

# How to Write A Winning Proposal

## *Knowing what funders want and how to deliver it*

By Jennifer Brooks

Closing the Gap, Looking for Money • April 1998

About half of all federal and foundation grant proposals are rejected because they are poorly organized or they don't conform to the Request for Proposal's (RFP) guidelines. True, there are never enough funds to go around. But the difference between a winning and losing proposal can be as simple as being organized, understanding what the funder *really* wants, and knowing how to sell your organization.

### Failing to prepare is preparing to fail

Without careful planning and organization, many proposal writers can overlook details or misunderstand larger issues laid out in the RFP. If you are organizationally-challenged, here are a few suggestions to help you write that winning proposal.

- Carefully read and analyze the RFP and then make an honest decision about applying.
- Develop a checklist of everything that is being asked in the RFP.
- Develop your strategy and key selling points.
- Make a schedule for yourself.
- Do your research. Use the funding agency as a resource. Some agencies accept drafts for review.
- Be sure to follow an outline or the steps laid out in the RFP.
- Design your program including time and budget. Take time to verify your data.
- Write your first draft. Make sure your proposal is a cohesive piece even if different people worked on it.
- Review and revise as many times as necessary. Don't be afraid to let an outside reader give you feedback.
- Write your cover letter and executive summary.
- Prepare appendices/attachments.
- Submit proposal on time.

Generally, proposals are due 30 to 60 days after the RFP is announced. Don't wait for the announcement to start working on your proposal.

"It's very important that a grant writer be selected and ready prior to the grant announcement," said Mike DuBose, MSW, president of Research Associates, a proposal writing firm in Columbia, South Carolina. "Otherwise there will be

a heavy focus on slapping something together at the last minute with lots of confusion and disorganization."

### Understanding what funders want

RFPs can often be confusing. Sometimes it's difficult to understand exactly what is being requested and why. **Nonetheless, the most important rule in developing a proposal is to follow the RFP to the "tee."** No matter how difficult this may be, the RFP is your most important source of information. It outlines the information according to how the grantor plans to review it.

"We definitely consider those that are well written and follow all the steps in the RFP," said Miriam Liepold, program officer at the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region in Washington, D.C.

Carefully go over the RFP with your checklist as many times as necessary until you feel that you fully understand all that is being asked.

The checklist should encompass everything ranging from the problem to task assignments to delivery due dates. Proposals that are incomplete, too long, or do not adhere to the instructions will likely be returned as non-conforming.

"You'd be surprised how many people don't include the correct number of copies and supporting documents when submitting their proposal," said Liepold. "They think it's okay just to submit the original proposal."

**Don't jump to conclusions. If you have a question regarding the RFP, it's better to pick up the phone and call the grantor.** RFPs usually provide contact names and numbers of grantors willing to answer questions.

The following are general points that should be demonstrated in any winning proposal:

- The project's goal is clearly stated and will address the identified community's needs and the program's purpose.
- The project is culturally competent.
- The workplan and strategies are feasible, realistic, and logically sequenced.
- The project can be monitored and evaluated.
- The project will result in specific outcomes.
- The staff and organization are qualified to do the job.
- The project is deemed necessary by the community.
- The budget is realistic.

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### Develop a winning strategy

A winning strategy should be clear, logical, and effective. In formulating a strategy, you should consider the approach you will take in solving the problem (as spelled out in the RFP). Then you will have to determine the methods you will employ, the resources you will need, costs and time, plus any creative or innovative ideas—things that weren't mentioned in the RFP.

If you are competing with other organizations for funding, this is the time to show what your organization offers that others don't. Market yourself. No one will know how qualified for the job your organization is unless you tell them.

### The body of the proposal

Obviously, RFPs differ as programs and community needs differ. "Each foundation has a different focus and interest," said Liepold. **One thing you shouldn't do is design a program you can't carry out in an effort to fit the RFP requirements.**

Grant reviewers place emphasis on different criteria, depending on the nature of the program. Some funders may emphasize staffing for a specific project, while others may place emphasis somewhere else. "We like to fund well-established organizations that have other sources of funding, as well as strong boards and executive directors that have good communication between them," according to Liepold. "But we also like to see new collaborations with community groups that address how to meet the community's needs."

Every RFP should clearly lay out the criteria by which your proposal will be judged. Again, if the review criteria is not clear to you, call the grantor directly.

The following example lists the basic questions addressed in most proposals.

- 1) Establishing the need. Demonstrate a clear understanding of the problem within the community or population at which the program is targeted. Your material should be based on your needs assessment. Remember that you need to answer the basic Who? What? Where? When? And How?

- 2) Goals and objectives. What will your project accomplish based on the assessed community needs? What route will you take to meet the community's needs?
- 3) Workplan and strategy. What are the specific methods involved in the project? What is the process and the target population? How will the project be managed and staffed? The workplan should always match the objectives.
- 4) Evaluation. How will the results be measured and the project evaluated?

### Writing the proposal

"Effective grant writing is a talent that is a result of many years of diverse expertise, education, and creativity," according to DuBose, who has written over 500 grant proposals. Proposal writing is a very complex and tedious task. For a project to get funded, every aspect of the proposal must be nearly perfect. "Each component is so important that the grant proposal is like an engine—if just one little item is slightly off, it can malfunction," DuBose said.

It is extremely important to follow an outline so that your material is organized. After looking over 40 proposals, reviewers usually need to look back at certain sections to refresh their memories. Make your information hard to find, and you'll end up frustrating someone and knocking yourself out of the running.

Remember, a well-written proposal is one that is clear in thought, logical in structure and organization, and concise. The writer should display fluid movement of ideas, paying attention to stylistic consistency. There are several style manuals available that should be followed throughout the document.

And finally, any winning proposal should look professional, be free from jargon, typographical, grammatical, or mathematical errors, and be submitted on time.

If you want to see examples of past winning proposals, contact the federal agency or foundation involved. Under the Freedom of Information Act, all open-bid proposals can be reviewed by the public. ❖

### \*Reasons for not receiving a grant

Inadequate planning/carelessly prepared applications	39%
Competency of applicant not shown	38%
Nature of project	18%
Misc.	5%



\*Based on an analysis of more than 700 proposals rejected by the U.S. Public Health Service. Roy Meador, *Guidelines for Preparing Proposals*, Chelsea: Lewis Publishers, Inc.

