

# Grants: A Brief Overview

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## **I. “How Grants from Corporations, Foundations, and the Government Really Work”**

Here’s how grants are really made (in backward order): (1) a funder asks an organization to submit a proposal, because (2) the proposed area of funding has been discussed between both parties so that the interests of the funder and the hopes of the grantee have been worked out so that they are in fairly close alignment, and (3) neither the grantee nor the funder feels like they are being asked to do something that “bends them out of shape” and (4) through this process of conversation about a potential project, the funders have gotten to know the person(s) in charge and have a great deal of faith in them. At the end of the day, **the most persuasive and best written letter of intent or proposal will likely mean nothing if the funder does not have TRUST in the people running or overseeing the project it is being asked to support.** And keep in mind that this is coming from someone who takes a lot of pride in the proposals he writes...

Now the strategic question is HOW does a funder get to know a potential grantee? The best way is a personal, face-to-face introduction, which will typically be facilitated by a third party (for instance, a faculty or staff member or an officer knows someone on the board at such-and-such foundation and has asked him to meet about some project).

In general, always try to get that meeting: start with an approach as personal as you can make it – and a letter is typically not very personal. Find some way “in” whereby you can talk on the phone, make an appointment to come by – network to find someone who knows someone who can get you “in.” A letter comes last – or as a last resort – when no better personal approach has worked.

## **II. Proposal Writing**

- The proposal is part of a process: it begins with planning and priority setting, followed by the writing of a first draft of the proposal. You then compile a list of potential funding sources, make initial contact and cultivate (i.e., initiate and create the all-important relationship with the potential funder), re-write the proposal (and re-write and re-write and re-write!), submit, and wait for the result (either a grant or rejection).
- When writing a proposal, keep the following general principles in mind: organize your thoughts well, prepare a detailed outline, avoid jargon, rely on data but also humanize to the extent possible, keep it simple, and be prepared to revise and edit (and edit and edit and edit!) – always have at least three other people proofread and critique.

- The basic elements of a grant proposal are as follows (though these may vary, depending on potential funder's requirements):
  - a. *Introduction: Summary or Abstract / Request / Executive Summary*: This section introduces the problem or need to be addressed and states the amount requested. Be succinct.
  - b. *Institutional Description*: This sections offers a "snapshot" of the requesting organization: its history and mission, its distinctive qualities, etc. Make connections between the organization's mission or other activities and the proposed program or project.
  - c. *Project Background*: Include history of program or project. What got you to the point of wanting/needing to seek funding for this program or project.
  - d. *Need Statement*: This section clearly describes/restates the general problem or need to be addressed by the proposed program or project. Include data and info from external sources as support. Use anecdotes, quotes, and real-life examples.
  - e. *Description of Proposed Program or Project*: Include what you specifically want to accomplish and how you plan to go about it - what are the individual components of the program or project including an overview of how the funds will be used; who is in charge (i.e., directors or staff responsible for directing and executing the project or program); progress to date, support received to date, timeline.
  - f. *Objectives / Anticipated Outcomes* (i.e. "measurable accomplishments"): This section describes what you specifically want to accomplish as a way to set up the criteria against which you will evaluate and report on the program or project. Provide numerical objectives or easily benchmarked qualitative objectives to facilitate measurement of success and reporting.
  - g. *Evaluation/Assessment (where applicable and/or appropriate)*: Answer the following question: how can you prove you have been successful in meeting your stated objectives? How will you – and the potential funder – know when you are successful?
  - h. *Sustainability*: How will you sustain the project / program. Other funders?
  - i. *Replicability*: Foundations are increasingly asking to know whether the project or program is one that has the potential to be replicated in other institutions or organizations.
  - j. *Conclusion*: Summarize the importance of the program or project to your organization (and larger community, if appropriate) and how the potential funder's support is crucial to carrying out the program or project.
  - k. *Budget (usually – but not always – separate from proposal)*: The budget describes the costs necessary to carry out the activities described in the proposal. You should make clear which of those costs are to be paid by funder

you are addressing and which costs may be covered by other sources, including your organization.

Many funders will also ask for a *Budget Narrative*, a description / justification of the expenses noted in the budget. The budget narrative offers an additional opportunity to make your case.

- l. *Appendix*: Board List, 501(c)(3), financials, resumes / CVs of key personnel, etc.
- m. Always, unless instructed not to, include a one-page *Cover Letter* from your organization's chief executive officer. This letter should describe the program or project briefly, state the request, and articulate the proposed project's or program's importance. *Should not repeat, verbatim, what is in the proposal.*

### III. Grants Resources – Searchable Databases

- **Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance**  
This is a complete listing of federal programs, projects, services and activities which provide assistance or benefits to the American public. It includes summary program descriptions and is searchable by keyword. [www.cfda.gov](http://www.cfda.gov)
- **Foundation Finder**  
A free lookup tool that provides brief facts on U.S. foundations, corporate grantmakers and public charities. The entries include links to grantmaker web sites and also to grantmakers' recently-filed IRS 990 PF tax forms.  
<http://lnp.foundationcenter.org/finder.html>
- **Michigan State University Libraries: Grants and Related Resources**  
Site contains information about all kinds of funders and the grants, scholarships and fellowships they offer (organized by subject area, etc.).  
<http://staff.lib.msu.edu/harris23/grants/>
- **Fundsnet**  
A searchable database of funders on the Web. The site also provides a categorized listing of funders in specific subject areas. [www.fundsnet.org](http://www.fundsnet.org)
- **Grants.gov**  
A common web site for all federal grant opportunities. The site is searchable by keyword, federal funding agency, date, or Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance number. [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov)
- **GrantSmart.org**  
This web site permits searching by grantmaker name or location and provides access to grantmakers' IRS tax returns (990 PF forms). The IRS Form 990 PF outlines an organization's charitable giving activities and lists grant recipients for the year.  
[www.grantsmart.org](http://www.grantsmart.org)

- **GuideStar**

Developed by Philanthropic Research, this site features a searchable database that contains descriptions of more than 600,000 nonprofit organizations, including public charities and some private foundations. Based on tax returns filed with the Internal Revenue Service, database entries also include a breakdown of the organizations' assets, liabilities, revenue, and expenditures. The database also provides links to organizations' web sites and to images of recent IRS 990-PF tax forms.

[www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org)