**Tips for Writing Successful Grant Applications**

1. **Respond to the solicitation.** 
   1. Adhere exactly to the **technical specifications** regarding font size, margins, and so on. This isn’t just about the style or appearance of your application; this is how you demonstrate to the funder that **you read directions and follow them**.
   2. Take care to answer **every single thing** that is asked for in the solicitation for that section of the narrative. If something that is asked about is not relevant to your proposed project, state that and briefly explain why it isn’t relevant.
   3. Respond to **this year’s** solicitation. Using a prior year’s application or a pre-written grant template as a starting point is fine; however, you should update it and only include information that is relevant to the current year’s solicitation. For example, it does not make a good impression when you include a sustainability plan when the solicitation has not requested one for several years.
2. **Organize your application like the solicitation.**
   1. Mirror in your narrative each of the **section headings** in the solicitation. This kind of organization will make it easier for readers (both internal to the funding agency and external peer reviewers) to compare your application to the solicitation and score it accordingly. It also makes you less likely to overlook a required section or sub-section, or to include something that used to be requested, but now is not.
3. **Write for a broad audience.** 
   1. Do not craft your narrative as though you’re addressing the staff of a specific funding agency. Write it as though it will be read by someone with no knowledge of the issues, your program, or the requirements of the solicitation. Funding agencies sometimes use information from successful applications in reports to Congress, for example. Even if they don’t, a narrative written with a target audience of intelligent professionals who may or may not know about violence against women demonstrates that you can clearly articulate details of your proposed project and desired outcomes to any audience.
   2. **Don’t assume that the reader will have pre-existing knowledge** about your topic.
4. **Paint a complete picture of the issue.**
   1. Be as **detailed** as you can within the required format of page length, margins, etc. For example, most solicitations ask that you describe the demographics of your service area or your target audience. Don’t just include racial breakdowns; also address the gender, age, education, and socioeconomic profile of your area. Comparison of this information to that of your state as a whole (or, if applying for a state, the nation as a whole) helps illustrate specific needs your area may have for the funding for which you are applying.
   2. Does your area have key industries worth mentioning? Has there been widespread job loss or housing gentrification? All of that helps **paint a broader picture** of the area you are proposing to serve. If geographic or topographic information is relevant, include a small (1” x 1.5”) map of the area. And so on.
   3. Again, this isn’t just about making your project narrative as complete as it can be. It demonstrates to the reader that your agency is one that **regularly** **goes above and beyond the minimum requirements.**
5. **Construct your application in a way that is easy to read and understand.**
   1. Make your **charts or diagrams clean and easy on the eyes**. What you don’t want to do is include a chart that is confusing, redundant, or hard on the eyes due to tiny print, too much information, or lack of organization. Make use of formatting, color coding, anything that makes the chart visually appealing, well organized, and easy to read and understand. A chart that doesn’t meet this standard may only cost you a point or two, but that could mean the difference between getting funded or not. It also gives your proposal overall a less professional appearance.
   2. You may be asked for a Gantt chart (also called a time/task table), an organization chart, a process flowchart, or a logic model. If no one on your team or at your agency is skilled at creating these, **enlist someone from outside** your team. You can give them the information to go in the chart (even handwritten) and just have them create the chart itself. You can find people to do tasks like this at reasonable rates on sites like Elance and Fiverr.
6. **Know the selection criteria.**
   1. The solicitation will include selection criteria and will often attribute point values to each section of your application. Review these criteria and keep the point values in mind! It goes without saying that you’ll want the sections with the highest point values to really shine.
   2. Do not neglect sections just because they have lower point values. The decision to fund or not to fund often comes down to one or two points.
7. **Tell the human side of your story.**
   1. If space allows, using an **example** – a brief case study or anonymous, real quote from an actual service recipient – is a great way to illustrate the very real impact that your program has already had on actual individuals, and/or the myriad overlapping issues that people often face and how complicated that can make addressing even one of those issues. It can convey hope, or the frustration, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and so on that is often key to the need for the project. *Remember*: assume no background knowledge on the part of your reader/audience.
8. **Be clear and concise.** 
   1. **Clarity is king**. Your narrative should convey clearly and specifically who you are and who you want to help, what you propose to do, your timeline, your service area, the need for the project and why this proposal should be funded, and your proposed methods and desired outcomes (in the order this information is requested in the solicitation, of course!). This is referred to as “the five W’s and the H” -- who, what, when, where, why, and how.
   2. **Use every inch of your page allotment** to add specifics and clarify any issues that could be confusing to the intelligent but uninformed reader. For example, see how these read differently:

*“Victims frequently have substance abuse problems or mental health diagnoses.”*

*“Victims frequently have substance abuse problems because they have self-medicated to try to forget the pain of what happened to them, or to try to cope with the overwhelming fear, anger, worry, and grief resulting from their victimization. In addition to or instead of self-medication, many victims struggling to cope with these overwhelming emotions and reactions to their abuse become depressed, anxious, panicky; have problems with sleep, eating, concentrating, or relating socially to others; or develop phobias, feel compelled to perform small rituals or repetitive tasks, experience flashbacks of the abuse, are very easily startled and struggle to regain composure. When these reactions are severe enough to interfere with the survivor’s functioning, they often lead to a diagnosis of mental illness, which in itself can result in a host of other challenges.”*

Obviously, the second selection is much longer, but it’s also not at all victim-blaming and spells out exactly why a survivor might have substance abuse and/or mental health issues directly related to their victimization. If you have the space available in your page allotment, use it. Even if your reader already knows all this, it’s good for them to see that you know and understand it, too.

1. **Refrain from using jargon and movement-specific acronyms.**
   1. As much as possible, **refrain from using acronyms**. The only acronym that is universally known on first reference – and doesn’t have at least one alternative use – is DNA. Other than that one, you can use acronyms that are well known in the field, but always spell them out on first reference: the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), domestic violence (DV), or the oft-used phrase “domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking (collectively referred to as violence against women, or VAW).”
   2. If the acronym isn’t much shorter than the actual word or phrase, don’t use it; it’s not worth disrupting the flow of the narrative. And **don’t invent acronyms** not commonly used in the field (NCUF) just to maximize your space allotment (SA). As you can see, it looks ridiculous and will make you look the same. It also equates to cheating, which is bad for credibility.
   3. Remember that even within the field, many acronyms have multiple uses. Does “ED” mean executive director, emergency department, emotionally disturbed, eating disorder, or erectile dysfunction? (All of the above.) Is “SO” a significant other or a sex offender? By “PID,” do you mean Public Integrity Division, or Pelvic Inflammatory Disorder? Is “SA” sexual assault, substance abuse, or our new phrase, space allotment? And so on.
2. **Don’t rely on attachments to convey key information.** 
   1. If the project narrative asks for information on the qualifications of key project staff, and you’re also required to attach resumes and job descriptions for key project staff, that means **you need to do both**. Electing to save space by not including anything about key staff in the narrative and/or just referencing the attachments will result in loss of points when applications are being scored. A line or two, at least, of basic information about the skills and experience of key staff and what they will do on the project needs to be included. The same is true for other information that is requested both in the narrative and via attachments.
3. **Choose a verb tense and stick with it.** 
   1. You can say that your agency ***will*** do x, y, and z to implement the proposed project, or that you ***would*** do x, y, and z. Either one is fine; just don’t use them interchangeably.
   2. You also don’t need to say “If this proposal is funded, we will…” It’s a proposal to receive money to do a project. Anyone reading it knows that whether the project described will happen depends on whether funding is awarded.
4. **Show, don’t tell.** 
   1. Rather than describing or interpreting information, you should present the facts and allow the reader to interpret them. If you tell the reader what to think by providing only your own interpretation, it sounds like you are making boastful statements that you can’t back up with data. If you show them the facts, the data speaks for itself. Which example sounds better to you?

TELL: “Our prevention programs are always well-attended.”

SHOW: “The prevention educator set a goal of reaching 1,000 people annually via the weekly sessions. In 2014, she reached 140% of that goal; attendance at the sessions averaged 28 people, rather than the 20 that had been anticipated.”

TELL: “It soon became clear that the community wanted and needed this discussion group.”

SHOW: “At the monthly discussion session, a maximum audience of 20 was anticipated. After that was exceeded three months in a row, the program was split into two monthly sessions to accommodate all interested participants while keeping the audience small enough to allow for meaningful discussion.”

By showing your data rather than simply telling the reader how you want them to think, you avoid bragging and also demonstrate respect for the reader’s ability to draw their own conclusions.

1. **Don’t pad the budget just to reach the budget ceiling.** 
   1. No one is required to budget for the total allowable dollar amount. If your project budget totals less than the allowable amount, either just **submit the budget as prepared** – making you look like someone uninterested in wasting money or asking for more than is needed – or go back and **revise the project narrative** to include additional, reasonable, allowable costs necessary for the successful completion of the project.
2. **Your budget justification should tell the story of your project just as clearly as your narrative.** 
   1. If a reviewer were to only review your budget justification, they should be able to fully understand the extent of your project and planned activities. There often aren’t page limits to the budget justification and you can include a lot more detail about project activities here.

* 1. Nothing should appear in the budget that wasn’t mentioned in the project narrative. Likewise, all activities included in your narrative must also be included in the budget. If they will be provided by a project partner at no cost to the funding entity, you can explain that in the budget narrative.

1. **Have someone else proofread your application.**
   1. When your proposal is complete, have it **proofread** by as many people as time will allow. Ideally, you would have at least these three people read and give you feedback on the proposal:
      1. **The Subject Matter Expert** – someone who knows your field very well but is not submitting a competing proposal. This person is reviewing the **substance of the proposed project**. Are there key aspects to it that you have left out or glossed over? Is the budget realistic? What factors in the field or your service area could be barriers to successful implementation that you may not have considered? It is far preferably to address these in your initial proposal than to have your project funded and then fail because you didn’t deal with such challenges.
      2. **The English teacher** – someone with strong skills in English composition who can look at the proposal strictly for **grammar, spelling**, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and so on.
      3. **The Person on the Street** – someone with no knowledge of your project or even, perhaps, of the field. He or she will read the proposal as a layperson to provide feedback on whether it **makes sense and flows**, or if the information appears disjointed, incoherent, or otherwise difficult to follow.

Getting feedback from these proofreaders does not mean you have to change your proposal. You may not be able to, depending on the order of the sections in the solicitation or other factors. But chances are that they will catch at least a few items that you will not notice because you have been working on the document over an extended period, and in several slightly different versions.

1. **Request your comments.** 
   1. Once the successful applications have received grant awards, contracts, or cooperative agreements, request from the funding agency the **review comments on your application**. These will include both strengths and weaknesses, and will give you valuable information on what you did well, what you could have done better – and, sometimes, bias or lack of understanding on the part of a reviewer that led to your proposal getting a lower score through no fault of yours. Unfortunately, while funding agencies generally go to great lengths to make sure that does not happen, the proposals are read and scored by human beings who will sometimes have biases they may not even be aware of, but that can impact their scoring. At least by viewing the comments you will go into the next proposal cycle knowing what, if anything, you can do to improve future applications to that funding source.