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Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

By Barbara Davis

A funder's guidelines will tell you what to include in a grant proposal for its organization. Most funders want the same information, even if they use different words or ask questions in a different order.

Some funders prefer that you fill out their own application forms or cover sheets. If the funder uses an application form, be sure to get a copy and follow the instructions. You may also use the Minnesota Common Grant Application Form if the funder you are approaching accepts it. To download the form and view a list of funders that accept it, visit the Council's Web site at www.mcf.org (select "Grantseeking in Minnesota"). Copies of the form are also available from The Foundation Center Cooperating Collections in Brainerd (218/829-5574), Duluth (218/723-3802), Marshall (507/537-6176), Minneapolis (612/630-6300), Rochester (507/285-8002) and St. Paul (651/266-7000).

The following outline should meet the needs of most funders, or guide you when approaching a funder with no written guidelines. The outline is for a project proposal, and is most appropriate for a project that is trying to correct a problem, such as water pollution, school truancy or ignorance about how HIV/AIDS is transmitted. (See *Variations on the Standard Outline* on page 4 for guidance on other types of proposals.) The grant proposal as a whole, not including supplementary materials, should usually be five pages or less.

Note: Consider using subheads for each section, such as "Organization Information," to help you, and your reader, keep track of what you're trying to say.

Summary

At the beginning of your proposal, or on a cover sheet, write a two- or three-sentence summary of the proposal. This summary helps the reader follow your argument in the proposal itself. For example:

"Annunciation Shelter requests \$5,000 for a two-year, \$50,000 job training program for homeless women in southwestern Minnesota. Training will be offered at four rural shelters and will include basic clerical skills, interview techniques and job seeker support groups."

Organization Information

In two or three paragraphs, tell the funder about your organization and why it can be trusted to use funds effectively. Briefly summarize your organization's history. State your mission, whom you serve and your track record of achievement. Clearly describe, or at least list, your programs. If your programs are many or complex, consider adding an organization chart or other attachments that explain them: Describe your budget size, where you are located and who runs the organization and does the work. Add other details that build

the credibility of your group. If other groups in your region work on the same issues, explain how they are different and how you collaborate with them, if you do.

Even if you have received funds from this grantmaker before, your introduction should be complete. Funders sometimes hire outside reviewers who may not be familiar with your organization.

Problem/Need/Situation Description

This is where you convince the funder that the issue you want to tackle is important and show that your organization is an expert on the issue. Here are some tips:

- Don't assume the funder knows much about your subject area. Most grantmaking staff people are generalists. They will probably know *something* about topics like Shakespeare, water pollution and HIV/AIDS, but you should not assume that they are familiar with *Troilus and Cressida*, taconite disposal methods or Kaposi's sarcoma. If your topic is complex, you might add an informative article or suggest some background reading.
- Why is this situation important? To whom did your organization talk, or what research did you do, to learn about the issue and decide how to tackle it?
- Describe the situation in both factual *and* human interest terms, if possible. Providing good data demonstrates that your organization is expert in the field. If there are no good data on your issue, consider doing your own research study, even if it is simple.
- Describe your issue in as local a context as possible. If you want to educate people in your county about HIV/AIDS, tell the funder about the epidemic in your county — not in the United States as a whole.
- Describe a problem that is about the same size as your solution. Don't draw a dark picture of nuclear war, teen suicide and lethal air pollution if you are planning a modest neighborhood arts program for children.
- Don't describe the problem as the absence of your project. "We don't have enough beds in our battered women's shelter" is not the problem. The *problem* is increased levels of domestic violence. More shelter beds is a *solution*.

Work Plan/Specific Activities

Explain what your organization plans to do about the problem. What are your overall goals? You might say:

"The goals of this project are to increase the understanding among Minneapolis middle school students about the impact of smoking on their health, and to reduce the number of students who smoke."



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