

**THE COMPLETE
IDIOT'S
GUIDE[®] TO**

Grant Writing

Third Edition

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The Parts of a Grant Proposal

Chapter 13

In This Chapter

- Making a convincing argument for support
- What goes into a program description
- Addressing your proposal to the right audience

When you use the word *proposal*, the program (or project) description is probably what comes to mind. It's the heart and soul of your proposal—the place where you go into all the details about the program's execution as well as its underlying philosophy. Although the pitch you make in the cover letter (see Chapter 16) might more obviously be written to sell your program, don't forget that the program description must reinforce everything you put in the cover letter, continuing to sell the funder on the program and your charity's ability to perform it.

To write a program description that sells, you have to keep in mind what the funder wants to support and balance that against what your charity plans to do. You have to preserve both perspectives through the numerous stages in editing. I show you how to do that, as well as explain the many elements that go into a proposal, in this chapter.

Making the Case for Support

If you want a funder to support your project or organization with a grant, you have to present a convincing argument to bring them to that conclusion. This is known as making the *case for support*. Each element that makes up the project description helps make the case for support.

**DEFINITION**

The **case for support** is the essential part of any funding request. It engages the reader, explains why the project or organization needs and is worthy of support, and demonstrates the urgency with which funding is needed.

A good case for support immediately captures the reader's imagination, usually with a bold statement of purpose or a surprising fact the reader might not know. It goes on to describe the problem you plan to solve and how your charity will work to solve it. It must also convey a feeling of urgency to make the reader want to give you the grant *right now*.

Good cases for support bear a strong relationship to other types of persuasive writing. In their book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath sum up their guide to successful writing with the mnemonic "SUCCES," which stands for "simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and stories." That's the best summary of how to create good fundraising copy I've ever seen. As you read on, think about how each part of the case for support fulfills one or more aspects of their principle.

Here are the essential parts of the proposal (or case for support):

Purpose of the program. Stated simply, what will the project accomplish?

Why you are doing this project. Why is the program needed? Does any other organization have a similar program? If so, how does what you will do differ? How does your program fit with your charity's mission?

How you will make it happen. What resources (personnel, technical, facility, financial) are needed to carry out the program? What are the steps you'll take to prepare for and to execute the program?

Who will do what. Who will run the program? What staff will be involved, and how much time will each person devote to this project? Will you use consultants? A combination of staff and consultants? What will the roles of each be?

Who will benefit. How many people will the program serve, and who are they? Why is it important to serve these people? Can you illustrate the effects of your program with a story about one of your clients or constituents?

How you will know you've done well. What results do you expect from the program? What are its *goals* and *objectives*? How will you evaluate the program?



DEFINITION

Goals and objectives are often spoken about as if they are the same thing, but they're actually quite different. Goals represent what you want to have achieved at the end of a program. Objectives are the measurable steps you need to take to get there. Goals are about the outcome; objectives are about the process.

Summing it all up. Can you sum up the proposal in two or three sentences to leave the funder with a simple picture they can really remember? People tend to skip to the end of documents. Can you use a surprising example here to stick in the reader's memory?

The ability to weave together the answers to these questions into a seamless, readable narrative represents the grant writer's primary skill. In large organizations, different people conduct research, and still others prepare the budgets, but writing the project description remains the province of the grant writer.

The order you present the necessary information can vary, especially if a funder specifies some other order. Always follow the funder's instructions to the letter.

You can use this list of elements as a questionnaire to gather information from the people running the program. You'll probably go back to them several times in the process for more information or clarifications. Be sure to let someone directly involved in carrying out the program read your proposal before you submit it to be sure nothing got lost in the translation.

Now let's look at each part to delve more deeply into what makes a successful grant proposal.

Purpose of the Program

So what is the purpose of your program? You might be able to answer that question in two or three words: alleviate hunger; purchase library books; vaccinate children; find a cure; make a film. Unfortunately, you can't stop there. The funder knows that any number of organizations have programs that work toward the same purpose, so you must show why *your* charity should receive a grant to pursue this goal.

A strong, even bold, statement of purpose at the beginning of a proposal can grab the reader's attention and set an ambitious tone for the rest of the proposal. For example:

Community Food Bank will provide two meals daily to 100 homeless people, none of whom are now reached by any other agency.

Nonprofit managers attending the Managing Your Board workshops will come away with the knowledge and skills to transform their relationships with their boards, resulting in more productive nonprofits throughout the city.

The music workshops we propose will give the forgotten children in the city's homeless shelters a new sense of identity.

Note that in each of these examples, I used the helper verb *will* instead of *would*. *Will* makes a more positive statement, implying that the project will go forward no matter what. *Would* is weaker, implying that the project is not only conditional on this grant coming through but perhaps on other factors as well.



HOW TO SAY IT

Beginning grant writers often hesitate to make bold, sweeping statements, having been taught in English classes to avoid generalizations and not to make any unsubstantiated statements. Sweeping statements are a means of getting the reader's attention, and although you need to support your assertions somewhere in the proposal, the substantiation doesn't necessarily have to immediately follow your bold declaration.

You should always create a one-sentence summary that describes the project's essence in a way that makes a strong case for funding. And it should be a *really* good sentence! If you can't do that, you don't understand the project well enough to write the proposal. Review your notes and talk again with people involved in the program until you can write one dynamite sentence.

A good accompaniment for your bold statement (and possibly preceding it) is a dramatic and surprising statistic related to your project, such as:

2,800 adults and 1,200 children in our city go to sleep hungry every night.

98 percent of nonprofit executives identify working productively with their boards as one of their top three issues.

The 400 children living in our city's largest homeless shelter have no access to after-school activities.

Why You Are Doing This Project

One of the critical points you have to make concerns the *need* for your program. The funder wants to know you have a thorough knowledge of the issue you seek to address and how what you propose to do fits in with what others are doing or have done. Is your approach different or complementary? Why is it needed? In what way will the program aid the program's clients? What would they do if your program didn't exist?



DEFINITION

Need is one of those nonprofit words that gets bandied about in many guises. Every project must fulfill some need, but every grant award is not "need based." Need-based grants use the need of the applicant as the primary or sole criteria in deciding on the award. Disaster relief grants are an example. Your proposals will mostly be for merit-based awards. You'll not only have to demonstrate your clients' needs, but also why your charity merits the award.

The need for the program should resonate with your charity's mission. Just because you're a good organization and the community has a need doesn't mean your charity is the best one to address that need. Explain how this program fits in with everything else you do.

Proposals that are too inward looking—that is, concentrated too much on what your charity needs—are doomed to failure in most cases. Proposals that focus on clients' needs—the people you will help—stand a much better chance of success. Remember: funders make grants to solve a problem other than helping you make your budget goal.

Never trash the competition in your proposal. Today's competitor is tomorrow's panelist deciding the fate of your grant proposal. It's also not polite or necessary. That's not to say you shouldn't contrast your approach to that of other organizations, but you should do so in a way that offends no one. For example, you'll say ...

The Community Food Bank will provide meals to 100 people daily who are now being missed by other social service providers.

Or:

The Community Food Bank will provide meals to 100 people daily who are unable to get transportation to food services offered by other social service providers.

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Either version is much more positive than “The Community Food Bank will provide meals to 100 people daily who Food for People does not reach because of its unwillingness to look outside its immediate neighborhood.”

You can make your need statement stronger by including in your proposal statements from neutral third parties that express or reinforce the need you seek to address. These could be stories in the press or studies groups other than your charity have done, including studies commissioned by funders. This not only gives greater credence to your cause, it also shows that your charity sees itself as part of the larger issue and that it keeps abreast of the latest thought on a subject. Here are a couple of examples:

The Daily Times reported that Mayor Thomas stated in his speech to the Rotary Club last week that “hunger remains one of the city’s most pressing problems, especially among the transient population that lives on the fringes of the industrial area.” Community Food Bank agrees, which is why we approach the distribution of meals through a mobile facility rather than depending on our main office to handle all clients.

Social Think Tank, Inc., in its report issued last month, drew attention to the difficulty that traditional place-based food banks have in reaching the most needy populations, which tend to exist outside central urban areas where most of these agencies are located. Community Food Bank agrees, which is why

Testimonials to your charity’s ability to carry out a project will also strengthen your case for support. We look at how to do that in detail in Chapter 17.

How You Will Make It Happen

You have to give the funder a concrete description of how the program will work. Be as specific as possible without putting too many limitations on your program staff. Will you meet with each client five times? How many hot lunches will you distribute? What are the steps your literacy program follows to involve adults and children? Let’s look at a couple of short examples:

The Managing Your Board workshop series will consist of four weekly sessions, each lasting two hours. Workshops will begin with a lecture by an expert in board and executive director issues followed by a question-and-answer period. During the final half hour of each session, participants will

break down into groups of 10 or fewer to discuss what they have learned in practical terms that relate to their organizations. The themes of the workshops will be Avoiding Micromanagement, Helping a Board Fundraise, Making the Executive Director's Performance Review Work for You, and Building the Board You Need.

The Music for Kids program will provide musical instruction to young people living in the city's largest homeless shelter. Transportation will be provided to our partner's recreational facility after school two days each week. The emphasis will be on rhythm and simple songs, rather than trying to teach them how to read music. This remains a transient population requiring short-term goals each of the young people can meet. Most of the 90-minute sessions will be devoted to working all together, but there will be time each day for more personalized attention from the teaching assistants.



HOW TO SAY IT

Never underestimate the power of negative writing. Any negativity in your proposal about a past failure to meet a goal or frequent personnel transitions at your nonprofit will cast enough doubt to sink your proposal. Be honest by all means, but keep it positive.

Note that both paragraphs briefly describe the format of the sessions, give information on the content, and give the time participants will be involved in the programs. A real proposal would go into additional detail. You might also want to include a month-by-month time line to show how the different steps in a program will come together.

When deciding how technical you can be in your proposal, take into consideration who will be reading it. You want to give details and examples the reader will understand. In general, proposals reviewed by peer panels can include more technical language than ones that will be seen only by foundation trustees who may or may not possess technical knowledge related to your proposal.

Also take into consideration other grantees of the funder and any other nonprofit connections the funder's trustees might have and how your proposal might affect them. An online service for which I was raising funds, on face value, might have appeared to compete with services offered by other grantees of a particular funder.

I was careful in the cover letter and the proposal to describe in detail how our new service would drive people to the websites of the other grantees rather than taking clients away from them.

Do not mention anyone or any organization as participating in your program without clearing it with them first. This is especially true if a peer panel will evaluate your proposal. When writing your proposal, keep in mind whom those people might be. If your proposal calls for working with other organizations (or even just using their mailing lists), give examples that include some of the potential panelists if possible. Be especially sure you don't criticize any other organization.



HOW TO SAY IT

Don't let too many details take away the flexibility the program staff will need to run the program. Don't say "We will hire John Jones as our management consultant." Instead say, "We will hire a management consultant such as John Jones, Mary Chin, or Thomas Brown."

Who Will Do What?

The funder will also want to know who will carry out the program. Will your staff do everything, or will you use outside consultants? It's critical that the staffing described in this section exactly matches the staffing detailed in your program budget. You needn't get too specific, but give them an idea of where the responsibilities will lie.

You want to build in the reasoning for participation by staff members at various levels. Will the executive director be involved in program development or execution in any way? If so, you can allocate a small part of his salary to this project. (After you've done that for enough programs, you've gotten your boss's salary paid for through restricted grants!)

The staffing sections of the two programs described previously might read like this:

The director of programs will select the consultants who will lead the workshops in consultation with other members of the program staff and from referrals from colleagues at other service organizations. Program staff will manage the enrollment of the workshop sessions and be present at each workshop to assist with the breakout groups. One consultant will lead each of the first three workshops, with two consultants jointly leading the final session.

Our education staff will provide the musical instruction throughout the program. They will be supervised by the director of programming and the director of education; both will assist in creating the lesson plans and review progress with the instructors weekly. We will be paying a fee to our partner organization for the use of their bus and bus driver. We will also pay the custodial staff at the partner facility from program funds.



WORDS TO THE WISE

Use the names of staff or consultants when they're well known or are included in a "key staff" attachment. Otherwise, you're just as well off using more general descriptions like "program staff" or "clinicians" to allow greater flexibility in the program's execution and still make it clear to the reader who is doing what.

Who Will Benefit

Who will benefit from the program is, of course, *the* important part of a program description. Foundations and other funders seek to solve some social problem, whether it's hunger, literacy, access to the arts, or helping nonprofits work better. In submitting a proposal, you are volunteering to help them solve one of their problems. Focusing on the needs of the ultimate beneficiaries of the program (rather than on your charity) will resonate more strongly with the funder's "problems."

Emotional stories about the people your project serves enrich this section. Even a short anecdote gives your proposal a human dimension the reader can respond to compassionately.

This section must also include some cold, hard facts about how many people you will serve and how well you will serve them. To corporate and some other funders, the numbers make a huge difference in judging the worthiness of your proposal. Giving exact numbers before the program even begins is impossible, but you can give ranges.

You might feel you need to inflate the number of people who will be served to make the funder feel like it will be getting its money's worth. Don't! Those numbers will come back to haunt you when it's time to report on your results. But don't give numbers that are too low, either, or funders might think the program isn't cost-effective.

Funders realize that different kinds of projects are more efficient than others and that efficiency is not the sole judge of worthiness. A website might cost \$50,000 to make and reach 250,000 people or 20 cents per person, whereas a workshop series might

cost \$50,000 and serve 100 people or \$500 per person, but in a much more direct and personal way. The value of the program is not just in the math—it's in the ability of your charity to deliver a program that accomplishes its goals and serves a worthy purpose.

How You Will Know You've Done Well

Program evaluation should be an integral part of everything your charity does. How else will you be able to show others that you have done the job well, if people benefit enough to justify the expense, and if the program should continue? A lot of charities coast along with only anecdotal evidence of program success. These charities eventually get an unwelcome surprise when a funder starts asking hard questions.

Lack of a current outside evaluation has prevented me more than once from approaching several foundations that insist on a third-party analysis of a program. One of these foundations seldom makes grants less than \$50,000, so it's easy to see how a \$20,000 professional evaluation would pay for itself in short order.

Don't let your charity be one of those getting caught short. Talk to program staff about evaluating their programs at various stages. Evaluations can be as simple as a survey given to each participant or as complicated as a multi-month study by an outside evaluator. Find the appropriate solution that best suits your program (and fundraising) needs.



HOW TO SAY IT

Funders won't judge your program solely on the numbers—the ability of your charity to deliver a program that accomplishes its goals and serves a worthy purpose is much more important. But do supply whatever *realistic* numbers you can to provide an idea of the scope of your program.

Just as your program evaluation needs to be carefully considered, so does the way you describe it in the proposal. Don't say you'll use an outside evaluator (which is usually expensive) unless you know your charity will do it.

Don't try to hide the lack of evaluative procedures by giving some vague statement of your charity's belief in evaluation like "Our charity follows a rigorous evaluative process to assess the efficacy of all programs through surveys, interviews with participants, focus groups, and independent evaluators." That's all well and good, but how

will you evaluate *this* program? A sound evaluation provides excellent material for all future proposals.

Nothing in the project description should deviate from the sole purpose of generating interest and enthusiasm for the project. Don't get sidetracked recounting your charity's history or describing other programs.

For the workshop series on How to Manage Your Board described earlier in this chapter, an evaluation plan might read like this:

Short surveys will be provided to participants at the end of each session in which they will be asked to grade the speaker, the content, and the overall workshop on a five-point scale. They will also be asked for information about themselves and the organizations for which they work so that *cross-tab* reports can be prepared to assess the program from many angles. We will also interview workshop leaders to gain insights from their point of view. Subsequent workshop series will be modified should the analysis of this data indicate a need for a different approach or different instructors. The cross-tab reports will also help focus the marketing and outreach for future programs.



DEFINITION

Cross-tabs are tabulations of one set of data in terms of another set of data. In the example here, that might mean counting the number of people from large charities rating the workshop excellent and comparing it to the number from small charities giving it an excellent rating to see which group was better served by the workshops. You should familiarize yourself with some of the jargon of the evaluation world before getting too deeply involved in describing evaluations in your proposals. The Management Assistance Program for Nonprofits offers a free guide to program evaluation and more at mapnp.org.

Given the ages of the participants in the music workshops for homeless children (also described in this chapter), surveys would not be as effective a method of evaluation. In this case, an evaluation from the charity's director of education might be best, especially if you can show that she has a background that allows her to do this objectively.

Summing It All Up

At the end of your proposal, clearly sum it all up for the reader. The summary should usually be no more than one or two paragraphs and should include ...

- A moving argument for funding your proposal stated differently from elsewhere in the proposal (which includes both needs and the results).
- A restatement of the amount of the grant you're requesting.
- A thank you for considering your proposal.

This is where you want the reader to hear the violins soar and see the cowboy ride off into the sunset. *This is your big ending.* Make it a good one. Here's an example:

Life in a shelter for homeless families is especially hard on the children. Going to school provides some respite, but often the school day simply exchanges one institutional environment for another. Music for Kids will ensure that for at least three hours each week, as many as 60 kids living in these shelters will be taken out of the institutional environment and out of themselves through music.

Individual and small group instruction will provide much-needed personal attention, and group singing will encourage community and cooperation. Such simple activities have an enormous potential to assist these young people, as has been shown in the recent study by Urban Educators Conference. Thank you for considering our \$20,000 grant request. It will make all this possible for these lost citizens of our city.

A common question is "how long should the proposal be?" Without being facetious, the answer is "as long as it needs to be." Some funders impose limits on length (as little as 3 pages), but I've written 15-page proposals that (at least to me) didn't seem long. The important thing is to stay focused on the project and avoid any tangents. If the proposal will be more than five pages, you might want to include a table of contents, and you'll definitely want section headers to help the funder's staff skim through to find particular information.

The Least You Need to Know

- If you can't sum up a project in one persuasive sentence, you don't understand it well enough to write a proposal.
- Making a clear case for supporting your charity includes information on what problems you seek to solve, how you will solve them, who will work on the project, and most importantly, who will benefit from it.
- Proposals that focus on your clients' or constituents' needs are stronger than those that stress the needs of your nonprofit.
- Take into consideration who will be reading your proposal when deciding how technical you can be in describing how you will carry it out.
- Use concrete methods for evaluating a program you know you will be able to include in your report to the funder.
- Use a moving closing section to reinforce the key points in the proposal and repeat "the ask."

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