

GET THAT GRANT! offers expert advice in eight example-filled lessons which help both beginners and seasoned professionals write proposals with the best chance of funding success. This concise Guide enables busy people to create polished, winning proposals.

Get That Grant! The Quick-Start Guide to Successful Proposals

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Get That Grant!  
The Quick-Start Guide to  
Successful Proposals

*Second Edition*

Gail R. Shapiro, Ed.M.  
and  
Carla C. Cataldo, M.P.P.

## Acknowledgements

*Get That Grant! The Quick-Start Guide to Successful Proposals, Second Edition* first was published in 2006, under the title *Introduction to Grant Proposal Writing: A Self-Study Guide*. This edition, updated and revised to reflect recent trends in proposal writing, incorporates many comments and suggestions from our readers. We are grateful for this input. We are especially grateful to Russ Johnson for his excellent peer review of the manuscript.

We also wish to thank our clients, colleagues, students, and workshop participants for the opportunity to continue to learn and improve our skills throughout the years; as well as our families for their support.

With the exception of Womankind's Financial Literacy Project and the national organizations cited with attribution, all projects, programs, and examples described herein are fictional.



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# Forward

Whether you are a writer who is looking to expand your skills, a newcomer to the development field, or a non-profit Executive Director who needs to brush up on proposal writing techniques, this *Guide* is for you.

The eight lessons will help you learn both how to write a compelling, comprehensive grant proposal, and to think like a successful proposal writer. Each lesson presents information about the mechanics of proposal writing as well as questions posed to sharpen your thought process. Finally, in many lessons, we challenge you to stop, take pen (or keyboard) in hand, and complete an exercise. By completing all the exercises, you will walk through the process of creating a complete proposal.

In order to get the maximum benefit from this *Guide*, you will need:

- Employment at or access to a non-profit organization (NPO), and
- A purpose for which funding is needed, such as a project, a program, equipment, or a building.

If you do not have these, you can invent a project and/or organization for learning purposes or you can use a department of your local municipality (e.g. Senior Center or Parks & Recreation Department).

## ***What you will learn***

By using *The Quick-Start Guide to Successful Proposals*, you will learn how to:

- Turn your good idea or project into a marketable plan
- Clearly organize your project and create measurable objectives
- Identify and produce elements common to most successful proposals
- Create a realistic budget
- Think about customizing your proposal to meet funder guidelines
- Figure out where to begin and how to refine your funder research
- Begin to approach funders, and

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- Plan for follow-up once the grant is submitted.

Proceed to **Lesson One**.



# Lesson One: Get Started

## *How does proposal writing fit into the big picture of fundraising?*

Grant proposal writing is just one component of an organization's overall fundraising plan. "Fundraising" is the term often used by those outside the field for development. "Development" is the identification, cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship of prospective funders in order to secure monetary or in-kind gifts from individuals, as well as from corporations, foundations, and the government, in support of an institution and its programs.

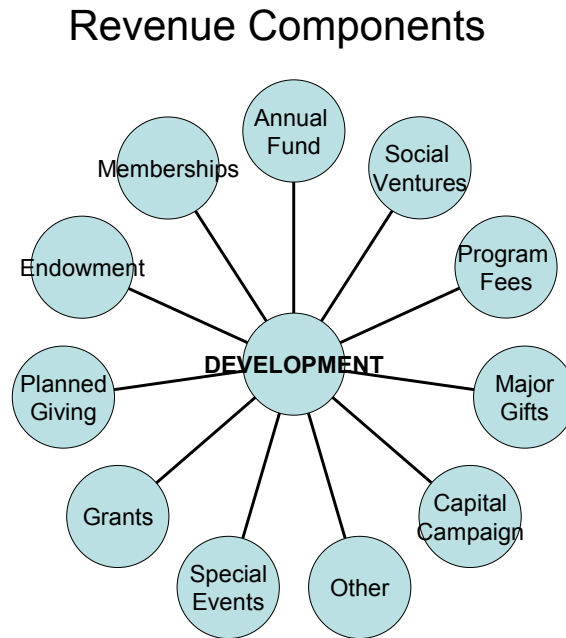
Development is only one component of a comprehensive plan to support and promote an organization. Sometimes referred to as "Institutional Advancement," this plan interweaves many functions, including, but not limited to: strategic planning, public relations, publications, marketing, special events, corporate and foundation relations, and grants management. Institutional Advancement also weaves together many individual and departmental participants, including: members, constituents, clients, the Board of Trustees, the Board President, senior staff, support staff, committees, the Development Office, the Business Office, and any external fundraising counsel or advisors.

## Development is One Component of Institutional Advancement



All the components are, or should be, driven by the mission of the organization, its goals, and the objectives designed to meet those goals. The mission, goals, and objectives (sometimes also called “strategies” or “action steps”) are the foundation of the organization’s strategic plan, which is developed by the Board of Directors, often with input from senior staff, consultants, and sometimes from other constituents.

Grants are but one of the revenue components of a well-constructed Strategic Plan for Development. As you can see by the following diagram, there are numerous components.



### ***The challenges***

Like other professions, development has its own rules and best practices, created throughout the years. As true today as when he said it more than forty years ago, according to fundraising guru Harold J. Seymour: “Good laws and principles of organized fundraising are a priceless gift of the long years ... ignored or trifled with at your peril.” (*Designs for Fundraising: Principles, Patterns, Techniques*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

Unfortunately, many agencies and Board members incorrectly think that finding grant money is a panacea – the solution to all their funding needs and fiscal woes. Don't make the mistake of believing that seeking grants is a substitute for a comprehensive strategic plan and development plan.

### ***Sources of charitable contributions***

So that you do not waste time or money, know that seeking grants is *not* the best or the fastest solution to an organization's fiscal challenges or even basic needs. In fact, 90% of the revenue an organization will raise will come from other sources, and typically just 10% will come from grants.

In 2008, about 82% of all charitable gifts in the United States were made by individuals, both during their lifetime (75%) and through bequests (7%). Corporations made about 5% of gifts, and foundations about 13% (*Giving USA 2009*, Giving USA Foundation™). Although the total amount of giving was down in 2008, these percentages have remained remarkably consistent during the fifty or so years that they have been tracked, and are not expected to change significantly in the foreseeable future.

During the lessons that follow, we will not elaborate on how to secure gifts from individuals, nor will we cover major gifts, special events, or annual funds, although grant proposal writing is directly related to all these other functions of development.

### ***What can grant funds be used for?***

Funders normally earmark their grants for one or more of the following:

- **PROJECTS and PROGRAMS:** Direct services or research.
- **CAPITAL needs:** Buildings, land, and major equipment.
- **OPERATIONS:** The day-to-day costs of running the organization, including salaries, rents, utilities, and other regular expenses.
- **ENDOWMENT:** Funds invested for future use by the organization. Normally all but a small percentage of the capital is left untouched, and only the interest is drawn upon.

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- **EMERGENCIES:** An occurrence outside the normal operations of the organization, which could not have been foreseen, and which is expected to be a one-time or temporary situation.
- **PASS-THROUGH GRANTS:** Scholarships or other funds for which individuals can apply directly, or funds provided to an organization which then are distributed to its own students or clients.
- **CAPACITY BUILDING:** Funds used to help an organization build its ability to operate more efficiently or effectively, for example, to upgrade computers or to hire a marketing or fundraising consultant.
- **SPONSORSHIPS:** Corporate or foundation funds dedicated to a single event.
- **MATCHING FUNDS:** A grant made specifically to match other funds obtained for any of the purposes above.

To find the best possible match for your needs, look at prospective funders' giving in terms of the above categories, plus these:

- **DIRECT SERVICES:** Some funders provide support only for direct services to people or animals.
- **PILOT PROGRAMS AND MODEL INITIATIVES:** Many funders seek to increase their impact by funding the development of a model program which may be able to be replicated elsewhere.
- **TYPE OF AGENCY:** Funders often have a particular area of interest, such as human services, education, advocacy, research, arts, or other type of organization.
- **GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION:** Most corporate and many other foundations fund only in their areas of operation and/or headquarters.
- **SOURCE(S) OF OTHER FUNDING:** Some funders will not support organizations already receiving funds from other established sources, such as the United Way. Others will fund your organization only if they know that it already has a broad base of support.
- **START-UP (SEED) VERSUS ESTABLISHED:** Some funders will support only brand-new organizations or those with a very small annual operating budget, while others will not consider a proposal until the applicant NPO is at least three years old, with a strong record of success.

- **POPULATION SERVED:** Funders often cite populations of interest, such as immigrants, the disabled, veterans, girls and women, homeless, children, symphony-goers, or residents of a particular city or county.
- **RECENCY OR FREQUENCY:** Some funders prefer to grant to familiar, previously-funded organizations, while others allow you to apply only once every two or three years.

### ***Do you really want a grant?***

Before you spend the many hours and do all the work it takes to produce a grant proposal, it is a good idea to ask yourself if you even need a grant. Might there be other ways to implement your idea? How has your organization accomplished things and started new projects so far? Some organizations with which we work:

- Use volunteers, interns, or students who will work for academic credit;
- Share part-time employees, known as "Circuit Riders," with other non-profit organizations;
- Charge a fee for their services or ask for a donation for their services;
- Barter with another non-profit for complementary services; or,
- Drop an existing time-consuming or inefficient service, in order to free up resources for new projects.

All grants received require some amount of paperwork, including reporting to the funder quarterly or at the end of the funding period. Some funders want to make site visits, usually but not always announced, for which your organization must prepare. There may be specific accounting requirements, which necessitate changes in your established accounting procedures. How much of your Executive Director's or management staff's time will be spent on overseeing the program or project if it is funded? What about your financial staff? Is the amount of the grant worth the investment of your time and energy?

*The adult education program in a small Midwestern town was eligible for a \$3000 grant from a national foundation to study the efficacy of the classes it offers at the local high school. When the Director of the program received and reviewed the grant guidelines, she noted the semi-annual reporting requirements for grant recipients, which, as expected,*

*included a narrative report on the progress of the research, any deviations from the proposed timeline, and a financial report on grant expenditures.*

*However, she was dismayed to find that the foundation required a separate description for “each task or logical segment of work on which effort was expended” during the grant period. This description was to include “relevant data and detailed graphs sufficient to explain the significant results achieved and any preliminary conclusions resulting from the analysis and scientific evaluation of data,” a “description of current technical or substantive performance,” as well as “a detailed description of difficulties encountered, with plans to address them in the future.”*

*The Director quickly realized that the relatively small size of the grant would not even match the amount needed to compensate her over-worked staff for their time to prepare the report. She declined to apply.*

For this grant program or idea, will your organization need additional supplies or equipment? Will you need more space in order to implement this idea, and if so, where will you get it? In other words, being able to obtain and manage a grant requires organizational capacity. Most funders will not provide grant funds for the organizational staffing and systems to manage a grant – your organization will have to be able to handle the internal systems to effectively utilize and account for grant funds. The cost will have to be borne by the organization’s existing operating funds, as a match to the grant dollars.

### ***Before you begin to write***

Once you have received the Board of Directors’ or Executive Director’s blessing to proceed with the proposal, before you begin to write it is vital to be sure that your organization:

- Has incorporated as a non-profit organization, and has applied for and been granted 501(c)(3) status by the Internal Revenue Service. Municipal governments are non-profits by definition and do not need an IRS determination. Most religious organizations also are non-profits, but should obtain a letter of determination in case the funder requests or requires it.

If your organization does not yet have such status, it will need to find a fiscal sponsor who does. A fiscal sponsor, also called a “fiduciary agent,” is another non-profit organization which agrees to apply for and administer grant funds on behalf of a charitable program or project not yet incorporated and/or recognized by the Internal Revenue Service. The fiscal sponsor usually oversees the accounting, reporting and other administration on behalf of your organization. Normally, the fiscal sponsor will retain a small fee or percentage of the funds received (about 5% is typical) for administration and oversight of your grant. This amount will be included in the budget you submit to the funder.

- Is financially stable, with a clear mission and goals, and a good plan to implement those goals. Does it have, or is it prepared to hire, a staff with the credentials and experience necessary to carry out its work? In addition, the organization and its work must fill a community need, and it should have active support from community members.
- Can show, if it is a brand new non-profit, that it has some initial capital, or at least a development plan to raise money. Some NPOs accomplish this by having members of the Board of Directors loan some start-up funds to get the organization off the ground. Others seek outright donations of seed money from Board members or other supporters.
- Puts its fiscal house in order. This means making sure that the books are up-to-date, the latest IRS Form 990 return is filed, and that it has met any state requirements for filing, such as registration with the state’s Bureau of Charities and/or the Attorney General’s office. If the agency has revenues greater than \$200,000 annually and has not had an audit or financial review for the last fiscal year within ninety days of the books closing, that is a warning sign to prospective funders and the public about its fiscal management capacity. The organization also needs to have a solid financial manager or team in place. Check to see that your organization’s most recent IRS Form 990 has been posted on [Guidestar.org](http://Guidestar.org), since foundations and donors are likely to look there.
- Gains support, or at least cooperation, from all involved.
- Budgets enough time to do a thorough job. How long does it take to write a good proposal? While it can vary greatly depending on the nature and complexity of the project, the

experience of the writer, and the specific requirements of the funder, a good rule-of-thumb for the new grant proposal writer is to allow at least 40 hours to prepare a simple proposal for a corporation or foundation. Double that figure for more complicated projects or for government proposals. Halve that time if you are experienced.

- Allows ample time for the finished proposal to be proofread and produced. If your proposal will require letters of support, detailed financial information, or other supporting documents, which may not be at your fingertips, you may need an extra week or more. Plan ahead! Most grant proposal writing consultants or NPO development officers have had the experience of the eager call about a great grant opportunity that is due in a day or two, with the anxious caller asking, “Can you help us?” or, “Can we do it?” Most of the time, the correct answer is “no.” For most NPOs, dropping everything to meet a tight deadline probably will not result in a successful proposal.
  
- Obtains formal consent from partners or collaborators, if any are involved in the program or project. Be sure to obtain a letter from each partner’s Executive Director and/or Board Secretary. Some foundations have a “consortium agreement form,” when a collaboration is involved, while others may require a formal Board resolution from each participating organization.
  
- Has or can build the capacity to fulfill all grant commitments. Does the organization have the support of the program staff who will implement the project and manage the finances? Otherwise when the grant is received, it will be problematic for the organization. If staff does not fulfill the grant requirements and carry out the program on time and on budget, the funder is likely to deny future support and possibly even demand that funds be returned.
  
- Has developed a realistic strategic plan for fundraising, so that expected grant revenues will meet about ten percent of the organization’s needed income. One exception to this rule is in the case of a start-up organization. Grants may constitute a much larger initial percentage of the budget, as the new organization starts to build a donor base of individuals. Remember: by definition, “development” takes time! Also, every member of the Board of Directors should have made his or her own financial gift, in addition to



whatever volunteer time he or she may be giving. If those closest and most committed to the goals of the organization are not supporting it, why should anyone else?

- Understands that not every grant proposal will be funded. For example, assuming that your organization has an excellent, well-developed project that matches the criteria of the prospective funder, and assuming that you follow all the steps in this *Guide*, it might reasonably expect to get approximately 10-25% of the grant money for which it applies. Although this number may sound low, remember that your NPO will be competing with many other worthwhile projects and organizations for the same funds. It is important that the Board, staff, and you, yourself have realistic expectations.

► **Exercise:**

Consider whether or not you actually need a grant. How else might you raise money for your program or project other than by applying for grants? Identify and list at least two other possible options. You can use these options now, in addition to a grant, or later, in case your first tries at proposal writing do not succeed.

Once all of these steps are in place, proceed to **Lesson Two**.

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