

Proposal Writing For Beginners

Introduction

What is proposal writing or grant writing?

A proposal is an application written by someone for the purpose of seeking funds for a project the applicant wishes to implement. The application process is most often a competitive one.

Possible projects in need of funding might be:

- Research
- Cultural programs
- Educational programs/curricula
- Cultural diversity training
- Legal programs
- Conferences
- Program evaluations
- Needs assessments
- Social programs
- Direct services to business or industry

To whom would you write a proposal?

- To a client you wish to serve (such as a non-profit organization, business, institution, or an individual)
- To a government funding agency
- To a private foundation
- To a corporation with an interest in a particular program

There are two approaches to starting the proposal writing process

- (1) Upon the request of the funding source
- (2) Selecting a funding source that is likely to fund your project

In the first case the funding source is telling you what it wants to fund. For example, a government agency or a private foundation might wish to address some major problem, such as an issue related to public health. They will then put out a “request for proposals” (RFP) or a “request for applications” (RFA). These are documents or notices sent out to all kinds of organizations explaining what kind of projects the funding source wishes to fund, why, and what the proposal requirements are.

In another case, an agency might need a particular service, such as program evaluation, legal services, or multi-cultural training. Here the agency with the need puts out an RFP to organizations and consultants that it knows provides these services. The agency will know who provides these services because the consultant or organization has previously contacted them asking to be placed on their vendors list, or because the organization or consultant’s name is available on a public vendors list.

One gets on a public vendors list by applying to get on the lists to public institutions such as the city governments, county governments, and local school districts. There are also independent vendors lists. Realize, though, that you cannot just put your name on a list. The sponsor of the vendors list must approve of you through your education and actual experience. In this case you need three references that will vouch for the quality of your work, and anyone looking up your name on the list will be able to contact these references by email or phone.

The second approach to starting the proposal-writing process is by choosing your own funding source. You may have a project that you have designed yourself and you know there is a need for it. Then you can approach a funding source such as a government funding agency, a private foundation, a corporation, or sometimes even a private individual and present your idea along with your written proposal. Below are a few helpful websites which provide directories of various funding sources.

Federal sources: Governmental

The Grantsmanship Center:
www.tgci.com/funding/federal.asp

Grants.gov:
www.grants.gov/

New Mexico State University:
www.cahe.nmsu.edu/USWEST/grants/574a.html

Private foundations

ABALANCE DOTCOM:
<http://www.abalance.com/GRANTS.html>

International sources: Governmental and private

Fundsnet:
www.fundsnet.com/internat.htm

Who is eligible to get funding?

If you are trying to get funding by performing a service to an organization, you usually do not have to have tax-exempt status. This is because the organization can use these services as a tax deduction and will not need to declare you as charitable contribution. However, if you are applying to a government funding source or private foundation you need to be attached to a tax-exempt organization in nearly all cases.

A tax-exempt organization is a nonprofit organization or public charity that meets the criteria for exemption under sections 501(c)(3) or 509(a)(3) of the federal tax code. If you don't work for a tax-exempt organization or run one you can still get a project of yours funded. For example, if you can develop a project and "sell" the project and yourself to a tax-exempt organization, you can develop a contract for the tax-exempt organization to become a fiscal sponsor. In other cases, private individuals or consultants can get funding from government agencies or foundations if it is allowed under the guidelines of the funding source. Your local humanities councils and arts councils are also excellent sources for individuals or loosely-knit groups to apply for funds.

You can propose a project all on your own, but it is wise to include a group of stakeholders. At times formal businesses, such as corporations or consulting businesses that are not tax exempt, can get funding from government agencies or foundations. These, by the way are extremely easy to set up. It takes only a few hours to set yourself up as a partnership, sole proprietorship business, or a corporation.

How do you get the funds?

You can request a tax-exempt organization to act as your fiscal sponsor, which means that you write the proposal and manage the project in its entirety. The funds, however, are managed by the tax-exempt organization. Usually the tax-exempt organization requests 10-15% of the grant for bookkeeping expenses.

At times a business that is not tax-exempt can apply for foundation or government funds directly. For example, the federal government has money set aside to fund projects for small businesses through their "small business innovative research" (SBIR) grants. You will need a lot of experience to be eligible for these grants. You will also need extremely refined proposal-writing skills, as teams of professional proposal reviewers evaluate these applications. You will want to think about the big picture as you learn grant-writing skills.

A few sad truths about proposal writing

- If you are an extremely polished proposal writer, and if you are going to funding sources that are good fits for your program, and you represent an organization with a very good reputation and sound fiscal management, you can expect to get one in four of your proposals funded.
- While most funding sources have official reviewers, few of these will really read your proposal. This is not true in formal, refereed settings, like those of federal agencies. Here the proposals are actually read and points are assigned for a variety of criteria. Reviewers knowing the applicant cannot review the proposal in these settings.
- In the majority of cases, the reviewers do little other than skim over your abstract or descriptive sentences on the cover page (again, this would not be the case when federal agencies review the proposal). If they really like the idea, they may read on.
- In cases where the funding source is well-staffed, members of the staff will skim (or actually read) your proposal, then present their own brief descriptions and judgment calls to their governing board or "official" reviewers.
- Most of the times, funding agencies have decided long in advance of receiving your proposal which projects they will or will not fund. This is because most of their money is already committed to ongoing projects, or their board has recently decided to put the majority of their funds into a particular type of effort. And of course, all of the reviewers know people (except for the formally refereed federal grants).

- It almost always takes longer to complete the required attachments or appendices on a proposal than to write the actual proposal. These attachments can include budget justifications, certifications, policy excerpts, enrollment forms, audits, biographical information, resumes, fiscal records, and the names of boards of directors and the sectors they represent.
- It can take six months to a year between the time that you write your first letter of inquiry to a potential funder to the time that you receive the actual funds, if your proposal is successful.

But for our purposes, we must assume that those reviewing your proposals will actually read them from beginning to end, so let's look at what proposal reviewers have to say about proposal writing.

What reviewers of grant proposals have to say:

"I can always tell if the person writing the proposal has no emotional investment in the project. They don't even give any thought to the title. Sometimes they don't even give the project a name. It might be something like, 'the after school program,' or something like that. That is not a name. This is just an attempt to fund a staff or consultant position."

"If you haven't told us what you want by the end of the third paragraph, chances are you're not going to get it [meaning the grant]."

"Ideas need to stand out. If the format of the proposal helps accomplish that, then it is O.K. But fancy fonts and layout don't carry much weight in and of themselves."

"Start with clarity and no fluff. I remember one proposal that was just bullet format. It was clear, succinct and to the point. For a literary point of view, it was dull, but programmatically, it was clear and precise."

"We like to see more, rather than less, information in the budget. We want to see how our money will be used, how it will fit into the whole picture."

"What makes me crazy is an organization ignoring our guidelines."

"If it is clear, concise, to the point, everything should be there without having to look for it. There should be meat on the bones but no fat."

"The needs they state should apply to the project. I once reviewed a proposal where they cited some local survey on the problems of gang recruitment in a neighborhood, then tried to use this to fund a program to teach parents how to tutor their kids in schoolwork."

In order to increase your odds of getting your proposal in the mix, follow these steps:

- 1) Always send out letters of inquiry (also called letters of intent) to the funding source before you write your full proposal. These letters describe the main goals, outcomes, and overall budget of your project in an abbreviated form (usually one to two pages). State that if the project meets their criteria, you would like their full proposal packet. Most funding sources request these letters anyway. A positive response will come with a form letter and full proposal packet.
- 2) Always make some personal contact with the funding source, if they permit this. Ask them questions about the proposal. Their answers to your questions will be helpful and you have this opportunity to stand out in their minds.
- 3) After your proposal is submitted, try your best to get an interview with the staff or reviewers. If at first you do not succeed, try again.
- 4) If the funding source has a public review process, show up for it.

General guidelines on writing the proposal

- 1) Read the RFP (request for proposal) or proposal guidelines in the greatest detail. This is the main mistake proposal writers make. Read the document at least three times, and cross off the items that you have already covered.
- 2) Even if they do not tell you to do this, follow the exact order of their proposal guidelines. Most of the time the grant applications will be online, so this will not be an issue. But if the application is only in print form, don't make them search for the answers to their questions—they will never do this. Never think you can just recycle your last proposal for the same project. Always begin from scratch.
- 3) Write clearly. Use short sentences. Intrigue the reader if you can. Begin a paragraph with a question, for example.

- 4) Have a catchy name for the project, indicating you have given this some thought.
- 5) If the proposal asks you how you know there is a need for this project, don't just say that you have talked to a few people. Present actual data such as survey results or findings from local needs assessments.
- 6) If you are writing a proposal from a printed application, make sure your proposal looks nice. Use tables, boxes, screens, bullets, and photos wherever possible. But do not use binders or tabs.
- 7) When listing goals, objectives, activities, outcomes, and measurements, it is best to number these and put them in an easy-to-read outline form.
- 8) Allow plenty of time to write the proposal—especially for the attachments. If you miss a deadline your proposal will, of course, be disqualified.
- 9) Put your best effort into your cover-page summary or online abstract. Often this is all that will be read. If possible, incorporate some intriguing sentence into this—especially the first sentence, if possible.

Writing a letter of inquiry

1. Describe your project in one or two paragraphs
2. Indicate the full budget for the project
3. Describe what positive outcomes you expect your project to have
4. Then ask for a full proposal packet, if the project meets the funder's guidelines

Finding the right funding source

Now it's time to look for the right funding source. If you are trying to offer a specialty service to a client, then you need to define your potential clientele and call on them, inquiring of their needs. If you are developing a program or research project of your own creation, you are most likely looking for a government funding source or a private foundation. Either will work well if the grant-maker is a match to your project. Generally speaking, however, if you are an organization that really intends to be part of the community, go with the private foundation. If you are an organization that serves mainly individuals from a wide geographic area and will not necessarily be well networked in the community, then go with the governmental funding source.

Elements of proposal writing

The abstract

The first element that most proposal guidelines, online applications, or RFPs will ask for is an abstract, or some very short summary of the entire project. This is really the most important part of the proposal, as it is often the only part of the proposal that will be read. However, this is what you want to write after you have written every other section and you have a better idea of how to articulate your project. This is also the element that you want to have everyone you know read to give you feedback on how engaging and clear it is. More will be said on writing the abstract later on.

Your personal or organizational description

Summarize this in two or three paragraphs, and realize that the organizational or personal information must relate directly to the project you are seeking to fund. These questions should be addressed in your description:

1. What is your mission as an organization or a private consultant? (A mission is a broad visionary statement.)
2. What are your overall goals? (Give two or three.)
3. What are some of your major accomplishments or qualifications?
4. Do you have evidence of client or community support? (For example, do you have a recent evaluation of your work that you can quote from?)
5. What is the population you serve as a consultant or organization? (Provide the number of people, demographics/socio-economic characteristics, and/or geographic area?)
6. If applicable, what is your total number of paid staff and volunteers/interns? (Do not include board members.)

If you are filling out an on-line application, the funding source will usually ask you these questions separately.

Describing needs

Almost every proposal guideline document will ask you to demonstrate the need for the project you are proposing. In most cases you will not be able to argue from common sense—you will need to present some actual data to show need. Here it is best not to come up with anecdotal data, but actual statistics of some kind. In a perfect world you will want to find data from an actual needs assessment that has been done on your proposal topic in your geographical area that is

not more than five years old. In truth, needs assessments are all around you, but there is no central clearing house on these—you often have to hear about them from word of mouth. Unfortunately, most of the time you will not be able to access already existing data because you will not know where it is or the data may not be out there. In these cases you need to come up with your own data (called primary data). For this you will need to do two things:

1. Decide what would constitute “proof” to your funding source that there is a need for your program.
2. Then, decide how you will get the data.

Here is an example of how you might collect primary data:

You might just write up a brief three- or four-item questionnaire and ask people in some location relative to your proposed program to fill out your survey. Try to get a substantial number of people who would be “in the know.” Then come up with percentages of people that you surveyed that claim there is a need.

Describing the goals, objectives, activities, measurements and outcomes

Stating your goals, objectives, activities, measurements, and outcomes is the hardest part of your proposal. Some proposal guidelines just ask you to put these elements in a loose narrative form, and others have actual on-line charts that you must fill out with very specific instructions. Most also require you to describe how you intend to evaluate your project, which is basically the same as “measurements.” Not every proposal guideline packet will use these exact terms, but most require you to state them in some form.

- *Goals* (sometimes called *aims*) are what your project is attempting to accomplish.
- *Objectives* are subdivisions of goals (some guideline kits reverse these definitions, or only include goals or only include objectives).
- *Activities* (often called *methods*) are what your project will actually do to accomplish the goals and objectives.
- *Outcomes* are (a) actual changes in program participants’ behaviors, practices, attitudes, or knowledge that should occur because of your project; or (b) actual changes in social structure (e.g., institutions, policy, public practices) that should occur because of your project.
- *Measurements* are data sources and findings that will demonstrate whether these goals, objectives, activities, and outcomes have actually taken place.

The measurements/evaluations are going to be focused mainly on your outcomes and much less so on your goals or activities. Remember that your outcomes are very specific changes in behavior, knowledge, and attitudes that people are expected to demonstrate because of your program. There are a number of ways that these changes can be demonstrated. But realize again that the list below does not constitute a rigorous evaluation the way that an experimental model would. This list should, however, satisfy funding sources for smaller-scale programs. The best strategies are listed first.

1. Conduct a pre-/posttest survey with program participants asking questions related to your anticipated outcomes. This survey will be identical at both periods, and should show improvement when the program is completed.
2. Conduct qualitative interviews with program participants at the close of the program, asking open-ended questions about participants' changes.
3. Conduct a posttest-only survey with program participants when the program is completed, asking questions about personal improvements.
4. Conduct focus groups with program participants at the close of the program, asking open-ended questions about participants' changes.
5. Keep field notes (or other records) on observations of program participants, making notes of changes in behavior and knowledge.

When you are discussing the outcomes, realize that often you will get your RFP or proposal guidelines and you will not be able to list the outcomes under the goals or anything similar.

Budget

Writing the budget can be either the easiest proposal element in the world or the hardest. If this is an online application the columns are often added for you, making the process a bit easier. Usually, the local private foundations require just a few line items with very little in terms of detail. But the governmental sources typically require a lot of information, including what is called a budget justification. The budget justification is an explanation of why you need certain dollars for this and that. Also note that you will usually be required to show that you are going to other sources for the funding as well, and some proposal guidelines ask you to list in-kind services/amounts in addition. The funding source will almost always state the line items they want, but if they do not, here is an example for what a budget might look like:

Mock Budget: ACE Job Training Program
(One year)

Item	Briar Fdn. (pending)	Prudent Fdn. (secured)	Overall
Personnel			
Program coordinator .5 FTE	\$11,000	\$5,000	\$16,000
Trainer #1 .25 FTE	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$8,000
Trainer #2 .25 FTE	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$8,000
Fringe (22%)	\$4,180	\$2,860	\$7,040
Subtotals	\$23,180	\$15,860	\$39,040
Other			
Supplies	\$330	\$220	\$550
Copying/printing Training manuals Daily copying	\$1,080	\$720	\$1,800
Telephone	\$200	\$150	\$350
Overhead (rent/utilities) 1/3 of total	\$3,127	\$1,540	\$4,667
Travel Daily mileage Green Valley workshop	\$1,020	\$710	\$1,730
Other (list) Rental of video equipment	\$310	\$200	\$510
Subtotals	\$6,067	\$3,540	\$9,607
TOTALS	\$29,247	\$19,400	\$48,647

Total amount requested from Briar Fdn: \$29,247

Total budget amount: \$48,647

Appendices or attachments

The proposal guidelines will most often tell you what you need to include in the attachments.

- If you are a corporation or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, you will always have to include a list of your board of directors and sometimes they will also ask for their affiliations (here they are just looking to make sure there is no conflict of interest). At other times they will want to know the demographic characteristics of the board members.
- For any kind of organization or business, they will usually request a copy of your last year's and current year's budget. This is something your accountant will have to fill out—it includes information about expenditures, assets, debits, projections, etc.
- If you are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, you will usually have to also include your IRS designation letter—a letter confirming you are legally tax-exempt.
- If you are a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, you will often also have to include your most recent 990 forms—this is the tax form packet you must fill out each year—it shows where your money came from and how it was spent.
- At times you will be requested to turn in other materials, such as your organization's policy on hiring or affirmative action and so on.
- Government funding agencies will have multiple forms on every imaginable topic that you will have to fill out.
- If asked or permitted, you will also want to turn in letters of support or letters of collaboration. If you are doing this project with a partner or a collaborator you may want to include letters from them to indicate their agreement. Sometimes these letters are required in the form of memos of understanding.

Face sheet

Most of the time when writing a proposal from a printed application, you will have to produce some kind of a face sheet with contact info on it. This is where your abstract will appear. Typically you will only be given about 250 words (often less) to summarize your proposal. Your proposal guideline packet will most likely tell you what the funding source wants

in the abstract, but you can usually add these items in any order you wish. Writing the abstract requires being as creative and as crystal clear as possible. Intrigue them if you can at the same time that you are presenting the clearest possible description. Most abstracts must include the following (in any order).

- A very short description of your organization or yourself
- A very short description of the program you are proposing
- A short statement of need
- Major anticipated outcomes of your program
- The total amount of the budget and the amount that you are requesting of the funding source

Specifics for a research proposal

Research proposals will very often have the same features as the program proposals:

- A description of yourself or your organization
- A description of needs for the research
- A description of specific goals or aims of the research
- A budget for the research
- Requested attachments

Here, instead of including strategies or activities like you do in a program proposal you will be including research strategies.