



Federal Grant Proposal Writing Guide

For The 1st Congressional District Of Massachusetts



Congressman John W. Olver

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Developing a Grant Proposal

A well-formed grant proposal is one that is carefully prepared, thoughtfully planned, and concisely packaged. A potential grant applicant usually becomes familiar with all of the pertinent program criteria of the funding institution. Before developing a proposal, the potential applicant may wish to refer to the information contact listed in the agency or foundation program description to learn whether funding is available, when applicable deadlines occur, and the process used by the grantor agency or private foundation for accepting applications.

Individuals without prior grant proposal writing experience may find it useful to attend a grantsmanship class or workshop. Applicants interested in locating workshops or consulting more resources on grantsmanship and proposal development should consult the Internet sites listed at the end of this report and explore other resources in their local libraries.

Developing Ideas for the Proposal

The first step in proposal planning is the development of a clear, concise description of the proposed project. To develop a convincing proposal for project funding, the project must fit into the philosophy and mission of the grant-seeking organization or agency; and the need that the proposal is addressing must be well documented and well articulated. To make a compelling case, the following should be included in the proposal:

- Nature of the project, its goals, needs, and anticipated outcomes;
- How the project will be conducted;
- Timetable for completion;
- How best to evaluate the results (performance measures);
- Staffing needs, including use of existing staff and new hires or volunteers; and
- Preliminary budget, covering expenses and financial requirements, to determine what funding levels to seek.

When developing an idea for a proposal, it is also important to determine if the idea has already been considered in the applicant's locality or state. A thorough check should be made with state legislators, local government, and related public and private agencies that may currently have grant awards or contracts to do similar work. If a similar program already exists, the applicant may need to reconsider submitting the proposed project, particularly if duplication of effort is perceived. However, if significant differences or improvements in the proposed project's goals can be clearly established, it may be worthwhile to pursue federal or private foundation assistance.

Community Support

For many proposals, community support is essential. Once a proposal summary is developed, an applicant may look for individuals or groups representing academic, political, professional, and lay organizations that may be willing to support the proposal in writing. The type and caliber of community support is critical in the initial and subsequent review phases. An applicant may elicit support from local government agencies and public officials. Several months may be required to develop letters of endorsement since something of value (e.g., buildings, staff, services) is sometimes negotiated between the parties involved.

While money is the primary concern of most grantseekers, thought should be given to the kinds of non-monetary contributions that may be available. In many instances, academic institutions, corporations, and other nonprofit groups in the community may be willing to contribute technical and professional assistance, equipment, or space to a worthy project. Not only can such contributions reduce the amount of money being sought, but also most grant-making agencies or foundations often view evidence of such local support favorably.

Many agencies require, in writing, affiliation agreements (a mutual agreement to share services between agencies) and building space commitments prior to either grant approval or award. Two useful methods of generating community support may be to form a citizen advisory committee or to hold meetings with community leaders who would be concerned with the subject matter of the proposal.

Identifying Funding Resources

Once the project has been specifically defined, the grant seeker needs to research appropriate funding sources. Both the applicant and the grantor agency or foundation should have the same interests, intentions, and needs if a proposal is to be considered an acceptable candidate for funding. It is generally not productive to send out proposals indiscriminately in the hope of attracting funding. Grant-making agencies and foundations whose interest and intentions are consistent with those of the applicant are the most likely to provide support. An applicant may cast a wide, but targeted, net. Many projects may only be accomplished with funds coming from a combination of sources, among them federal, state, or local programs and grants from private or corporate foundations.

There are many types of foundations: national, family, community, corporate, etc. For district or community projects, as a general rule, it is a good idea to look for funding sources close to home, which are frequently most concerned with solving local problems. Corporations, for example, tend to support projects in areas where they have offices or plants. Most foundations only provide grants to nonprofit organizations (those registered by the Internal Revenue Service as having 501(c) tax-exempt status), though the Foundation Center publishes information about foundation grants to individuals.

Once a potential grantor agency or foundation is identified, an applicant may contact it and ask for a grant application kit or information. Later, the grant seeker may ask some of the grantor agency or foundation personnel for suggestions, criticisms, and advice about the proposed project. In many cases, the more agency or foundation personnel know about the proposal, the better the chance of support and of an eventual favorable decision.

Sometimes it is useful to send the proposal summary to a specific agency or foundation official in a separate cover letter, and ask for preliminary review and comment. An applicant may check with the government agency or foundation first to determine its preference if this approach is under consideration. If the review is unfavorable and differences cannot be resolved, the grant seeker may ask the examining agency or foundation official to suggest another department, agency, or foundation that may be interested in the proposal. A personal visit to the agency's or foundation's state or regional office or headquarters (if available) may also be beneficial. A visit not only establishes face-to-face contact but also may bring out some essential details about the proposal or help secure additional advice or information.

Federal agencies are required to report funding information as funds are approved, increased, or decreased among projects within a given state depending on the type of required reporting. Also, grant seekers may consider reviewing the federal budget for the current and future fiscal years to determine proposed dollar amounts for particular budget functions.

Getting Organized to Write the Proposal

The grant seeker, having narrowed down the field of potential funders, may want to approach the most likely prospects to confirm that they might indeed be interested in the project. Many federal agencies and foundations are willing to provide an assessment of a preliminary one- or two-page concept paper before a formal proposal is prepared. The concept paper should give a brief description of the needs to be addressed, who is to carry out the project, what is to be accomplished, by what means, how long it will take, how the accomplishments will be measured, plans for the future, how much it will cost, and the ways this proposal relates to the mission of the funding source.

Developing a concept paper is excellent preparation for writing the final proposal. The grant seeker should try to see the project or activity from the viewpoint of the grant-making agency or foundation. Like the proposal, the concept paper should be brief, clear, and informative. It is important to understand that from the funder's vantage point, the grant is not seen as the end of the process, but only as the midpoint. The funder will want to know what will happen to the project once the grant ends. For example, will it be self-supporting or will it be used as a demonstration to apply for further funding? Will it need ongoing support, for how long, and what are the anticipated outcomes?

Writing the Grant Proposal

Overall Considerations

An effective grant proposal has to make a compelling case. Not only must the idea be a good one, but so must the presentation. Things to be considered include the following:

All of the requirements of the funding source must be met: prescribed format, necessary inclusions, deadlines, etc.

- The proposal should have a clear, descriptive title.
- The proposal should be a cohesive whole, building logically, with one section leading to another; this is an especially important consideration when several people have been involved in its preparation.
- Language should be clear and concise, devoid of jargon; explanations should be offered for acronyms and terms that may be unfamiliar to someone outside the field.
- Each of the parts of the proposal should provide as brief but informative a narrative as possible, with supporting data relegated to an appendix.

At various stages in the proposal writing process, the proposal should be reviewed by a number of interested and disinterested parties. Each time it has been critiqued, it may be necessary to rethink the project and its presentation. While such revision is necessary to clarify the proposal, one of the dangers is that the original excitement of those making the proposal sometimes gets written out. Somehow, this must be conveyed in the final proposal.

Basic Components of a Proposal

The basic sections of a standard grant proposal include the following:

1. Cover letter
2. Proposal summary or abstract
3. Introduction describing the grant seeker or organization
4. Problem statement (or needs assessment)
5. Project objectives
6. Project methods or design
7. Project evaluation
8. Future funding
9. Project budget

Cover Letter

The one-page cover letter should be written on the applicant's letterhead and should be signed by the organization's highest official. It should be addressed to the individual at the funding source with whom the organization has dealt, and should refer to earlier discussions. While giving a brief outline of the needs addressed in the proposal, the cover letter should demonstrate a familiarity with the mission of the grantmaking agency or foundation and emphasize the ways in which this project contributes to these goals.

Proposal Summary: Outline of Project Goals

The grant proposal summary outlines the proposed project and should appear at the beginning of the proposal. It could be in the form of a cover letter or a separate page, but should definitely be brief — no longer than two or three paragraphs.

The summary should be prepared after the grant proposal has been developed in order to encompass all the key points necessary to communicate the objectives of the project. It is this document that becomes the cornerstone of the proposal, and the initial impression it gives will be critical to the success of the venture. In many cases, the summary will be the first part of the proposal package seen by agency or foundation officials and very possibly could be the only part of the package that is carefully reviewed before the decision is made to consider the project any further.

The summary should include a description of the applicant, a definition of the problem to be solved, a statement of the objectives to be achieved, an outline of the activities and procedures to be used to accomplish those objectives, a description of the evaluation design, plans for the project at the end of the grants, and a statement of what it will cost the funding agency. It may also identify other funding sources or entities participating in the project.

For federal funding, the applicant should develop a project that can be supported in view of the local need. Alternatives, in the absence of federal support, should be pointed out. The influence of the project both during and after the project period should be explained. The consequences of the project as a result of funding should be highlighted.

Introduction: Presenting a Credible Applicant

In the introduction, applicants describe their organization and demonstrate that they are qualified to carry out the proposed project — they establish their credibility and make the point that they are a good investment, in no more than a page. Statements made here should be carefully

tailored, pointing out that the overall goals and purposes of the applicant are consistent with those of the funding source. This section should provide the following:

- A brief history of the organization, its past and present operations, its goals and mission, its significant accomplishments, and any success stories.
- Reference should be made to grants, endorsements, and press coverage the organization has already received (with supporting documentation included in the Appendix).
- Qualifications of its professional staff, and a list of its board of directors.
- Indicate whether funds for other parts of the project are being sought elsewhere; such evidence will strengthen the proposal, demonstrating to the reviewing officer that all avenues of support have been thoroughly explored.
- An individual applicant should include a succinct resume relating to the objectives of the proposal (what makes the applicant eligible to undertake the work or project?).

Problem Statement or Needs Assessment

This section lays out the reason for the proposal. It should make a clear, concise, and well-supported statement of the problem to be addressed, from the beneficiaries' viewpoint, in no more than two pages. The best way to collect information about the problem is to conduct and document both a formal and informal needs assessment for a program in the target or service area. The information provided should be both factual and directly related to the problem addressed by the proposal. Areas to document are as follows:

- Purpose for developing the proposal.
- Beneficiaries — who are they and how will they benefit.
- Social and economic costs to be affected.
- Nature of the problem (provide as much hard evidence as possible).
- How the applicant or organization came to realize the problem exists, and what is currently being done about the problem.
- Stress what gaps exist in addressing the problem that will be filled by the proposal.
- Remaining alternatives available when funding has been exhausted. Explain what will happen to the project and the impending implications.
- Most important, detail the specific manner through which problems might be solved. Review the resources needed, considering how they will be used and to what end. One of the pitfalls to be avoided is defining the problem as a lack of program or facility (i.e., giving one of the possible solutions to a problem as the problem itself). For example, the lack of a medical center in an economically depressed area is not the problem — the problem is that poor people in the area have health needs that are not currently being addressed. The problem described should be of reasonable dimensions, with the targeted population and geographic area clearly defined. It should include a retrospective view of the situation, describing past efforts to ameliorate it, and making projections for the future. The problem statement, developed with input from the beneficiaries, must be supported by statistics and statements from authorities in the fields. The case must be made that the applicant, because of its history, demonstrable skills, and past accomplishments, is the right organization to solve the problem.

Project Objectives: Goals and Desired Outcome

Once the needs have been described, proposed solutions have to be outlined, wherever possible in quantitative terms. The population to be served, time frame of the project, and specific

anticipated outcomes must be defined. The figures used should be verifiable. If the proposal is funded, the stated objectives will probably be used to evaluate program progress, so they should be realistic. There is literature available to help identify and write program objectives.

Program Methods and Program Design: A Plan of Action

The program design refers to how the project is expected to work and solve the stated problem. Just as the statement of objectives builds upon the problem statement, the description of methods or strategies builds upon the statement of objectives. For each objective, a specific plan of action should be laid out. It should delineate a sequence of justifiable activities, indicating the proposed staffing and timetable for each task. This section should be carefully reviewed to make sure that what is being proposed is realistic in terms of the applicant's resources and time frame. Outline the following:

1. The activities to occur along with the related resources and staff needed to operate the project ("inputs").
2. A flow chart of the organizational features of the project: describe how the parts interrelate, where personnel will be needed, and what they are expected to do. Identify the kinds of facilities, transportation, and support services required ("throughputs").
3. Explain what will be achieved through 1 and 2 above ("outputs"), i.e., plan for measurable results. Project staff may be required to produce evidence of program performance through an examination of stated objectives during either a site visit by the grantor agency or foundation, and/or grant reviews that may involve peer review committees.
4. It may be useful to devise a diagram of the program design. Such a procedure will help to conceptualize both the scope and detail of the project.
5. Carefully consider the pressures of the proposed implementation, that is, the time and money needed to undertake each part of the plan. Wherever possible, justify in the narrative the course of action taken. The most economical method should be used that does not compromise or sacrifice project quality. The financial expenses associated with performance of the project will later become points of negotiation with the government or foundation program staff. If everything is not carefully justified in writing in the proposal, after negotiation with the grantor agencies or foundations, the approved project may resemble less of the original concept.
6. Highlight the innovative features of the proposal that could be considered distinct from other proposals under consideration.
7. Whenever possible, use appendixes to provide details, supplementary data, references, and information requiring in-depth analysis. These types of data, although supportive of the proposal, if included in the body of the proposal, could detract from its readability. Appendixes provide the proposal reader with immediate access to details if and when clarification of an idea, sequence or conclusion is required. Time tables, work plans, schedules, activities, methodologies, legal papers, personal vitae, letters of support, and endorsements are examples of appendixes.

Evaluation: Product and Process Analysis

An evaluation plan should be a consideration at every stage of the proposal's development. Data collected for the problem statement form a comparative basis for determining whether measurable objectives are indeed being met, and whether proposed methods are accomplishing these ends; or whether different parts of the plan need to be fine-tuned to be made more effective

and efficient. Among the considerations will be whether evaluation will be done by the organization itself or by outside experts. The organizations will have to decide whether outside experts have the standing in the field and the degree of objectivity that would justify the added expense, or whether the job could be done with sufficient expertise by its own staff, without taking too much time away from the project itself.

Methods of measurement, whether standardized tests, interviews, questionnaires, observation, etc., will depend upon the nature and scope of the project. Procedures and schedules for gathering, analyzing, and reporting data will need to be spelled out.

The evaluation component is two-fold: (1) product evaluation and (2) process evaluation. "Product evaluation" addresses results that can be attributed to the project, as well as the extent to which the project has satisfied its stated objectives. "Process evaluation" addresses how the project was conducted, in terms of consistency with the stated plan of action and the effectiveness of the various activities within the plan.

Most federal agencies now require some form of program evaluation among grantees. The requirements of the proposed project should be explored carefully. An internal staff member, an evaluation firm or both, may conduct evaluations. Many federal grants include a specific time frame for performance review and evaluation. For instance, several economic development programs require grant recipients to report on a quarterly and annual basis. In instances where there are no specified evaluation periods, the applicant should state the amount of time needed to evaluate, how the feedback will be disseminated among the proposed staff, and a schedule for review and comment. Evaluation designs may start at the beginning, middle, or end of a project, but the applicant should specify a start-up time. It is desirable and advisable to submit an evaluation design at the start of a project for two reasons:

- Convincing evaluations require the collection of appropriate baseline data before and during program operations; and
- If the evaluation design cannot be prepared at the outset then a critical review of the program design may be advisable.

Even if the evaluation design has to be revised as the project progresses, it is much easier and cheaper to modify a good design. If the problem is not well defined and carefully analyzed for cause and effect relationships, then a good evaluation design may be difficult to achieve. Sometimes a pilot study is needed to begin the identification of facts and relationships. Often a thorough literature search may be sufficient.

Evaluation requires both coordination and agreement among program decision makers. Above all, the federal grantor agency's or foundation's requirements should be highlighted in the evaluation design. Also, grantor agencies may require specific evaluation techniques such as designated data formats (an existing information collection system) or they may offer financial inducements for voluntary participation in a national evaluation study. The applicant should ask specifically about these points.

Future Funding

The last narrative part of the proposal explains what will happen to the program once the grant ends. It should describe a plan for continuation beyond the grant period, and outline all other contemplated fund-raising efforts and future plans for applying for additional grants. Projections

for operating and maintaining facilities and equipment should also be given. The applicant may discuss maintenance and future program funding if program funds are for construction activity; and may account for other needed expenditures if program includes purchase of equipment.

Budget Development and Requirements

Although the degree of specificity of any budget will vary depending upon the nature of the project and the requirements of the funding source, a complete, well thought out budget serves to reinforce the applicant's credibility and to increase the likelihood of the proposal being funded. The estimated expenses in the budget should build upon the justifications given in the narrative section of the proposal. A well-prepared budget should be reasonable and demonstrate that the funds being asked for will be used wisely. The budget should be as concrete and specific as possible in its estimates. Every effort should be made to be realistic, to estimate costs accurately, and not to underestimate staff time.

The budget format should be as clear as possible. It should begin with a Budget Summary, which, like the Proposal Summary, is written after the entire budget has been prepared. Each section of the budget should be in outline form, listing line items under major headings and subdivisions. Each of the major components should be subtotaled with a grand total placed at the end. If the funding source provides forms, most of these elements can simply be filled into the appropriate spaces.

Generally, budgets are divided into two categories, personnel costs and nonpersonnel costs. In preparing the budget, the applicant may first review the proposal and make lists of items needed for the project.

The personnel section usually includes a breakdown of

- salaries (including increases in multiyear projects),
- fringe benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans, and
- consultant and contract services.

The items in the non-personnel section will vary widely, but may include

- space/office rental or leasing costs,
- utilities,
- purchase or rental of equipment,
- training to use new equipment, and
- photocopying, office supplies, and so on.

Some hard to pin down budget areas are: utilities, rental of buildings and equipment, salary increases, food, telephones, insurance, and transportation. Budget adjustments are sometimes made after the grant award, but this can be a lengthy process. The applicant should be certain that implementation, continuation, and phase-down costs can be met. Costs associated with leases, evaluation systems, hard/soft match requirements, audits, development, implementation and maintenance of information and accounting systems, and other long-term financial commitments should be considered.

A well-prepared budget justifies all expenses and is consistent with the proposal narrative. Some areas in need of an evaluation for consistency are as follows:

- Salaries in the proposal in relation to those of the applicant organization should be similar.
- If new staff persons are being hired, additional space and equipment should be considered, as necessary.
- If the budget calls for an equipment purchase, it should be the type allowed by the grantor agency.
- If additional space is rented, the increase in insurance should be supported.
- If matching funds are required, the contributions to the matching fund should be taken out of the budget unless otherwise specified in the application instructions.

In learning to develop a convincing budget and determining appropriate format, reviewing other grant proposals is often helpful. The applicant may ask government agencies and foundations for copies of winning grants proposals. Grants seekers may also search the Internet under keywords such as "sample grants budget" for examples such as the following:

- Budget Information, Instructions and Forms
<http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/pdf/BudgetInstructions.pdf>
- Foundation Center: Examples of Nonprofit Budgets
<http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/faqs/html/samplebudget.html>
- Getting Your Grant Proposal Budget Right
<http://nonprofit.about.com/od/foundationfundinggrants/a/grantbudget.htm>
- Grant-writing Tools for Non-Profit Organizations: Full Proposal Budget
<http://www.npguides.org/guide/budget.htm>
- Proposal Budgeting Basics
http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/prop_budgt/index.html
- UWRF Grants Office: Budgets (University of Wisconsin)
<http://www.uwrf.edu/grants/budgets.htm>

In preparing budgets for government grants, the applicant may keep in mind that funding levels of federal assistance programs change yearly. It is useful to review the appropriations and average grants or loans awarded over the past several years to try to project future funding levels: see "Financial Information" section of the CFDA program description for fiscal year appropriations and estimates; and "Range and Average of Financial Assistance" for prior years' awards. However, it is safer never to anticipate that the income from the grant will be the sole support for larger projects. This consideration should be given to the overall budget requirements, and in particular, to budget line items most subject to inflationary pressures. Restraint is important in determining inflationary cost projections (avoid padding budget line items), but the applicant may attempt to anticipate possible future increases.

For federal grants, it is also important to become familiar with grants management requirements. The CFDA identifies in the program description the Office of Management and Budget circulars applicable to each federal program. Applicants should review appropriate documents while developing a proposal budget since they are essential in determining items such as cost principles, administrative and audit requirements and compliance, and conforming with government guidelines for federal domestic assistance. OMB circulars are available full text on the Web at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants/grants_circulars.html.

To coordinate federal grants to states, Executive Order 12372, "Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs," was issued to foster intergovernmental partnership and strengthen federalism by relying on state and local processes for the coordination and review of proposed Federal financial assistance and direct federal development. The executive order allows each state to designate an office to perform this function, addresses of which may be found at the OMB website <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants/spoc.html>. States that are not listed on this Web page have chosen not to participate in the intergovernmental review process. If the applicant is located within one of these states, he or she may still send application materials directly to a federal awarding agency. State and regional offices of federal agencies that award grants and other domestic assistance can be found in CFDA Appendix IV at <http://12.46.245.173/CFDA/pdf/appx4.pdf>.

Proposal Appendix

Lengthy documents which are referred to in the narrative are best added to the proposal in an Appendix. Examples include letters of endorsement, partial list of previous funders, key staff resumes, annual reports, statistical data, maps, pictorial material, and newspaper and magazine articles about the organizations. Nonprofit organizations should include an IRS 501(c)(3) Letter of Tax Exempt Status.

Additional Proposal Writing Websites

All About Grants Tutorials (National Institutes of Health)

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/ncn/grants/default.htm>

Grant Writing Tips Sheet http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/grant_tips.htm

Common Grant Application (National Network of Grantmakers)

<http://www.nng.org/cga.html>

EPA Purdue University Grant-Writing Tutorial (Environmental Protection Agency)

<http://www.purdue.edu/envirosoft/grants/src/msieopen.htm>

Grant-writing Tools for Non-Profit Organizations (Non-Profit Guides)

<http://www.npguides.org/>

Sample proposals: http://www.npguides.org/guide/sample_proposals.htm

Proposal Writing Short Course (Foundation Center; English and Spanish)

<http://fdncenter.org/learn/shortcourse/prop1.html>

How do I write a grant proposal? Where can I find samples?

http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/faqs/html/proposal_writing.html

Proposal Writing websites (University of Wisconsin)

<http://grants.library.wisc.edu/organizations/proposalwebsites.html>

Sample Proposals (SchoolGrants.org)

<http://www.k12grants.org/samples/>

Selected Proposal Writing Websites (University of Pittsburgh)
<http://www.pitt.edu/~offres/proposal/propwriting/websites.html>

Tips on Writing a Grant Proposal (Environmental Protection Agency)
<http://www.epa.gov/ogd/recipient/tips.htm>

What Reviewers Look For (College of William and Mary)
<http://www.wm.edu/grants/PROP/reviewers.htm>

Writing a Successful Grant Proposal (Minnesota Council on Foundations)
<http://www.mcf.org/mcf/grant/writing.htm>

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Guidelines for Requesting a *Congressional Letter of Support*

When submitting a federal grant application, you may consider requesting a Congressional Letter of Support from my office. Although I do consider every request for a letter of support, it is not possible for me to provide letters of support in all cases.

Letters of support will be sent directly from my office to the head of the department or agency from which you are seeking a grant. Your organization will receive a copy of the support letter to submit with your application.

Finally, a letter of support from my office is not a guarantee of funding.

To request a letter of support for your application, please supply my office with the following:

1. A description of your organization,
2. The executive summary of your grant application,
3. A description of what the money will be used for,
4. A draft letter of support, and
5. The date the application was or will be submitted to the agency for review.

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