

## Preparing to Write Proposals

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Are you ready to write a grant proposal? Is your organization ready? So, you just find a good grant and start writing, right?

Wrong. This approach can lead to disasters like mission creep, organizational turf battles, and/or the ultimate catastrophe: missing the grant deadline.

We recommend several preparatory steps to increase your chances of success. Doing a little legwork before you write a proposal—actually, before you even shop for grants—will save you time and headaches later.

### Get to Know Yourself

Before you do anything else, you should confirm your organization's mission, gather boilerplate material, and ascertain any fundraising policies.

Your mission is the key to your funding research. You should be seeking grants that align with your mission. If they don't match closely enough, [mission creep](#) may cause your organization to veer off course to serve the aims of the grant instead of your own. Reviewers also are quick to spot a mismatch, decreasing your chances of an award.

Assemble boilerplate information on your organization; keep text updated and ready to drop into proposals. This includes the following:

- Mission
- Vision
- Services and programs
- Key staff—job descriptions and resumés
- Results and accomplishments—any relevant outcomes of your services and programs with target populations, in the community, etc.
- News items or mentions in the press—your communications department may be helpful

Determine what channels you need to go through to apply for a grant. Do you need permission from your CEO? Your boss? For each grant? Or just for those over a certain amount? Know your organization's fundraising policies and grant application procedures. If there aren't any, establish them well before you start applying for grants.

## **Get to Know the Funding Source**

When you identify a grant opportunity, you should ask three key questions:

1. What are the funder's aims for the grant program?
2. Do they match yours?
3. Has the funder ever awarded a grant for a project similar to yours, or supported organizations like yours?

The funder's website may supply this information. If not, try visiting a [cooperating library](#) of the Foundation Center Online to access its huge database (for information on foundations), or try searching federal websites (for federal grant programs).

It's worth a call to the funding agency at this point. Program officers are interested in finding deserving recipients for grants; they're the best sounding board when you're deciding if your project and their money are a good fit. If you aren't right for a particular grant, a program officer can sometimes guide you toward a better fit elsewhere.

Even if you think you're right for the grant, you should call to [establish a relationship](#) with the funding agency. Taking the time to do this sends a strong signal that you want to get it right, which will serve you in the long run.

## **Identify Needs**

Need is at the heart of every grant proposal: You seek funding to fulfill a need, and agencies award funding to address societal needs.

What are the needs of your organization, your community or your target population? This is what agencies are interested in funding; their mission statement and the stated aims of the grant program will offer clues to the social need that funding agencies are attempting to fill.

If your organization has never done a needs assessment, now may be the time. An assessment should identify areas of need that you cannot address with your existing resources—these are prime areas for which to seek funding. A Google search can help you find templates for conducting a needs assessment; [click here](#) to download a PDF of the Missouri Association for Community Action's toolkit.

A needs assessment can also help you prioritize your needs, matching projects to grants. How would you spend a grant for \$1,000? \$10,000? \$100,000?

## **Let Your Needs Be Your Guide**

Brainstorming how you would spend the money is the fun part of grant seeking. Involving other staff in this step can build ownership and uncover additional areas of need. You may discover that your need is actually to build on your strengths—for example, scaling up a successful model for a larger target population.

Considering need not only helps you prepare for proposal writing, it paves the way for project design. Need is key to building a logic model, the all-important “map” of your project required by many funding agencies. A logic model indicates what you intend to do and achieve. (Our

guide “Logic Model Resources” provides an annotated, hyperlinked list of online resources to help you understand and develop logic models; download a free copy on our [Resources](#) page.)

For example: You identify a problem (lack of kindergarten readiness among children). The flip side of the problem is your goal (get children ready for kindergarten). Needs are what you resolve to get from problem to goal; in this case, you might need to train teachers, support parents, and create learning-rich environments. Notice, we’ve identified three specific areas of need:

1. a need associated with staff,
2. a need associated with parents, and
3. a need associated with students.

When you conduct a needs assessment, try to delineate a set of distinct needs. With a set of needs in mind, you can develop your project design using logic modeling. Into your logic model you can place your objectives (how you plan to address your needs), outcomes (how you know you’ve achieved your objectives), and strategies and activities (how you will make it all happen). Need is the key to your entire logic model.

### **Find Your Building Blocks**

Before you can write a successful proposal, you should identify resources that will help design and implement a successful program.

#### *You and your assets*

Your primary resource is right in front of you—your organization’s resources and strengths. This can include staff and their training, your success serving the target population, innovative programming, etc.

Identifying and articulating your assets supports the argument that you are a good risk for funding. It can also bolster your case for sustainability. Going into a grant project with organizational strengths increases the chances of being able to sustain the effort after funding ends.

If your organization lacks notable experience or strengths, this may signal that you are not ready to apply for funding and should prepare more. If, for example, you want money to expand programming, but you lack a proven track record, you might solicit in-kind donations or the help of a collaborating partner to build and improve programming. After creating some success, you may be in a better position to seek funding.

#### *Partners and their assets*

Collaborating partners are another important resource. Every community has organizations—educational institutions, government agencies, and nonprofits, among others—that can supplement your efforts. Funding agencies often require [collaborating partnerships](#) to amplify grant projects and stretch grant dollars.

If you don't already partner with other agencies, now may be the time to think about logical choices, to begin cultivating relationships, and to think about how they may fit into potential projects. Also consider what *you* can offer *them*; this will be part of the deal.

### *Facts and figures*

**Literature reviews:** A lit review is an examination of the literature (e.g., research studies, professional articles, evaluation reports) relevant to your project. Many people wait until they're in the heat of a grant proposal to conduct a lit review. But making it an ongoing exercise will not only save you time in advance, it will help you design and refine your programs. See our newsletter article "[The \(Surprising\) Benefits of Doing a Lit Review](#)" for the basics of lit reviews, and the benefits of conducting one before you start writing a proposal.

**Data:** Every grant writer needs to become familiar with data—figures and facts that speak to the need you're trying to fill, and the results you seek. Using data is daunting to some, but the more you acquaint yourself with researching and using data to document outcomes, the more prepared you'll be to write a proposal and show evidence of your effectiveness.

Case in point: Your organization offers pre-K programming, and you want to obtain a grant to reach a new target population. What data show a need for your programming? Local educational data may show that a large percentage of children in your area enter kindergarten unprepared for school. Down the line, what data will you choose to document your effectiveness?

Most proposals will require you to write an evaluation plan. You may need to consult a professional evaluator to get it right; it can be tricky to structure aims, goals, objectives, and outcomes that the funding agency uses (and may have other terms for). It will be important that your evaluation plan matches up well with the needs that you've identified and will provide the funding agency with information about the success of your project. If you're a newbie to evaluation, read up on SMART goals—visit our [Resources](#) page to download our guide "Getting SMART: Writing Measurable Objectives and Outcomes," which has links to a number of online resources.

### **Advantages of Advance Work**

A little preparation now gives you three key advantages in securing a grant:

- It will help you apply for the right grants.
- It will save you time later, when you most need it. If you have just two weeks to write a proposal in addition to all your other duties, advance preparation will buy you more time to concentrate on the meat of the proposal.
- It will give you an edge over other applicants who haven't done their homework.

Further resources on preparing to write grant proposals include:

- [What to Do Before You Write a Grant Proposal](#), tips from the Ohio Literacy Resource Center
- [How to Write a Grant Proposal](#), from the Appalachian Regional Commission; according to ARC, writing the proposal is actually Step 5 (out of 5).

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