

Writing an Outstanding Competitive Grant

by VICTOIRE GERKENS SANBORN

Just a few weeks ago, I had a conversation with a perplexed program manager, who wondered why her EL/Civics grant proposal was not funded for a second time. “I wrote the same grant this year as last year,” she assured me. Therein lay the problem. Competitive grants are chosen because they are the BEST among a crop of truly outstanding grants. With a competitive grant, the details that made it good last year might not make the grade this year or next year. Money is tight and competition is keen, and grant writers, some of whom attend grant writing workshops yearly, are getting demonstrably better at meeting funders’ criteria. The days of receiving grant money because your program has always been funded are long gone, and, as soon as WIA (Workforce Investment Act) reauthorization passes (and, yes, this will happen in our lifetime), the competition will become even stiffer. Had the program manager studied her data and changed her grant to reflect how that data influenced her planning and decisions, she might have successfully updated her old grant.

Another manager felt so confident in her NRS (National Reporting System) Table 4, which demonstrated a remarkable increase in the number of students that had progressed to the next level, that she failed to pay equal attention to the other sections of her grant or tie them cohesively together to show how the necessity for increased staff involvement was reflected in the budget. Grant readers are not mind readers, and thus her program’s proposal lost a number of crucial points and placed below the fundable cut-off level.

These two mistakes are rarely made by competitive grant writers, who leave little to chance. With the knowledge that securing adult education and literacy grants will become tougher as funds get tighter, I would like to share a few *Dos* and *Don’ts* of competitive grant writing:

1 Do read the RFP (Request for Proposal) closely to determine if your program has the capacity to meet the grant guidelines. Then FOLLOW the funder’s format EXACTLY as outlined, using the funder’s terminology. Make a note of deadlines and create a timeline, taking care to schedule ample time for proofreading and editing.

2 Do not wait for the RFP to come out before taking action. Competitive grants are written from a strategic plan. Knowing that RFPs are announced each spring, a savvy program manager will assemble a grant writing team at the start of the fiscal year to brainstorm several proposals. These projects should be the clear result of internal needs (as demonstrated by student performance data, professional development requirements, or instructional needs, such as integrating technology into instruction) and pressures external to the organization (such as a sudden shift in population demographics or massive layoffs in the community). When the RFPs are finally announced, a prepared team has already done its research, solicited possible partners, and gathered all the elements to write a well-crafted grant.

3 Do not write the grant alone. The lone grant writer faces stiff competition from teams that have identified several key people to help with research and writing. Teams (consisting of the finance director, project evaluator, marketing/outreach person, and staff responsible for delivery of services, etc.) can help the director define key ideas, fact check, edit, and use others’ strengths in compiling the best grant proposal possible. Someone in your organization might be quite familiar with facts and statistics, for example, while another is comfortable working up a budget. For smaller programs, remember that two people can make an effective team.

4 Do write for impact. These days, funders are looking for outcomes, impact, and how you plan to measure what you promised to do. Your proposal gains points if you can show that your staff examines data regularly and is willing to make mid-course adjustments; that evaluations are both summative and formative; and that staff, as well as students, are evaluated. Ask yourself these questions: Are the instruments you use appropriate for the performances being assessed and are they tied to student achievements? What are the indicators of success and how are they measured? What are the immediate results? What are the long-term effects? How many clients will be served successfully? If a previous project demonstrated poor results, discuss what steps your program will take to change this year’s outcomes, and describe how data will drive your decisions. A table outlining the *what*, *who*, *when*, and *why* for each phase of evaluation scores

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more points than the general statement, “We will follow NRS guidelines for pre- and post-testing, and evaluate the results in June.”

5 Do collaborate and form partnerships. If your project requires expertise that your program cannot readily provide, turn to one of the partners that you have already approached. Funders are looking for the biggest bang for their buck. The easiest way to increase your capacity to serve your clients is to find other agencies with similar missions who can fill in those gaps in service, expertise, or location. Include your MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) and letters of support.

6 Do not write from neediness. Concentrate on stating a compelling case that focuses on your CLIENTS not your program, and describe how you intend to address the client and community needs using positive terms. Find local statistics to demonstrate your need, and use state statistics only to show how your locality compares to the overall situation. Although the need statement section in a grant is extremely important, be relevant and concise, and introduce only enough information to justify the need for your project and why yours is the best organization to address the problem. State your case using information based on adult demographics. For example, a rise in K-12 ESOL school registration describes the adult situation only peripherally. You will need other more relevant statistics to back up your claims.

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7 Do be clear about your goals and what you intend to achieve. Do not assume that the grant reader can fill in the gaps. In fact, assume nothing, and be explicit in stating measurable goals, objectives, and outcomes. Your methodology should be a comprehensive description of how you will achieve the objectives. Instead of depending on long paragraphs of exposition, give the grant readers’ eyes a rest and create tables that state each goal, the objectives required to reach that goal, who will perform the tasks to achieve each objective, what they will do and the materials they will use, when these activities will be accomplished, and the benchmarks for success.

8 Don’t twist your program into a pretzel to fit funder requirements, or go chasing after grant money just because it is there. Do tie your project in with your mission statement and strategic plan, and make sure your funder is interested in supporting your project. Craft your grant carefully and look at the overall picture, connecting each grant element together logically. Your budget should tell in monetary terms the same story as your proposal narrative. The mistake of not tying in the various grant elements is a common one, which often causes the

grant reader to pause. Remember, if grant readers have to guess HOW an increase in the budget for teacher salaries will influence student outcomes, they might guess wrong. It is better to be explicit and repetitive than to assume that the grant reader can recall a salient point that was made several pages back.

9 Do describe how your project will be sustained. Funders are loath to fund programs that disappear once the grant period is over. Some questions for consideration include: What other funders will you be soliciting for this project? Will your organization be charging a fee for service and, if so, how much? What are some other long-term plans for the project?

10 Absolutely, positively, and indubitably DO use a “fresh eye.” To put it bluntly, grant writers are not objective enough to edit and proof their own writing. Let me restate this important point: The person who proofs her own grant is more likely to send in a mistake-riddled document than the team that uses a “fresh eye.” This new person’s task is to read the RFP, making sure that the proposal has answered each section clearly and concisely without using jargon, and taking note of sections that are missing. Do give the fresh eye ample time to perform this important duty, or else the benefit of such a useful service will be negated.

Grant writing is demanding work and few program managers can set aside the required time to devote to grant writing. For this reason, it is crucial to begin planning your projects early, and to adhere to a strict grant writing schedule. Precise, jargon-free language is a necessity. Tables and graphs are welcome and can clarify a point more quickly and accurately than a paragraph of exposition. The grant writer who has a gift for making a project seem exciting and interesting will make her proposal stand head and shoulders above the competition. One thing is assured: those who wait for the RFP to appear in their inbox before they begin to think about their grant, who write in a hurry and in isolation, or worse, polish off last year’s grant, changing only the dates and numbers, will most likely be left with the short end of the funding stick. In conclusion, I would like to share a magic formula for grant writing success: Proof, edit, proof, edit, proof, proof, proof. ■

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