

Grant Writing Made Easy: How to Write a Successful Grant Application

The world of grants can be difficult to navigate. Grants are funds made available and designated for a particular purpose or project. Unlike a loan, grant funds are usually awarded without terms of repayment. Normally, organizations that have grant funds available announce a request for proposals (RFP) soliciting projects that embody their purpose and mission. There are many kinds of grants available and entities to secure them from, including corporations, state and federal government agencies, and foundations.

The grant writing process can be a daunting task, but it is imperative to write a compelling and competitive application in order to acquire funding on the first attempt. This technical brief addresses how to plan your grant proposal. It provides tips on how to search for grant opportunities as well as easy steps on how to write a successful grant application. It also covers the core essentials of submitting, tracking, and following-up on your grant application and provides a list of helpful related resources.

January 2014

Plan in Advance

Plan your grant proposal.

Most grant-making organizations seek similar core information from potential project applicants. They usually want to know about the scope of the project, the support from the community, long and short range impact, and overall budget and project cost estimates. Planning the grant proposal in advance will help create a thorough application and demonstrate a compelling argument for project need.

Below are the key elements to any grant application that must be carefully considered and clearly outlined prior to writing the proposal.

Determine project need and scope.

- Who is the customer base? What are the community's needs? Does this project fit into a local plan or a larger master plan? Is it part of an existing transit network and structure? Is the project the first of its kind in the area?

Determine project cost.

- What is the total project cost? How much funding will be needed for start-up and continuing operations? Are local matching funds available? What is my project

schedule? How will inflation impact the project financially?

Determine community impacts.

- Will the project increase ridership, mobility, and multimodal accessibility? Will there be economic development and better access to jobs? Will greenhouse gas emissions decrease? Will there be coordination with other programs and/or transit?

Determine project support.

- Do I have local agency and community support? Does the project have stakeholder partnerships? Does the project have local, state and federal political/representative support?

Seek Opportunities

Seek grant opportunities that share your project's mission and purpose.

Once the project proposal has been planned and the key elements have been identified, the next step is to seek out

grant opportunities and announcements from organizations that support your project's mission and purpose.

Grant seeking steps include:

1. Know where to look for agencies and organizations that provide grant awards.
2. Search for entities whose mission aligns with the purpose of the project.
3. Request a grant application.
4. Determine if the organization's grant awards encompass the project's need. Be sure of limitations set on the parameters of the grant.

Agencies and organizations that provide grants:

Federal Agencies

Below are some of the federal agencies with grant programs relevant to rural and tribal transit. You can also search for all of the federal grant opportunities through Grants.gov.

Keep in mind that with some programs, like FTA's Section 5311 Formula Grants for Rural Areas, the funds are apportioned to states by a formula to then be distributed as grants to sub-recipients. However, there may be components of a formula program that are discretionary, like the Tribal Transit Program discretionary funds, which tribes apply for directly from the FTA.

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- Brownfield Assessment Grants
- Environmental Justice Small Grants Program

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

- Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants
- Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

- Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Transportation, and Environmental Protection Agency

- Partnership for Sustainable Communities

States

As mentioned above, some federal grant programs are administered by states, and HUD's Community Development Block Grants program is another example of that. States may also have their own grant programs, so be sure to contact your state's department of transportation and other relevant departments.

Foundations

The Foundation Directory Online and The Grantsmanship Center are good places to look for grants from foundations. You can also visit the websites of specific foundations to see what grants they offer. Examples of foundations that award grants for rural development include:

- Ford Foundation
- Pew Charitable Trusts
- McKnight Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Charles Steward Mott Foundation



Image courtesy of Naypong from FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Write the Grant Application

Use these principles of grant writing to create a compelling grant application.

Once you have identified an appropriate grant to apply for, follow these grant writing recommendations to complete the application: 1. Gather information; 2. Organize ideas;

3. Develop a need statement; 4. Outline proposal; 5. Provide narrative detail.

1. Gather information

Gather as much data as possible that will support all assertions laid out in the grant application. The more supporting data you have, the more compelling the application will be. Be sure to pay close attention to all requested information and the details that the grant application requires. If some information is missing, the grant proposal may be deemed incomplete and will not be considered.

- Read all grant guidelines and requirements.
- Determine information needs.
- Collect applicable and supporting information for your project, such as:
 - Current transportation options and ridership data
 - Demographics and other U.S. Census data
 - Geographical data
 - Accessibility of health care, employment, and education

2. Organize your ideas

Brainstorming and organizing ideas ahead of time will provide the necessary structure that will help in identifying themes and developing a strong project need statement.

- Reread grant guidelines.
- Identify main points, concepts, or themes.

- Determine how to meet the goals of the funding source.
- Develop broad concepts (e.g. senior mobility, access to employment, etc.).

3. Develop a project need statement

A project need statement is akin to the thesis statement, which the entire grant proposal will support. The need statement should be a clear, concise, and robust assertion about your project, including its mission, the need for the project, and the overall impact it will have.

4. Outline Your Proposal

Drafting an outline will create the structure necessary to provide logic and sequence to the proposal. Be sure to follow any format requirements for the grant application.

This initial outline will serve as guidance in writing the narrative detail and adding the supportive data.

- Determine the main sections of the proposal.
- Craft brief statements for each section.
- Check off completed sections of the outline.

Quick Grant Writing Tips:

Revise, edit, and clarify. Put it aside – let it cool, then go back and reread. Does it make sense? Are there gaps? Get a second reader, especially someone who is not familiar with the project.

Simplify, but don't generalize. Stick to main points. Present ideas concisely.

Don't get bogged down. Move to other part of outline if stuck. Circle back to become clearer. Alleviate feeling overwhelmed.

Don't exaggerate. Describe manageable problems. Propose doable solutions.

Avoid repeating exact phrases from grant guidelines, but be sure to follow the instructions and keep the funder's mission in mind.

5. Provide thorough narrative detail

Once the outline is drafted, it's time to provide thorough narrative detail and data to support all sections of the outline. Be sure that the project scope is clear and concise. Do not overwhelm the reader with superfluous information. The narrative should always support the project need statement and the scope of work.

- Craft a clear project scope.
- Provide a complete and coherent funding strategy with budget breakouts.
- Include letters of support from the community, local delegations, and businesses.
- Provide details on the project benefits and community impact.
- Include human interest stories about real events and people.
- Demonstrate your knowledge, experience, and technical capacity.
- Provide a project timeline.

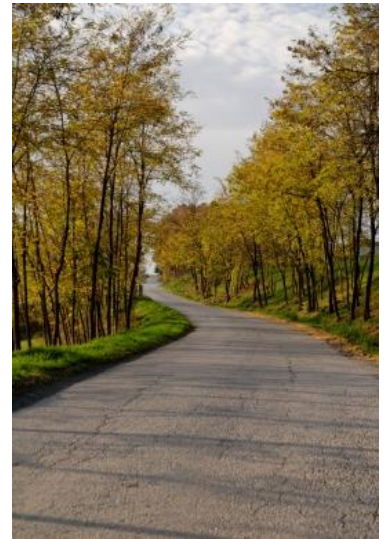


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Submit and Follow-up

Submit a complete grant application and follow-up on its status regularly.

Sometimes submitting the final grant application can be tricky due to the establishment of electronic application systems, such as the federal government's Grants.gov. It's worth taking the extra steps to investigate how the submission process works before the deadline looms close. If there is a technology problem or error when submitting the application and sections are deleted or entered incorrectly, it may count as an automatic disqualifier for award consideration.

Once the application is submitted, be sure to stay in contact with the grants manager or designated application contact. Sometimes the squeaky wheel gets the grease!

- Don't miss deadlines – check close-out dates and mark them on your calendar.
- Stay in contact – stay abreast of announcement dates and know the key grant contacts.
- Build support – ask supporters to send letters of support for your proposal.
- Follow-up on your proposal and ask for feedback if your grant was not funded.

Like anything, mastering the skill of grant writing comes with practice and patience. There are many grant opportunities available; it's only a matter of making a clear and compelling argument and demonstrating need. A project can be important and worthwhile, but if the proposal is mediocre and doesn't present the project well, it will be passed over. The principles and recommendations outlined in this technical brief will help guide you through the steps to produce a successful grant application.

Good luck!

Helpful Resources

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance – Writing Grants

<https://www.cfda.gov/?s=generalinfo&mode=list&tab=list&tabmode=list&static=grants>

This guide provides step-by-step instructions on how to develop and write a successful federal grant proposal.

Foundation Center

<http://foundationcenter.org/>

The Foundation Center provides information and resources about philanthropy, including a comprehensive database of grants and grantmakers called the Foundation Directory Online.

The Grantsmanship Center

<http://www.tgci.com/>

The Grantsmanship Center offers training and publications for non-profits, including a database of grantmakers called GrantDomain, and lists of the top grantmaking foundations, community foundations, and corporate giving programs in each state in the Funding Sources section of their website.

National RTAP – ITA Grant Writing Workshop

<http://webbuilder.nationalrtap.org/details.aspx?org=a2GSpnDbrul%3d&query=grant%20writing>

Rob Tassinari, of National RTAP, gave this workshop at the 2009 Intertribal Transportation Association (ITA) Annual Meeting and Conference. The presentation focuses on writing Tribal Transit Program grant applications. The presentation recording and slides are both available for viewing.

Rural Information Center (RIC), USDA National Agricultural Library – A Guide to Funding Resources

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/fundguide.html>

This resource guide provides information and guidance on grants and grantwriting, with a focus on rural areas. It gives links to funding databases, as well as links to manuals and tips on how to prepare a successful proposal.

Grant Opportunities

Foundation Center – Foundation Directory Online Free

<http://fdo.foundationcenter.org/>

The Grantsmanship Center – Funding Sources

<http://www.tgci.com/funding.shtml>

Rural Information Center (RIC), USDA National Agricultural Library – Funding Resources

<http://ric.nal.usda.gov/funding-resources>

Grants.gov

www.grants.gov

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

<http://www.dot.gov/grants>

- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
<http://www.fta.dot.gov/grants.html>
- Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)
<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/discretionary/>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

<http://www.epa.gov/otaq/stateresources/grants.htm>

- Brownfield Assessment Grants
http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/grant_info/index.htm
- Environmental Justice Small Grants Program
<http://www.epa.gov/compliance/ej/grants/>

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

<http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/topics/grants>

- Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grants
http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/sustainable_housing_communities/sustainable_communities_regional_planning_grants
- Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)
http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/communitydevelopment/programs/entitlement

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=RURAL_DEVELOPMENT&navtype=SU

- Rural Community Development Initiative (RCDI)
http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/HAD-RCDI_Grants.html

HUD, DOT, and EPA – Partnership for Sustainable Communities

www.sustainablecommunities.gov/toolsKeyResources.html

For more information, please visit www.NationalRTAP.org, or contact National RTAP directly at info@nationalrtap.org or at 888-589-6821.