LOI from Bridges to Nature

- What's wrong with this 'ugly duckling'?
- What would you do to correct it?

The Makeover: from 'ugly duckling' to 'beautiful swan'

- What's been improved?
 - Stronger opening
 - More vivid images – *fresh bobcat tracks*
 - Program details *demonstrate* fit
 - Specific grant amount - *\$15,000*

Finding the Fit: Helpful URLs

- The Foundation Center
www.fdncenter.org
- Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance
www.cfda.gov
- Grants.gov www.grants.gov

Proposal Components

- Summary
- Intro – history and mission
- Problem/Need
- Goals & Objectives - outcomes
- Project Description – methods
- Evaluation
- Future Funding

Summary

- Comes first, written last
- Identifies agency and shows "fit"
- Describes the problem, the agency's response and expected results
- Specifies the amount requested
- States total budget & other funders

Introduction: Agency History and Mission

- Highlights milestone events and major accomplishments
- Includes agency's mission
- Lists key individuals (founders, board, staff)

Problem or Needs Statement

- Core of a proposal
- Can't assume funder knows the need
- Who do you serve and where? (constituents and location)
- Why does this need occur?
- Use relevant statistics/data to support
- Include anecdotes and quotes

Goals and Objectives

- What is a goal? An objective?
- Typically, 1 to 3 overall goals
- Each goal may have 1 or more related objectives
- Objectives measure degrees of change such as: *increase, decrease, reduce, improve*

Methods & Program Description

- Describes agency strategies and activities, plus rationale for choosing them
- May present this info in bulleted form

Evaluation

- Describes agency plan for assessing whether objectives were met and methods followed
- Quantitative & qualitative measures
- Internal vs. external
- Budget assessment costs

Future Funding

- What happens at the end of the grant period?
- What strategies does the agency have for securing future funding?
- Be as specific as possible

Conclusion/Request

- One paragraph – or less!
- “Closes” your story
- Asks the funder for the funding!



Top Ten Flaws: #2

- Does not follow logical order.
 - About 50% said they see this 'moderately often' to 'frequently'.
 - All said they see this flaw at least occasionally.



Getting Organized: Funders Comments

- *"Logical order is important."*
Grace Caliendo, John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund
- *"The impression [from a disorganized proposal] is that the applicant is a disorganized organization."*
Andrea L. Reynolds, Community Foundation of Greater Memphis



Tips for Organized Proposals

- Use the funder's outline or a standard format.
- Use headings – 98% of funders say they like them!



Top Ten Flaws: #3

- Does not show the need.
 - A strong needs statement is critical for 98% of funders.



Funders' Comments

- *"Demonstrating the need for a particular program is important. Without it, one wonders about the relevance of the work."*
Anne Vally, James Irvine Foundation
- *"Perceiving that we know this information is not an appropriate rationale for skating through this section."*
Carol Watson, United Way of the Bay Area



What to put in a Needs Statement

- Statistics – 84% of funders mention this element.
- Quote authorities – 65% suggest this element.



Top Ten Flaws: #4

- Uses too many statistics.

Tips:

- Choose only the most compelling.
- Use **local** statistics for **local** programs.



Top Ten Flaws: #5

- Relies too heavily on client stories and testimonials.
 - 44% suggest using client stories to demonstrate need or to illustrate the case.
 - Only 26% suggest using client testimonials in proposals.



Funders' Comments about Client Stories

Pro

- *"We love them."*
Elizabeth M. Lynch, Massachusetts Bar Foundation
- *"Fine if they grab our attention and sharpen the presentation."*
James R. Posner, Posner-Wallace Foundation



Funders' comments, cont'd.

Con

- *"Don't try to make me cry, rather be honest about what your work has accomplished."*
Barbara Kemmis, Crossroads Fund
- *"Personally, I do not find client stories and quotes to be useful. Almost every program can find compelling and moving stories."*
Anne Vally, James Irvine Foundation



Funders' comments, cont'd.

Middle ground

- *"Include only a few representative stories."*
Sister Jane Burkhart, HM, Sisters of the Humility of Mary
- *"One or two maybe; don't overdo it."*
Jan Eldred, California HealthCare Foundation



To story or not to story?

- Large, institutional funders tend to fund with their head and are data-driven.
- Small, family foundations tend to fund with their heart and emotion can persuade.

To story or not to story?

Tips:

- Know your funder!
- Choose carefully
 - Only if they clarify your case.
 - Choose one or two and keep them brief!
 - Be careful about manipulating emotions.

Top Ten Flaws: #6

- Uses poor objectives and/or evaluation.
 - Objectives and evaluation should fit the maturity of the program/organization and the size of the grant.
 - 65% of funders suggest using a formal outcome evaluation system.

Funders' Comments about Objectives & Evaluation

- *"This is not one size fits all."*
Aaron Jacobs, Social Venture Partners-Seattle
- *"You need to show progress towards your goals and objectives. Measure outcomes not just outputs."*
Grace Callendo, John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund

Funders' Comments about Objectives & Evaluation

- *"I want to know if they did what they said they would do, was the project effective, what did they learn, and did they modify or make corrections along the way."*
Andrea L. Reynolds, Community Foundation of Greater Memphis

Strong Objectives & Evaluation

Tips:

- Don't confuse objectives with methods.
 - Objectives indicate desired level of **change**.
 - Evaluation **measures** that change.

Class Exercise:

- What's wrong with this 'ugly duckling'?
Goals are vague, general.
- What would you do to correct it?
Objective describes methods, not targets.
- Evaluation doesn't measure anything.

What's Wrong with the Proposal?

- Objective describes methods, not targets
- Goals are vague, general
- Evaluation doesn't measure anything

Minimum Makeover: Progress . . . Not Perfection

- Specify geographic target area in goal.
- Include targets in objectives:
 - "process objectives"
 - "product objectives"
- Describe how data will be gathered in evaluation.

Beyond "Bean-Counting: Funders' Comments

- *"We want more than the numbers who walk in the door."*
Ann McQueen, the Boston Foundation
- *"An excellent proposal demonstrates the long-term impact (both individually and in the community) that the program has achieved."*
Carole M. Watson, United Way of the Bay Area

Optimum Makeover

- Goal specifies target population **and** points to change in their condition.
- Objectives describe
 - What will change
 - By how much
- Evaluation tells how change will be measured **and** how the data will be used to improve outcomes.

Top Ten Flaws: #7

- Includes a poor budget.

Pet Peeves:

- Large, unexplained budget line items – 69%
- Inconsistent with narrative – 66%
- Numbers don't add up – 50%

Financial Flaws: Funders' Comments

- *"Foundation support should be provided in detail with name of foundation and amounts (received and pending)."*
Nancy Wiltsek, Pottruck Family Foundation
- *"We ask for a budget narrative ... to explain the details of each line item."*
Mary Vallier-Kaplan, Endowment for Health
- *"Some think a budget does not include income. We expect to have a clear picture where all funds are received and disbursed."*
Judith Murphy, Y&H Soda Foundation

Fixing Financial Flaws

Tips:

- Double-check to be sure the budget agrees with the proposal narrative!
- Include budget notes/narrative.
- Show income as well as expense.
- Give status for other funding.
- Re-check the math!!

Top Ten Flaws: #8

- Is written "by committee".
 - This can happen in a collaboration.

Funders' Comments

- *"I can tell if more than one writer has been involved, because the proposal may seem fragmented. . . . It's unusual to see a well-organized proposal come from multiple authors."*
Anne Vally, James Irvine Foundation
- *"It is typically easy to tell when more than one writer has worked on a proposal. It does not influence the final decision. What does influence the decision is if the two ore more writers' components do not blend together into a coherent project proposal."*
Elizabeth M. Lynch, Massachusetts Bar Foundation

Style Tips for Collaborations

- Choose the best writer to assemble and edit.
- Watch for inconsistencies in the narratives submitted by members of the group.

Top Ten Flaws: #9

- Uses overblown, florid language.
 - 62% of funders complained of this flaw.

Avoiding Flowery Language

Style Tips:

- Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.
- Watch out for too many superlatives.
- Be careful when using "unique" and "innovative".

Top Ten Flaws: #10

- Uses vague, abstract language.
 - 78% of funders complained of academic/abstract/vague/pontificating language.

Funders' Comments

- *"The most common bad writing style is vague, overblown, indirect language."*
Lori McGlinchey, Open Society Institute
- "Proposals that are full of jargon and don't explain, in plain language, what the organization would do with proposed funds."
Anne Vally, James Irvine Foundation

"Ugly Duckling" Example

We are deeply committed to utilizing local intellectual and creative capital to achieve systemic change and plan to address fundamentals that will provide students with currency in the world of responsible adults.

"Ugly Duckling" Example

This will metamorphose to accountability for enforced outcomes for each student and for each cohort. By drawing on local resources, the program will reinforce cultural and social assets in the students' community and re-integrate them to the values of their heritage.

What's wrong with the example?

- Vague
- "Creative capital" and "metamorphose" ??
- Sounds lofty, but "where's the beef?"

Makeover: The "Beautiful Swan"

The *goal* of the New Horizons Initiative is to expand the students' horizons for future success by increasing their critical thinking and leadership skills and strengthening their connections within their own community and culture.

What's been improved?

- More focused and specific
- Eliminates vague and pontificating language

Taming the Word Monster

Tips:

- Anticipate questions!
- Use language that is:
 - Specific, not general.
 - Concrete, not abstract.
- Write as you speak!
 - Read aloud to check your language.

Time to Tell Your Story

- What's the one 'take-away' you'll put to immediate use?



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