

INTRODUCTION to Grantwriting

Grantsmanship can often sound overly simplistic or downright overwhelming. It is merely a process, a step-by-step technique to create a fact-based, compelling proposal comprised of a logical and understandable sequence of information about your nonprofit and its social impact.


To clarify, a grant supports a nonprofit, its Mission, program or project. Although it is usually financial in nature, it can also be a service or specialty, such as technical assistance, organizational or professional development. The actual grant usually does not have any repayment element, but is awarded in response to a grant proposal or grant application based on merits of a particular program.

Diversifying your funding sources not only optimizes overall fundraising results, but ensures your nonprofit will be capable of navigating external circumstances beyond its control, such as economic changes, natural donor attrition, changes in grantors' funding requirements or philanthropic focus. But even with multiple funding sources and revenue streams, how can you be certain your nonprofit is pursuing and procuring the best and most advantageous grants available to your organization? In a word, grantsmanship.

Grantsmanship goes beyond submitting successful grant proposals. It's a systematic, strategic approach that manages grant processes from application to reporting; researches the most appropriate private and public grantors; and delivers the maximum amount of funding for your particular Mission type, nonprofit and program(s).

Effective grantsmanship requires a comprehensive understanding of your nonprofit, its programs, Mission and impact relative to what private and public funds are available. Once established, your nonprofit must then be able to provide accurate, relevant documentation in a compelling format that complies with prospective grantors' funding and submission criteria. Of course, having a nonprofit that can readily demonstrate capacity, credibility, evidence, impact and sustainability to fulfill its Mission is essential for successful grant funding as it is in all strategic fundraising.

Although each funder establishes its own eligibility criteria and requirements, specifying application process(es) and timeline(s), an organization-wide audit of grant readiness and qualifying programs empowers you to be prepared to apply for grants appropriate for your organization and also to determine the effectiveness of your overall grant funding as well as how to incorporate grantsmanship best practices to maximize the financial benefits of grant funding.



You must determine your organization's grant readiness; identify programs appropriate for grant funding; determine scope, impact, quantitative and qualitative measures of current or proposed programs; and assess the most strategic grants to pursue for specific program(s) or your organization. By collecting documentation and completing the Program Audit and Inventory Checklist, the concept of applying for grants and effectively managing the process while fulfilling your operational functions will no longer seem insurmountable. Completing the forms with the details unique to your nonprofit will make strategic grantmanship a more manageable challenge you can easily handle one step at a time.

Locate Existing Documentation. Go through each line item on the Grant Readiness Checklist to determine which documents your organization already has available in paper or electronic format. As many grantors now request online submission of proposals and applications, having both paper and electronic versions is the ideal.

Create Documents. Develop remaining documents on the Grant Readiness Checklist. For example, if you do not have a complete, updated list of Board Members, staff or program managers, then develop a document that can be used to meet the Board and Leadership information requirements for most grants.

Conduct Program Audit. Define explicit details about your specific program(s) and its impact. It doesn't have to be an extensive narrative -- just the essential elements that grant funders may require or need.

Complete List of Current or Potential Grants. Identify and list all current grants, prospective grants, pending and in-process grant applications so priorities and timelines can be strategically planned and managed. Pay particular attention to any restrictions imposed by current or potential grants, as those limitations levied by a single funder may impact other grants you can or cannot pursue.



Importance of Impact Data

“Evidence” and “effectiveness” are much more than trending buzzwords in the nonprofit sector. They are the foundation for virtually all of your fundraising strategies, demonstrating the value and impact of your organization and its programs. Evidence and effectiveness are the keys for procuring and renewing individual donors and winning grant applications as well as hosting successful events and meaningful Board Meetings.

Specific to your grant applications, data is the bone structure of the process that distinguishes your nonprofit and its programs from the nonprofit universe, which includes many organizations that are addressing the same overarching need, cause or problem as your nonprofit. As more and more organizations foster a data-driven approach to their operations and fundraising, nonprofits and grant funders alike have begun to look more intently at data.

Not only is it important that the data used for your grant applications be accurate and current, the data must reflect meaning, which requires a new kind of data literacy. Collectively, the data must portray a solid, factual indication of the measurable impact specific programs and organizations have or would have in meeting a definite social need.

Successful grant applications must also demonstrate resources – time, talent and dollars – are being invested in ways that do the most good. The data defining your organization, its programs, operations and impact must also convey its effectiveness in achieving the greatest return in a sustainable manner substantiated by metrics, data, and outcomes.

Letter of Intent

Some foundations pre-qualify grant applications by requiring a Letter of Intent (LOI). There is no formal format for LOIs, so as with proposals and grant applications, always adhere to the funder's specified guidelines. Use the opportunity to establish a positive, collaborative relationship with the Program Officer, which can be leveraged to learn precisely what and how the grantor wants information presented on your subsequent grant application.

A successful RFP application requires an intense amount of thoughtful, accurate information that is presented in a concise, compelling manner. Here are some additional tips to maximize results of your grant applications:

- Use simple language, avoid industry jargon or internal acronyms
- Write simple sentences and paragraphs with impact that anyone can easily understand and relate to
- Your most important point should be prominent at the beginning of each section or paragraph
- Eliminate excess words
- Ask someone from outside your organization to review the application so you can address any questions that naturally arise
- Make it easy for the reader to quickly understand
- Narratives should underscore the human element of your work
- Use brief anecdotes, quotes and specific examples
- Edit, revise . . . then edit and revise again!

If you are submitting an application online, check the word or character count available for each section in advance so your documents and material will accommodate the grantor's online application fields. To facilitate managing your grant application process