



the Monthly Newsletter of the Arts Consulting Group
October 2003

Grant Writing Basics: **Know the Score Before Asking for Funds**

Many smaller organizations often seek counsel in the grant writing process. Questions arise regarding how to write an effective proposal, when an application should be made, and what the best way is to approach prospective donors. With the number of nonprofit organizations continuing to grow, and about 80% having annual budgets of less than \$1 million, this issue of *Arts Insights* is dedicated to a review of the basics of grant writing and the proposal process.

PREPARATION

You are likely to find preliminary grant writing steps to be the most time consuming, yet it is the most vital aspect of the process. If done well, your preparatory work will simplify the writing stage. Below are a few steps that will allow your organization to most accurately target your prospective donor.

Define your project

The first challenge many organizations face is in simply clarifying the purpose of their project. This typically stems from having an effective organizational mission statement. Ask yourself how the project fits into the organization's mission and long-range plan. By taking this crucial first step, you will be able to define the scope of work on which to focus your funding search. You can then further determine the broad project goals, followed by specific objectives that define how you will focus the work to accomplish those goals.

Example:

Goal: To improve the artistic quality of our orchestra.

Objective 1: Recruit the best musicians and music director.

Objective 2: Engage the best soloists and guest conductors.

Objective 3: Retain quality artists through appropriate compensation competitive with the industry.

These goals and objectives suggest the proposal will request support for recruitment activity, including for a music director, guest artists, and musician compensation. In contrast, a different proposal with the same goal might focus only on expanding the music library or purchasing certain instruments.

Following the goal setting phase, it is important to decide who will benefit from meeting your objectives. Benefits may extend beyond the direct beneficiary to include the audience, local schools, and other arts institutions in your community. In taking this step, your organization can further draft the expected project outcomes in measurable terms of numbers of people and overall impact.

Identify the right funding sources

Now that you've identified the project for which you're seeking funding, it's time to figure out which funding sources are most appropriate. There are various sources in most communities that can assist in your funding search. These include community or nonprofit research centers, computerized databases, your colleagues who work in development in the nonprofit sector,

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consulting firms, assorted publications, and public libraries. A key here is to not limit your funding search to one source. Look for a match between your project and the grants you seek by looking for consistency between the purpose and goals of your project and the funder. In addition, pinpoint specific funding priorities and preferences.

Contact the funders

Once you've determined the prospective funder, it is time to make direct contact with them to discuss your project and to gain a greater understanding that they would indeed support projects like yours. It is typically best to get this information now rather than submitting a blind proposal that will ultimately be rejected. During this conversation, you can also request proposal guidelines, a list of projects previously funded, and perhaps an annual report. During this process, it is key to inquire about the maximum amount of available funding and the average size and funding range of awards. It is not wise to request \$1 million from a funder if their largest past gift is \$5,000. Ultimately, you must determine if funding levels of the grants you select are appropriate for your project and if there is a funding floor or ceiling.

Always try to think of the funder as a resource. As grants are typically written to foundations, corporations, and government agencies, it is important to realize that their key staff members have many connections and suggestions when it comes to fundraising. In advance of contacting a prospect, it is wise to identify a project officer who will address your questions. This individual may even review a proposal draft in advance of full submission of the application. Ultimately, it is important to understand how and when proposals are reviewed and how decisions are made. Are matching funds required? Is in-kind acceptable as a portion of applicants' share? What may be counted as in-kind, and how might it be applied? These and other questions will make the process much easier on your organization. Finally, please remember that the contacts you make may prove invaluable, even if not for now. "Development" is all about cultivating personal relationships that may result in advancement for your organization now or at some future point.

Acquire proposal guidelines

Once you receive the guidelines from a funder, you should carefully review the information. It will be extremely important to understand submission deadlines, organizational eligibility, and proposal format. This format could include award levels, specific applications that are required, supplementary materials, margins, spacing, evaluation process and restrictions on the number of pages. Typically funders have clear information on their review timetable, budgets, funding goals and priorities, award levels, evaluation process and criteria, whom to contact, and any other submission requirements. Always ask the funder to clarify if you have any questions.

Know the submission deadline

This may sound like a simple task, but it is often one that is overlooked. Funders have specific deadlines, and your organization should be careful to submit your proposal on or preferably before its due date. It's also important to be realistic about whether you have time to prepare a competitive proposal that meets the deadline. Initial funding proposals in particular can be seen as your introduction to a prospective funder. First impressions are everything, as there may be a long cultivation process with a prospective funder. If your organization makes a bad first impression, it may not bode well for future applications.

Update your timeline

As you can see from the above, there is a substantial amount of work in the preparation phase of the grant writing process. Now that you've reviewed all the data, this is a good point at which to update your timeline, as you have a clearer picture of submission deadlines and review timetables. It is important to factor into your schedule appropriate time needed to write multiple drafts, gather relevant and permissible materials, and prepare an impartial critique of your proposal for clarity, substance, and form before submitting it to the funder.

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WRITING THE PROPOSAL

Structure, attention to specifications, concise persuasive writing, and a reasonable budget are the critical elements of the writing stage. There are many ways to organize proposals, so it is crucial to read the guidelines for specifications about required information and how it should be arranged. Standard proposal components are: the narrative, budget, appendix of support material, and authorized signature. Sometimes proposal applications require abstracts or summaries, an explanation of budget items, supplementary materials, and certifications.

Narrative

If you've done appropriate preparation, you will be able to clearly identify your organization's statement of need. There are many ways to represent the same idea. However, you'll need a certain "hook" to tailor the description of the idea specifically to the interest of the funder. The hook aligns the project with the purpose, and goals of the funding source. This is a critical aspect of any proposal narrative because it determines how compelling reviewers will perceive your proposal to be.

Ultimately, the narrative will present the purpose, goals, measurable objectives, and a compelling, logical reason why the proposal should be supported. Background information provides perspective and is often a welcome component. Key to the narrative section is to define your organization's approach to the project. This includes the method and process of accomplishing goals and objectives, a description of intended scope of work with expected outcomes, an outline of activities, a description of personnel functions with names of key staff and consultants, if possible. Most funders want to know that you are also tracking your results, so it is important to enter a method of evaluation that clearly measures your results. Otherwise, a project timeline and budgets will paint a picture of project flow that includes start and end dates, schedule of activities, and projected outcomes. This should be detailed enough to include staff selection and start dates.

In summary, narratives typically must satisfy the following questions:

- What do we want from the funder?
- What concern will be addressed and why is it important?
- Who will benefit, how and how many will be served?
- What specific objectives can be accomplished and how?
- How will results be measured?
- How does this funding request relate to the funder's purpose, objectives, and priorities?
- Who are we and how do we qualify to meet this need?

Budget

Budgets are cost projections, as well as a window into how projects will be implemented and managed. Well-planned budgets reflect carefully thought out projects. Funders typically use several factors and ask themselves these questions to assess the effectiveness of a presented budget:

- Can the job be accomplished with this budget?
- Are costs reasonable for the market - or too high or low?
- Is the budget consistent with proposed activities?
- Is there sufficient budget detail and explanation?
- Is the organization financially stable?

Many funders provide mandatory budget forms that must be submitted with the proposal, so be sure to use these whenever possible. And don't forget to list in-kind and matching revenue, where appropriate, as this will add to the overall scope of your project and substance of your organization. And try to be flexible about your budget in case the funder chooses to negotiate costs or amounts that they are willing to fund. Typically, donors won't fund an entire project, so they need to understand how the outcomes can be achieved through additional outside resources.

Supporting materials

Supporting materials are often arranged in an appendix. These materials may endorse the project and the applicant, provide certifications, add information about project personnel and consultants, exhibit tables and charts, performance reviews, brochures, and other ancillary materials. Policies about the inclusion of supporting materials differ widely among funders. Whether to allow them usually depends upon how materials contribute to a proposal's evaluation. Find out if supporting materials are desired or even allowed, and be prepared to invest the time to collect resources, produce a tape, document capability, update a resume, collect letters, and include reference reports or whatever else is needed. Also be sure to include any required authorized signatures. Proposals may be rejected for lack of an authorized signature, so be sure to allow the time to acquire a needed signature before submitting a proposal.

Specifications

As outlined above, it is important to tailor your proposal writing to the specifications found in the funder's guidelines. Include only the number of pages allowed and observe the suggested format. Is there a form to complete? Must the proposal be typed, double-spaced, on 8-1/2 x 11 inch pages? Are cover pages allowed or desired? Keep in mind that the beautifully bound proposal is not always appreciated or allowed, as it makes it difficult to copy or disseminate to the funder's board of directors. And always be prepared to write one or more drafts, being concise. Elaborations should add depth and scope and not act as page fillers.

Submission checklist

Although it goes without saying, the proposal must be **neat, complete, and submitted on time** with the requested number of copies and original authorized signatures. Address the proposal as directed in the guidelines, with appropriate postage, and be sure to include required documentation.

FOLLOW-UP

The final step in the grant writing process can be the most important in the long-term relationship with the funder and as a learning experience. Therefore it is strongly recommended to contact the prospective funder about the status, evaluation, and outcome of your proposal. It is important to request feedback about a proposal's strengths and weaknesses, although this information is sometimes unavailable, especially with a large volume of submissions. Reference information may also be useful if you choose to approach the same or different funder again with your idea, as many funders only accept proposals on an annual basis.

Note: This article was adapted from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's website www.cpb.org/grants/grantwriting.html entitled *Basic Elements of Grant Writing*.

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