



ASSOCIATION OF ESD PROFESSIONALS

HOW TO

WRITE EFFECTIVE GRANTS





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WRITE STELLAR GRANTS & BRING IN FUNDING TO YOUR ESD PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

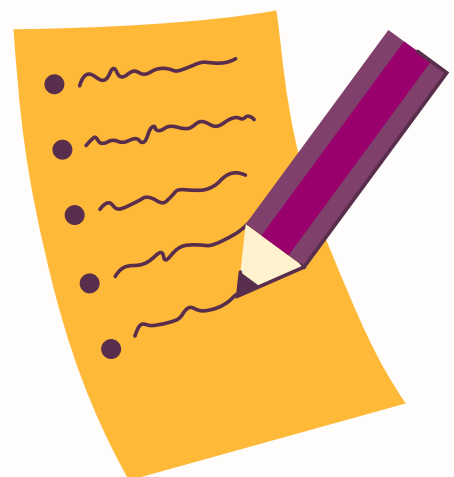
From corporate to foundation to government grants, money in the world of grants is out there. And it is out there because people want to fund your project!

Finding and getting access to that money doesn't have to be as hard or as daunting as it seems, but it does take time, research, and attention to detail.

People are often intimidated when they hear the term "grant writing," thinking it is a skill beyond their reach. Don't let this assumption stop you!

Writing grant proposals can be a complex and competitive process. We would love to give you a shortcut to writing effective grants, but unfortunately there is not one big secret for success.

More than anything, a thoughtful assessment of the grant application, careful planning, and an organized approach to telling your story and articulating your goals will increase your chances of creating a successful proposal. It sounds like a lot, but if you take it step by step, you'll see that it's not so much.



WHAT IS GRANT WRITING?

What is grant writing, anyway?

Before we go any further into the “how” of writing grants, let’s dig into what grant writing is and clarify some common terminology.

What many people refer to as grant writing is actually grant proposal writing. The grant is the money that is awarded by a funding institution. The proposal is the application for the receipt of this money, which is reviewed by the institution. These are generally called RFPs which stands for Request For Proposal.

So “grant writing” is actually just the process of completing and submitting an application or proposal for funding for a specific purpose that has been released by an institution. These can be government departments, corporations, foundations, or trusts. The grant applications, proposals, or submissions serve as formal requests for funding to support your project, program, or initiative.

Some funders (they are the entities providing the funding, also referred to as grant-makers) open a grant cycle once, twice, or multiple times throughout the year, while others accept applications any time. Some grants are one-time awards and others are ongoing. Every grant is different, and every funder is unique in their requirements and application process. But fret not, there are basic elements they all have in common.

Many funders do not accept unsolicited grant proposals but they do accept letters of intent or LOIs—some accept them any time, some during designated periods.

WHAT IS AN LOI?



An LOI (Letter of Intent or Letter of Inquiry) introduces your project to a potential funder. It is not as detailed and is designed to receive feedback on the viability of the project...and hopefully an invitation to submit your full proposal!

Submitting an LOI before a proposal may feel like an extra step. However, the idea is to save time for everyone involved. It is a vetting process for the funder to determine if the potential grantee is a good fit, if they have aligned mission and values, and if their proposed project fits within the granting parameters. And it helps you to formulate how best to present your project, think about how much funding you need, and do a little research about the funder and how your goals are aligned with theirs.

Effective grant proposal writing requires thorough research, complete clarity in your own work and goals, persuasive writing skills, and a clear presentation of the project's goals, objectives, and expected outcomes.

STEP 1 || IDENTIFY FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The first step is to find relevant funding opportunities for your specific project. This can be quite time-consuming, but once you start, you will realize just how many opportunities are out there! Research and identify grants that align with your ESD project, organization, or research.

WHERE CAN I FIND GRANTS?



- Government Agencies
- Foundations
- Private Organizations
- Grant-maker Databases
- [The Association of ESD grant database](#)

Of course, you can start with an Internet search, too. There are specific databases and platforms where some foundations exclusively announce their call for proposals. Accessing these databases sometimes requires creating a profile and making an annual payment. The payment may or may not be worth it, depending on what your funding goals and existing budgets look like. Sometimes your organization must be verified and vetted to be invited to use these databases.

Here are some common ones:

- [Government grants](#) (from the U.S. government)
- [Guidestar](#)
- [Foundation Directory](#)

With these databases, you will find search tools to filter your parameters and needs and you may find access to foundations that are otherwise tricky to find. However, the proposal deadlines and requirements may not always be updated. If there is a website or direct contact, the best thing to do is always reach out and find the most updated proposal guidelines.

Make a list of possible funding opportunities, and take notes:

STEP 2 || UNDERSTAND THE FUNDER AND THEIR GUIDELINES

- Focus on relationship building.
- Review guidelines with careful attention to detail.
- Understand requirements, funding priorities, and parameters.
- Review past grantees.

This is arguably the most crucial part of the process, getting to know the funder. The more money you are requesting (or they are offering), the deeper you should dig and the more important it is to build a relationship.

PRO TIP

A big part of grant writing is actually relationship building.

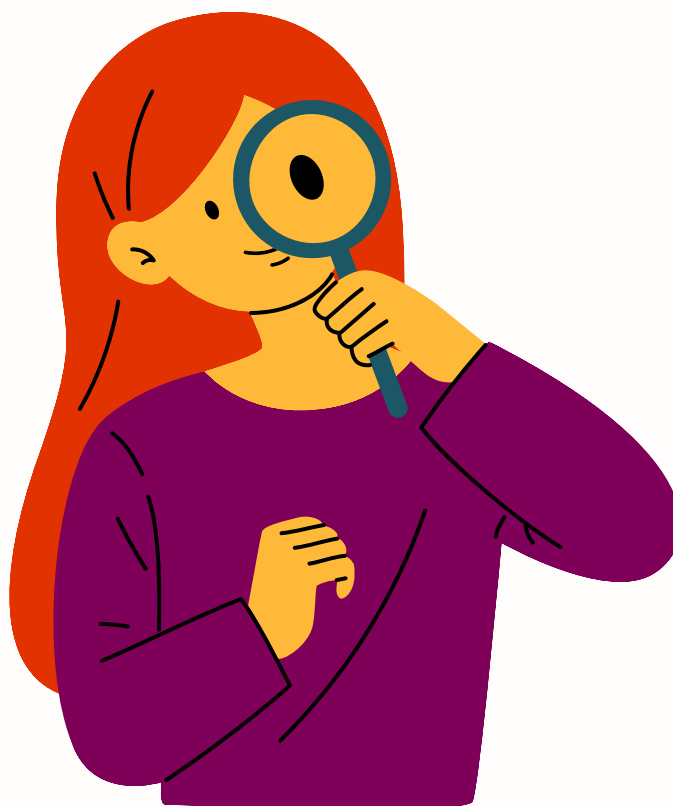


Most of the time, funding entities will have a very clear process laid out for potential grantees, one that may not include an initial conversation or one-on-one communication. However, if there is an option to connect directly with someone from the institution, always take advantage of this. The sooner you can begin to build a relationship with the funding organization, the better.

If you do not have the option to communicate directly with someone in the grant-making organization before you submit an LOI or proposal, begin by carefully reviewing their guidelines. They should have a clear set of parameters, requirements, and funding priorities. They will often have lists of what kinds of projects they do and do not fund.

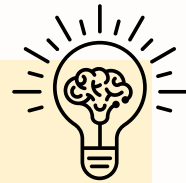
Next, research the funding organization. Research the entity's mission, projects, and charitable works and priorities. Familiarize yourself with their current funding goals. To save yourself (and the grant-maker) time on the proposal, spend more time on this step than you may otherwise think necessary. Thorough research of the funder and their funding priorities is critical to writing a successful proposal—or perhaps realizing that your project is not a good fit for a certain grant-maker. You may be able to write the most compelling proposal ever (well done!), but if you aren't the right fit for the grant-maker, your time may be better spent finding a better fit.

While you are getting to know the funder, check past grantees (the people and organizations that have received grants), too. Most grant-makers will have a website that shows the grant cycles, RFPs, guidelines, and past grantees. Is your organization similar to the others in size, budget, scope, scale, and mission? Does the grant-maker fund many similar organizations with similar missions? Or do they fund projects from many different types of organizations?



STEP 3 || WRITE AN EXCELLENT LETTER OF INTENT

If a grant-maker welcomes potential grantees to submit LOIs before making full proposals, this is a great first step in relationship building. You may not be invited to submit a proposal the first or even the 10th time you submit an LOI, but you may at least get your organization on the funding entity's radar.



A LETTER OF INTENT SHOULD BE SHORT AND CLEAR:

1. **Be Clear and Concise.** If it is not clearly stated, do not go over 1,000 words or two pages.
2. **Amount of Funding.** Express your intent to apply for funding and an amount (or small range).
3. **Project Description.** Describe a specific project/program/idea and a timeframe.
4. **Organization Mission & Works.** State your organization's mission and give a brief introduction to the good work you are already doing.
5. **Alignment with Funder.** Share what makes your organization aligned with the funder's mission and priorities.
6. **Short Backgrounder.** Provide some background about you and/or your organization, something short: why you do what you do, demonstrated successes, and how the funds will make an impact.

Keep your language clear and brief. Do not be repetitive or vague.

CREATE A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL

If you have submitted an LOI and been invited to apply, or if a grant-maker has an open grant cycle and you are ready to dive into the application, here is what you can expect.

Expect that every single funding institution will have a different application with different questions and requirements. You may be able to create a partial template to use for multiple applications, but be careful doing this, as different applications will always use different vocabulary and have different maximum word requirements.

PRO TIP



Don't try to game the system. Each grant application will be different. Your answers will not be one-size-fits-all and each application will be unique!

However, most RFPs will include sections like these:

- Organization Background
- Project Summary
- Project Narrative
- Expected Outcomes, Impact, and Measurement
- Budget

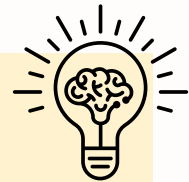
MAKE SURE THAT YOU FOLLOW THEIR INSTRUCTIONS PRECISELY REGARDING THE FORMAT, LENGTH, REQUIRED DOCUMENTS, AND EVALUATION CRITERIA.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

State your organization's mission. Your mission should align with your proposed project and the mission of the grant-maker. Your mission statement should be clear, concise, and easy to understand. It should include a who, what, and where, and it should be consistent.

BE TRUE TO YOUR MISSION.

You must never change your mission statement to appeal to a grant-maker.



Also include a background section. The background is a brief history of your organization and project. In addition, list any prior accomplishments that may relate to your proposal.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Many grant-makers ask for you to include a brief description or summary of your project. This is basically an introduction to the rest of the proposal. What is the project or program, who will it serve, and how?

As with nearly every section on any application, there will likely be a word or character limit. The summary character limit is generally quite low, so make it clear and easy to understand. You want the grant-maker to get a good understanding of what you will do with their money using as few words as possible (or as many as they allow).

You will be able to elaborate on the details of your project in the "Project Narrative" section.

PROJECT NARRATIVE

This part may be called a project narrative, budget narrative, project description, or any number of variations on these. It may include goals, objectives, expected impact and outcomes, and how you will evaluate outcomes (evaluation of outcomes), or these may be separated into their own sections. The project narrative is where you want to explain in detail exactly what you intend to do with the money you are requesting—and how.

You should have a plan in place, including a breakdown of exactly what activities will take place and a timeframe for carrying them out.

PRO TIP



The project narrative section is your chance to demonstrate to the funder that you have thought through all aspects of your project. Grant-makers want to know that they are making a difference with their funds, so it is important to show them with a well-constructed plan that you will be responsible with their funds. It is also important to demonstrate that you are confident about the impact that your work will have.

Citing data or results from similar projects can also help the grant-maker understand why you see your project as important and necessary. If there is space and it makes sense, this is the section where you may want to include a story about your work and its impact.



BUDGET

The budget may be its own section or may be included within the project narrative. It is most common to present it as a table or spreadsheet. The more money you are asking for, the more detailed the budget section will be. If you are requesting a small grant, you may not need to provide a detailed budget in the application, but rather after you receive the award. Either way, it is important to be as specific and realistic as possible as you forecast how much money you will need to complete your proposed project.

Most grant-makers will want to see your organization's or project's annual budget as part of your grant application to see how your RFP budget fits with what you are already doing and receiving. You need to make sure to include all funding sources such as revenue, volunteer hours, in-kind donations, sponsorships, and other grants.

PRO TIP



Your budget for the project needs to be realistic in relation to your total annual budget. For example, if your total annual budget is only \$200,000, you will likely not be approved for a one-time grant of \$150,000.

Keep in mind that you will also have to report your expenses, explain any discrepancies between your original budget and your expenses, and return any funds you do not spend.

WHY SHOULD THEY FUND YOU?

WRITING A COMPELLING NARRATIVE

From your initial contact to your LOI to your completed grant application, your goal is to receive funding, which means you need to convince the grant-maker that you are doing amazing work. (Of course you are!)

Most funders want extremely specific data and measured outcomes. Give as much precise data as possible, as well as qualitative data and storytelling when there is space. Humans connect through stories, and funders are humans. They just require data to back up the stories.

This is where persuasive writing comes in handy. And one key to persuasive writing is authenticity.

If you are sure you are aligned with the funding priorities and scope of the grant and you have a realistic budget and a clear project, all that is left to do is to sell your story and your good work. The most important thing is to be authentic. You are not molding yourself to fit the funding requirements; rather, you are showing the grant-maker exactly why your project serves the goals of the grant. You are also demonstrating to the grant-maker that their funds will be used responsibly and effectively and be of great service to the world. Reflect the language and vocabulary the funder uses on their website and call for proposals (the RFP)—as long as it is true to what you do.

PRO TIP

Be honest and transparent.



TIPS FOR CREATING A COMPELLING NARRATIVE

- USE CLEAR, DIRECT LANGUAGE.
- COMBINE DATA AND TESTIMONY OR STORIES TO SHOW IMPACT.
- BE AUTHENTIC. DO NOT EXAGGERATE OR EMBELLISH. BE TRUE TO YOUR VALUES AND YOUR MISSION.
- WHY IS YOUR WORK IMPORTANT? ALWAYS RETURN TO THIS QUESTION. WHY DO YOU CARE? WHY DO YOU DO WHAT YOU DO? WHEN YOU WRITE FROM YOUR “WHY,” YOUR PASSION WILL SHINE THROUGH.



Common Grant Proposal Writing Mistakes to Avoid

While each grant application is unique, there are some common mistakes to avoid when it comes to drafting an excellent proposal.

● BEING REPETITIVE

Your proposal should really pack a punch! Write with clarity, and do not repeat yourself. Give grant-makers as much meat as possible and be concise.

● WRITING TO THE GRANT

Don't try to chase the money by changing your project to make it fit the parameters of a grant. If it's not a good fit, pursue another grant. Be true and authentic to your mission, and let your passion and values shine through.

● NOT HAVING CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR IDEA

Before beginning any proposal, make sure you have a solid understanding of your work. Have a plan in mind before you begin the application.

● LACKING SPECIFIC DATA

Most funders will want to see specific, quantitative measurements demonstrating how your work creates an impact.

● BUDGET IS OUT OF ALIGNMENT

If your budget is out of alignment with your narrative or you have an unrealistic budget, grant makers who love your idea will reject the grant. Take some time to crunch the numbers.

● LACKING QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION

Funders will want to see that you have a plan for measuring the impact of your program, a process for evaluating and measuring outcomes.

● LACKING SUSTAINABILITY

This is kind of a Catch-22. You need money to be sustainable, but you need to show sustainability to be awarded a grant. You will need to show sustainability, because no one wants to fund a risky operation or a dying organization.

CONCLUSION: THE FIRST STEP IS REALIZING YOU CAN DO IT!

Grant proposal writing can be time-consuming, and it may feel overwhelming. Sometimes, all it takes to get motivated is to take the first step by opening the application and realizing that you can do it! Just remember that every application is different, and every funding institution is unique.

Getting denied a funding opportunity may feel like a huge disappointment, but it is part of the process. Don't let it discourage you, a lot of people are competing for those dollars. But there are a lot of funds and funders out there, so keep at it!

Keep focused on your mission and your vision. Your work matters! As long as you keep believing that, the right funders will come along to support your programs.



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