

Tips for writing a successful grant application

Prepare

- Don't wait until the last minute. Contact your office of sponsored programs well before the deadline. They can tell you important information, like how to connect to grants.gov or other submission platforms.
- Read the guidelines for the program to which you're applying. They will tell you what is eligible and what's not, and what an application should contain.
- Look for or ask for sample applications, either from the granting organization or from colleagues at your local institution. Don't take those as models, but as examples of how someone made the case for his/her project.
- Search for previously-funded proposals in the same grant category.
- Contact program staff with questions. Make note of any contact information and use it after you've explored any available information on the website.
- Ask program staff how review works. If a review panel, ask questions about its composition. Is it a standing panel or are reviewers selected anew each year?

Make your case

- Don't start at the beginning. Think about your work plan, your budget, and your intended outcomes. Do they align
- Grant guidelines will often tell you the criteria by which your application will be evaluated. Your application should make a case for how your project meets those criteria.
- For many grant programs, the most important criterion is the project's significance (NSF calls this "Intellectual Merit," NEH calls it "Humanities Significance," and NEA "artistic merit"). Tell your readers why your project is important. Who should read your work? How will it change the field?
- Locate your project in a larger scholarly context. Know the literature, issues, questions, and controversies on your topic. How are you building on and/or challenging prior work?
- Especially for early-stage projects, discuss the questions at the heart of your project.
- For dissertation revision projects, explain how a planned book moves beyond the dissertation.
- Provide a realistic timeline and work plan. What chapters will be written? What archives will you visit, and for what materials? Or what field work will you do, when & where, and what methods will you use?
- If you're proposing a book, describe its parts/chapters. If a different kind of project, explain the constituent parts. Make sure the individual parts hold together.
- Remember, reviewers often won't read your application as a bunch of parts, but as a whole. Find ways to strengthen the ties between parts. Understand how the parts work together.
- Embrace realistic ambition! Remember that there is often a difference between your ambitious, overall, multiyear project and the subset of tasks that comprise your current grant project. Sometimes one overall project requires many grants.

Processing applications – reviewers as audience

- Your application will often be read by both specialists and generalists. You will need to persuade both groups that your project is important and that you know what you're doing.
- Make it easy for your readers. Write clearly and concisely. Avoid language that is too abstract, unclear, or jargon-laden. Define concepts and terminology.
- Make it easy for your readers, part 2. Look for the review criteria and make it easy for readers to find elements of those review criteria in your narrative. Don't make them search for it.
- Make it easy for your readers, part 3. Don't leave it to reviewers to "figure it out." Do the interpretative work for them.
- Balance the abstract and the particular. Tell readers why your project is important, but also provide examples. This goes double for projects that are predominantly theoretical.
- Show reviewers that you know what you're doing. Describe your planned methods and sources. Tell them why you are using those methods, theories, or case studies.
- Anticipate your readers' concerns and address them.
- After your application is drafted, ask yourself what kind of narrative the reviewer will put together about YOU and YOUR PROJECT. Reading your cv and narrative, will readers understand how you've arrived at your project? Do they know where you will be in your proposed project when the grant starts? Have you explained what you will do during the grant period? And is it clear when you anticipate completing your project and what the outcome will look like? The greater likelihood that reviewers end up with a SHARED view of this narrative, the greater likelihood of your success.

Follow-through: details, details, details

- What separates a highly-rated, funded application from a highly-rated, unfunded application is often the attention to details.
- Ask colleagues (not friends), both inside and outside your field, to read a draft application. They see things you might take for granted.
- Make sure items in your appendix are up-to-date, including things like bibliographies, which gives a good 'snapshot' of your project.
- Proofread your work. Reviewers often do not expect adherence to a particular style guide (except where noted in the guidelines), but they do expect a well-executed narrative. Reviewers will assume that you approach a funded project with the same care and concern (or lack thereof) that they see in your application.
- Budget: Allowable costs might include salaries/wages, fringe benefits, consultant fees, travel, supplies/materials, equipment costs, participant stipends, etc.
- Don't forget indirect costs!
- If references are required for the proposal, make sure your references know what you expect them to do; make sure they have the evaluation criteria and a copy of your application. Check to make sure they submit any letters of reference, and give them ample time to complete their letters.
- If you don't succeed, ASK FOR FEEDBACK and try again.

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