

Tips for Success with Proposal Development

Designing the project is really the most difficult task required in pursuing grant funding, but the process of putting together a proposal can also be a daunting challenge. The following are some general tips for achieving success in securing grant funds.

Carefully choose a sponsor and funding opportunity that best matches your project idea. It is important to understand that agencies do not give you grant money because you need it; they give you grant money because your project will help them carry out their mission. One of the most important goals of your project narrative should be to show the reviewers how your project will contribute to the accomplishment of the agency's mission.

Read successful grant proposals. One of the best ways to become a successful grant proposal writer is to read funded proposals that other individuals in your field have written. Many sponsors provide lists of funded proposals on their websites, and some offer abstracts. Typically, individuals who have been successful in securing grant funds are willing to share their successful proposals with others in the field. Awarded proposals should be used as examples of quality documents that meet the sponsor's specifications rather than as boilerplates for drafting your own proposal.

Create a convincing argument. Agencies receive far more quality proposals than they can support; a convincing argument, therefore, is critical to the funding success of your proposal. Use assertive language such as "will" instead of more tentative language such as "would." For example, write "I will use the results to . . ." rather than "I would use the results to . . ." in your project narrative. Seek to demonstrate why your project is important and what it contributes to the field. When possible, create a sense of urgency by explaining the long-term effects of the problem you have identified. Make it difficult for reviewers to say "no" to your proposal.

Be realistic. Carefully plan your goals and objectives for the project and be confident that you can deliver anything you promise in the proposal. Remember that it is always better to under-promise and over-deliver than to overpromise and under-deliver. Sponsors are not interested in getting as much work as possible for the least amount of money as much as they are interested in funding a solid project that can be accomplished with positive results according to their expectations and timelines.

Follow the sponsor's guidelines. Following the sponsor's guidelines is absolutely critical to the funding success of your proposal. Most sponsors will not even send your proposal for review if it fails to meet the criteria outlined in the application guidelines. Be sure to strictly adhere to formatting requirements and include all required information in the narrative. It can be very helpful to reviewers if you organize your proposal with headings that follow the order in which the narrative criteria is presented in the guidelines. If sponsors assign point values to specific sections of the proposal, try to devote more energy to the sections worth the most points.

Include a well-planned and cost-effective budget. The budget for your proposal should be an accurate reflection of the amount of money you need to do the project well. Avoid the temptation to submit a "bare-bones" budget that may not include enough funds to adequately complete project activities as well as the temptation to submit an inflated budget that includes extra costs "just in case" you come up short of funds. Reviewers will have an idea of how much money is needed for the project, and a proposal including a budget that is far different from what they expect is less likely to be funded than one that seems realistic to them.

Allow time for proofreading and editing. A proposal with a good idea that is poorly written is not likely to make it to the top of reviewers' score rankings. Avoid risking the denial of your project's funding as a result of issues that are unrelated to the project itself. In addition to proofreading the proposal yourself, ask others to review it as well. It can be helpful to have someone within your field to review the proposal for technical errors or misrepresentations as well as someone from outside your field to review the proposal for organization, grammatical errors, and readability.