The basics of grant proposal writing

This tip sheet is an overview of the process for applicants who might be new to grant writing. It isn't an instruction sheet for any particular grant program, but it does have suggestions and concepts to consider that might be relevant to any grant application.

O   Grant solicitations start with the funding agency or organization (such as Commerce) publishing a solicitation or program guidelines, often called a Request for Proposal (RFP).

O   This document might be called a Request for Application (RFA), Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), Request for Quotes and Qualifications (RFQQ), or another similar name. All of the names mean basically the same thing: There's funding available for specific projects or goals.

O   The format and requirements differ, but all of the grant notifications contain some common elements – purpose, evidence and a budget.

Use the prompts below to help focus your thoughts about effectively presenting your project in response to a grant solicitation. Once you've thought these concepts through, you'll be better prepared to provide responses to the specific criteria and questions in your proposal.

1)   **Before applying, assess the fit**

Assess any funding opportunity before investing resources in applying. Read the RFP or RFA thoroughly and consider whether your project is a good match.

- Examine the funder's purpose and determine if your project's goals align.
- Do the applicant and project meet the minimum requirements stated in the RFP or RFA?
- Do the start and end dates for use of funding meet the needs of your project?
- Will the amount of funding and spending requirements work for your project?
- Does your organization have any required matching funds available for the project?
- Can your organization respond to the RFP or RFA by the due date? Will the award decision timeline meet your project start needs?
- Will you need internal approvals within your organization for the project or application? How long will those take?

2)   **Prepare the proposal and/or application**

Consult experts in the project field as needed to develop a viable plan and realistic budget. Verify the proposal submission process; for example, if it must be submitted via an online portal, log into and get familiar with the platform and review required fields.

Plan for the proposal format to match the outline in the RFP or RFA. The application might be disqualified if anything is left out. Be brief and thorough. Explain any missing data or sections that don't apply to your project. If you use abbreviations or acronyms, define them.

Consider the evaluation or scoring approach the solicitation reviewers will use. Plan to address each criteria area that your project proposal will meet. In the relevant sections, highlight any distinguishing characteristics of your organization's proposal.

Sections in most RFPs

You will generally find these or equivalent sections in any RFP:

○ **Summary**

The executive summary and/or cover letter summarizes your purpose, evidence of a realistic project plan and the project budget. This is a high-level overview.

- State the project goals and demonstrate your organization's commitment to its objectives.
- Summarize the primary components of your proposed project and highlight any unique characteristics or benefits.

○ **Technical proposal**

This usually contains two parts:

- Narrative section to describe the project:

  - What is the current situation and what need does the project intend to satisfy?
  - Describe the actions that will be taken to address the need and the timetable for each.
  - Who will be the primary beneficiaries of the project?
  - What was the process for gathering and considering input from the community and other stakeholders?
  - What are the expected outcomes of the project?
  - How will you measure project success?
  - What is the plan for sustaining or maintaining the project outcomes?
  - How have diversity, equity and inclusion been included in the needs assessment or project planning?
  - If you attach appendices, cross-reference them in the body of the proposal.

  Describe the organization in the narrative, too. List people's names and their roles in project management, as well as their credentials and relevant experience. Do the same for any key consultants who would have responsibility for execution of the project plans.

- Data section to support the narrative:

  - Provide data that describes the current situation and demonstrates how the situation might change upon completion of the project.
  - Explain the methodology used in obtaining the figures you provide. Each RFP/RFA will provide parameters for the data and presentation format so the funder can compare all grant applications on the same basis.

Cost proposal

Present a budget with the estimated cost of the various elements of the project.

- Include staff costs, contractor fees and any other expenses necessary to complete the proposed project.
- Plan for contingency funds to account for unexpected costs, which often arise despite careful planning.
- Follow any guidelines for allowable expenses provided in the request. Outline the amounts and intended sources for any funding your organization will commit to the project.

Submit the grant proposal

Double check to make sure all of the required elements are included. Have at least one colleague review the proposal before you submit it, and consider having it reviewed by technical and administrative experts.

Look for submission instructions, which are usually in a section of the RFP/RFA.

- There are often software requirements or a designated portal for submissions. After you submit, look for an acknowledgement that the application was received (which might be in a browser window or sent via email) and make a copy for your records.
- Provide more than one contact person, in case the primary person is not available if the funder has questions or the award decision.
- Submission deadlines are generally firm – avoid leaving submission to the last minute in case of technical difficulties.

Take action on the award decision

Mark your calendar for the scheduled award decision date. Keep an eye on your email or phone so you can respond promptly if the funding organization or agency reaches out.

- If you receive the award, be prepared to act quickly! The project should launch according to the guidelines of the award. Plan to make periodic reports on project progress and grant funds spent.
- If you do not receive the award, learn from the experience for a future grant. Ask the funder what you can do differently in a future application. Follow up with any questions quickly.