



TIPS ON SUCCESSFUL GRANT WRITING

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A grant is an award given by a funder, such as a state or federal government agency; local, regional, or national foundation; or a corporation (Browning, 2005). Grants can take a variety of forms, including monetary awards and donations of equipment, materials, or services. A grant proposal is a detailed, written plan describing the program or idea your organization desires to be funded (Browning, 2005). Grants can provide support to school districts that are experiencing challenges with providing adequate financial support for programs, and writing grant proposals is an effective way to raise additional resources (Burke & Prater, 2000). With inequitable resources disadvantaging many school districts, school officials are seeking opportunities to obtain external resources that can help enhance student learning outcomes. Grants may enable school officials to provide professional development to educators on innovative teaching and learning activities, purchase equipment and supplies, and involve students in experiential learning opportunities. These activities can promote positive learning outcomes for students; for example, studies show that greater engagement of elementary school students in science and mathematics leads to increased enrollment in advanced math courses and greater participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) career fields (Bertram, 2014; Bryan, Glynn, & Kittleson, 2011). This brief provides 10 tips and strategies for education leaders who are interested in developing and submitting high quality proposals for funding consideration. Although this brief focuses on STEM education, these tips can be useful when educators are writing proposals in any areas of need.

1. Maintain a Positive Attitude

A positive attitude is essential to grant-writing success and is necessary for maintaining a sustained focus throughout the proposal development process (Henson, 2012). Henson notes several myths that often discourage school leaders from applying for grants. The following statements are examples of commonly heard myths:

1. It is imperative that school officials collaborate with a grant-writing expert.
2. There is a shortage of funds available from grant sources.
3. Grants are typically only awarded to large school districts.

Henson argues that the most important factor that determines the success people experience when writing grant proposals is their attitude. Often, negative thoughts can discourage educators from reaching their goals; therefore, having a goal-oriented (i.e., “I can and I will”) attitude is necessary for success. Haller (2012) recommends that K-12 STEM educators volunteer to serve as grant reviewers so that they can learn what criteria funders look for when considering grant proposals. The knowledge gained from this experience will be advantageous and can help educators gain more confidence in their grant-writing abilities.

2. Propose an Innovative Idea

Sometimes a school district may simply desire money to purchase new or used equipment that they are unable to fund through their annual budget lines. Local businesses may be the best source for one-time expenses, such as equipment, supplies, and materials. Foundations and state/federal entities often are not interested in one-time expenditures and instead expect original and/or unique proposals that present an innovative solution to an identified problem that you wish to solve in your school districts. Funders may provide seed money to pilot or implement new ideas in order to encourage the institutionalization of new strategies and approaches (Carlson, 1995; Henson, 2012). For example, proposing a work-based learning program that allows high school students to learn job skills working with local companies and businesses while earning industry credentials would be an idea that is interesting to community members and may gain the attention of funders. Funders also may value ideas that derive from a proposed theory of action, implement a logic model, and/or utilize innovative instructional methodologies (Sternberg, 2012).

3. Locate an Appropriate Funding Source

It is critical that educators identify a potential grant that aligns with their proposed need and that funders will want to fund. Below is a list to consider:

- Some funders have minimum or maximum funding amounts that they will award.
- Some require research and if the district is unable/unwilling to propose a research study, they will not be funded.
- Some require partnerships with other entities, such as higher education institutions or local businesses.
- Some expect the activity to be sustained once funding runs out, and the district needs to describe how they will continue to fund the proposed activity.
- Some foundations may only fund in regions where they operate, so school district officials will need to ensure that they qualify (in addition to confirming that they meet all other requirements).
- Some grants may be highly competitive, and your odds of obtaining them may be slim. You may wish to have an initial conversation with the funder to see if they are interested in your proposal and will encourage you to submit.

Federal grants can come from various departments and agencies (New & Quick, 2003); the federal government provides an online resource of grant opportunities at www.gpoaccess.gov. Another online source that lists grant opportunities is www.Grants.gov. Illinois educators can find state-funded grants on the Illinois State Board of Education website: www.isbe.net/funding_opps/default.htm. Foundations are privately owned and operated and typically are more targeted and mission-oriented than governmental grants in the kinds of research they will fund. Examples of foundations are the Spencer Foundation, the W.T. Grant Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation (Sternberg, 2014). A list of grants from foundations and businesses can be found at <http://www.k12grants.org/Grants/midwest.htm>. Corporations can be for-profit or non-profit private entities; some corporations may only be interested in funding grant proposals that involve research activities that can help improve their products or increase their sales (Sternberg, 2014).

4. Create a Checklist

Typically, funders will only consider your grant application if all required elements are addressed and all necessary support materials are included. To ensure your application is complete, create a checklist that includes all required components and includes a timeline for submission. Your checklist should indicate targeted dates to complete each submission component and parties who are responsible for completing these tasks. Some state and federal funders and established foundations may provide a checklist that indicates all criteria and the weight they assign to each component when reviewing your proposal, but it is beneficial to create one if the potential funder does not provide it. New and Quick (2003) provide the example as a checklist of elements included in a proposal. (See Standard Elements of Proposal)

5. Know your Capabilities

It is important not to underestimate the expectations of each aspect of the proposal or to overestimate your district's capacity and capability to meet the requirements of the funding agency. Therefore, you should craft a proposal that is reasonable and feasible for the district and that fully addresses the expectations of the funder. In addition, ensure that you have the capacity and resources to address the funder's requirements; some grants will require research components while others may not. For example, a funder may only be willing to fund highly sophisticated research proposals that contain experimental treatments involving randomized controls. If your district currently does not have staff members with extensive research training, you will either need to hire additional personnel, contract with an outside professional to conduct this work, or partner with another agency that has the needed expertise. As another example, if your proposal will require an extensive commitment on the part of educators in your district, you will need to ensure that the time demands of the proposal are manageable and/or that additional resources are provided to support staff and acknowledge their additional work expectations, such as including funding for substitute teachers, stipends for after-school or summer professional development, and stipends or release time for developing materials.

A good proposal has clear, attainable, and measurable objectives. Funders will expect each objective to be evaluated by the end of the grant period, to determine whether you have achieved your goals. For instance, if your proposal includes a goal to improve students' science test scores, you most likely will need to measure this goal by analyzing pre- and post-test data incorporating learning components that you have implemented during the grant. Some funders may expect your proposal to include a program evaluation component, so your goals and objectives must be clear and attainable.

It also is important to plan out the amount of time you have to write the grant proposal, building in a cushion for unexpected events that may delay or derail your proposal. MacKellar and Gerding (2010) suggest that writers should schedule, at minimum, two months time to write a fully developed grant proposal. This timeline may change depending on the funder's specifications of the grant and on whether you are partnering with individuals from other organizations or if colleagues are responsible for writing sections of your proposal.

6. Collaborating with Others can Increase Your Probability of Success

Collaborating with colleagues, either in your district or within other organizations, can help strengthen your proposal (Steinberg, 2014). Bringing in people who have special expertise and professional credentials and that can help address the solutions to your problem can be beneficial. For example, if your proposal will include professional development activities to increase elementary teachers' proficiency in teaching science and mathematics, funders may be more willing to approve your proposal if you intend to contract with individuals who are acknowledged experts in the discipline and who have a track record of success in providing these trainings to teachers.

It is increasingly common for successful research grants to involve collaboration across multiple disciplines. Grant writers who connect with colleagues from across professions and work collaboratively on a problem help strengthen their proposals when they seek out professionals from outside their school districts on matters that exceed their own individual expertise. Collaborating can have many positive outcomes, and examining a problem through multiple lenses can greatly enhance creativity. Although collaboration has many benefits, it also may take additional time due to the potential for philosophical disagreements or misunderstandings. Therefore, when working in groups it is important to have a clear agreement on the division of labor and a leader who can move the project forward (Henson, 2012). In addition, local businesses, community colleges, and universities can help provide support in STEM fields. For example, colleges can provide resources in the form of STEM camps, equipment, and professional development training.

7. Ensure your Writing Style is Appropriate for the Grant Audience

Effective grant writing requires clarity. In order to achieve this purpose, avoid writing in the past tense, exercise brevity, and use action verbs. Visuals such as graphics and tables can help illustrate the goals of your proposal and should be added to help the funder quickly understand your proposed activities. Writers should be prepared to self-edit and revise multiple drafts of the grant proposal. Before submitting a proposal, it is beneficial to have someone else—and ideally multiple individuals—proofread the proposal for grammatical errors and clarity (Sternberg, 2014), as well as to ensure that all required elements have been addressed.

Avoid the use of fancy and unnecessary words, as well as educational jargon. An effective grant proposal explains the goals to the reviewers in a straightforward and succinct manner. Address every element of the funder's expectations in the proposal and do not exceed the maximum number of words or pages the funder permits for the submission. Most funders will automatically reject proposals that do not include all required components or exceed the allowed page limits. Some funders may post their current funded projects on their websites, including the successful proposals. When you have any opportunity to do so, you should read through funded proposals from your prospective funder. Having this knowledge can help you to strengthen components of your proposal that you may have omitted or overlooked.

8. Prepare a Compelling Purpose Statement

The purpose statement is the first part of your program design narrative, and it tells the grant reviewer the reason you are requesting funding. The following sentence is an example of a purpose statement: *ABC Training program is seeking your financial support to provide laptops to students studying computer science.* Funding entities have targeted goals and areas of interest, and they typically will only provide resources to programs and problems that align with their own interests. Burke and Prater (2000) suggest that the purpose statement should immediately grab the reader's attention in the introduction. An introduction should capture the reader's interest, define the area of focus, align the idea with the funding agency's areas of interest and goals, and show logic and reasoning. To ensure consistency review funder's supporting documents (i.e. website, annual reports, etc.), and utilize the information when preparing a purpose statement that complements their vision and goals.

9. Prepare the Budget

When developing the proposed budget, it is important to provide a detailed account of how the requested funds will be spent (Browning, 2005). Some funders require extensive budget details, along with a justification of each expenditure, and some merely wish for you to provide an overall budget summary. A budget detail is a description of what you are going to do with the project funds (MacKellar & Gerding, 2010). A budget summary provides a thorough overview of cost expenditures (Bauer, 1999; Henson, 2004).

Any expenditure listed in the budget section should have been discussed in the project design and proposed activities. For example, a funder may question why you have included the purchase of 50 laptop computers for the agriculture education department, when your proposed activities have not discussed how computers will be used and explained why they are essential to the proposed project's success. Often funders will provide applicants with summary budget templates, and your proposal must not deviate from the templates. It is important to read the grant proposal guidelines and explanations to understand the specific expectations of what should be included in each line item (New & Quick, 2003). The following are usually included as line items in budget proposals: personnel, benefits, travel, equipment, supplies, contracted services, and construction costs. Coley and Scheinberg (2008) encourage grant writers to carefully research the anticipated budgetary needs, including personnel, equipment, and supplies, and develop an accurate estimate for each item.

10. Plan for Sustainability

Including a sustainability section to your grant proposal signals funders that you are serious and committed to the long-term success your project (Henson, 2012). Many funders are not interested in one-time-only projects that cease when funds run out; instead, they look for proposals that have the potential to continue within your district. Therefore, the plan to maintain the program in the future should be considered in the program development phase. For example, it will be helpful to demonstrate your priority to continually secure resources and support. In this section, explain in detail the steps you are taking to ensure long-term existence.

Asking community leaders and other collaborating agencies to write grant proposals to additional funders are one way of keeping a project going. Involving the community in the grant writing and planning process can also get people invested in the program. Expand your base of support by involving local businesses and colleges with your project. Funders like to see evidence of the program's success. Therefore keep record of media coverage and track positive outcomes. For example, it would be beneficial to show that your program has helped increase students' math scores.

Conclusion

As school leaders pursue additional resources to enhance instruction and programming, grants are an opportunity to supplement funding. While writing grants can be done individually, collaborating with a team of people who have the same goal can be beneficial and is recommended when possible. Remember to choose a funding source that fits the project or program. Write in a clear and concise style that demonstrates to the reader the problem and a clear plan for a successful project. Maintain a positive attitude and rely on the knowledge gained from the experience to secure funding. Remind yourself that you can and will succeed!

For additional information on successful grant writing strategies, you may find it helpful to read Henson's (2012) book, *Successful Grant Writing for School Leaders*, and Sternberg's (2014) book, *Writing Successful Grant Proposals*. The citations for these two publications are included in the reference list.

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Standard Elements of Proposal

Cover Letter

This is a basic letter outlining your proposal. This cover letter sets the tone for your proposal and should therefore be convincing. The cover letter should be easy to read and quickly identify what the organization does, the purpose or reason for your request, and the amount of the request. The cover letter can also include the following: grant project title, project description, needs statement, organizational overview, names of partners, in-kind contributions, funding requested, and any planning and involvement of the targeted audience.

Introduction: The introduction presents a sound program design or solution worthy of funding. In this section the writer should grab the reader's interest while defining themes and areas of focus (Burke & Prater, 2000).

Need Statement: In this section you will describe how your project will address a current need or problem. The need should be compelling to the funders based on their mission and guidelines (Mackellar & Gerding, 2010). A well-written need statement is critical in conveying those reasons. Elements of a good needs statement include: (a) a clear description of the needs; (b) use of clear data as evidence to support your request; (c) comparison statistics to support the success of programs that may have had similar needs; and (d) an outline of the potential benefits to having the need met with the financial support requested (Carlson, 1995).

Organizational Overview: Funders are interested in supporting organizations that are capable, successful, and trustworthy. In this section describe the background of your organization. In detail discuss the "history, mission, who you serve, achievements primary programs, current budget, leadership, board members and key staff members" (MacKellar & Gerding, 2000, p. 115). Include success stories that highlight your organization's qualifications.

Objectives: "The ends, the outcomes that prove you have arrived" (Burke & Prater, 2000, p. 73). They should answer questions related to *who* will be involved, *what* will occur, and *when* and *under what conditions* it will happen, and *how* it will be measured (Burke & Prater).

Example: By June 2017 (*when*), all 6th grade students identified as requiring supplemental math support (*who*) (i.e., those whose standardized math assessment results estimate their performance below the local 25th percentile) will perform (*what*) at the national median as measured (*how measured*) by the NWEA MAP assessment.

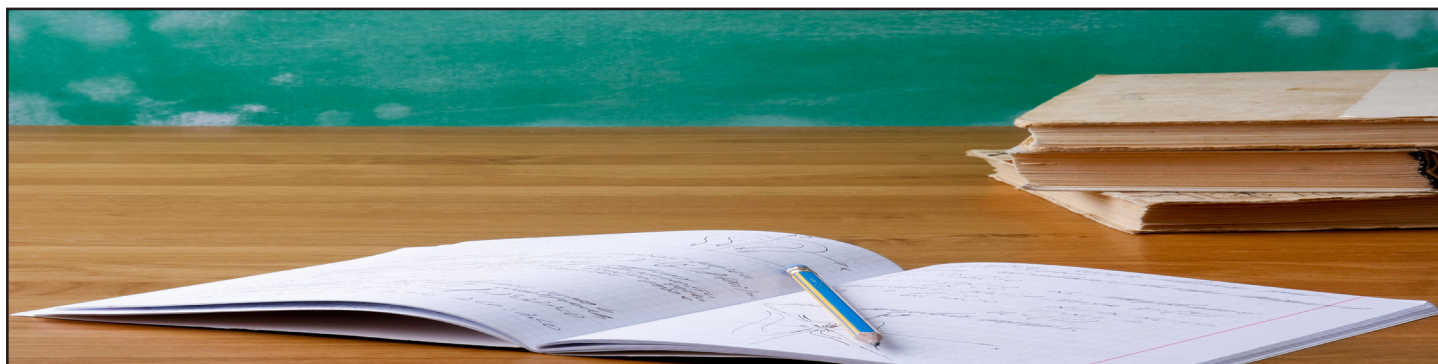
Plan of Operation: In this section describe how you plan to accomplish your project goals. You can illustrate with a timeline that includes start and end dates, project activities, and outcomes listed.

Evaluation: A description of the means of assessing the quality or effectiveness of the proposed initiative/project. This description should include a description of who will carry out the evaluation, as well as how it will be conducted.

Budget: “The budget is a blueprint for planning and explaining the costs in a grant” (Henson, 2012, p. 54). This section should provide a detailed cost projection of funds needed to support the project. It is important to research the cost and work with your fiscal office or financial administrators. Below is an example of a budget summary that includes an itemized list of expenses.

Table 1.0 Example Budget Summary

| Objective Category | Instructional Series | Support Services Total | Total |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| Personnel (Salaries) | \$157,851 | 0 | \$157,851 |
| Employee Benefits | \$33,127 | 0 | \$33,127 |
| Purchased Services | 0 | \$12,012 | \$12,012 |
| Supplies and Materials | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Capital Outlay | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | \$190,978 | \$12,012 | \$202,990 |



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