

10 TIPS for SUCCESSFUL GRANT WRITING

By Steve Miller

Does it ever seem that the same districts, the same teachers, are the ones that get all the grants? Why are they successful? What are they doing that you aren't? Successful grant writing really isn't rocket science; on the other hand, it's real easy to botch the job. A couple of years ago I sat on a federal grant review panel and was astounded at how bad, even embarrassing, were many of the applications. I took some notes and have continued to talk with other grant reviewers and successful grant seekers on the state and national levels. Based on their experience, here are some tips:

1) Do it! The biggest reason people don't get grants is that they don't apply. Of course it will take time. Of course it will be extra work. Of course there is a good chance that your first several attempts won't succeed. But you will get better each time, much of what you write is re-usable, and once you start hitting -- unlike in baseball -- it gets easier and easier to keep up the winning streak.

In order to apply, you must first know what grants are available. The news won't come to you; you have to do some searching. Fortunately, web search engines make this relatively easy. There are too many websites to even begin listing here: some are organized by the nature of the grantor (federal agencies, state agencies, corporations, foundations, etc.), some are focused on the nature of the programs being funded (education, gender equity, literacy, etc.). Go fishing!

2) Only Propose Activities that the Grant maker's RFP or Guidelines Explicitly State are Fundable! Just because you have a good idea or a desperate need doesn't mean the funder is interested in giving you money. Read the entire RFP or Guidelines. If anything is unclear call the grantor and ask. Don't waste your time and the reviewer's time by describing activities that simply are NOT eligible under the publicized guidelines.

Before you start, ask at least two other people to read the RFP and tell you what they think is, and is not, fundable. Then tell them about the activities you are thinking of including in your proposal and ask if they think you are within the guidelines.

3) Know the Importance of What you Want To Accomplish. Before you write anything, get a couple of people together to brainstorm the big picture, the dream, the difference you will be making in the lives of your students or other stakeholders through the funded program. Why is that a worthwhile impact? How will it move everyone closer to achieving the mission of your school -- and of the funder? How will it build on existing strengths in your organization and among the participants? At the same time, how will it help people who have the greatest need?

The best proposals are ones that express passion. Use language that lets the funder know that you believe in what you are doing! The best strategic planning is done with the participation of all stakeholders. Get administrators, teachers, STUDENTS!, and

PARENTS! involved in the discussions. Then make sure that you mention their participation in your application!

4) Structure Your Application to Exactly Follow What is Being Asked For.

Reviewers have to toil through dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of applications. They don't have time to find where you've hidden the responses to the required questions. Make an outline of the application form listing the wording of every question and every request for data. Structure your response to satisfy each question and each request for data *in the exact sequence* that the grantor has placed it in. Don't be afraid to include MORE than is requested in any or every section; but never provide less. And don't worry about redundancy or illogical jumps or stupid questions; the reviewers may not have created the application form they're just stuck using it and they will quickly skip over anything that makes their job even harder than it already is.

Remember: reviewers almost always start by getting the stack of applications down to manageable size by eliminating everything they can. Your job is to not give them any reason to cut you. It is only after you get through the initial shuffle that your application's positive qualities become of prime concern.

5) Work on the Action Plan and the Budget Simultaneously. Of course you can't literally do two things at the same time; but you can do the action plan and the spending plan in total sync with each other. The bottom line is: will you spend the money in ways that lead to the promised results, and on the activities you describe as leading there? In the narrative or the budget detail, make sure you tie each budget expense to the actions required to achieve your goals. Then go another level down to list the cost of the people, training, services, equipment, and other resources you will need to accomplish those actions. Of course you are making all this up. Of course it will have to change once you start work. But at least you have an idea of what is going to happen and what it might cost. That is a very solid starting point.

6) Emphasize What Makes Your Project Likely To Succeed & Sustainable. Has something similar been done in other places, which increases the likelihood that it will also work in your school? What skills, experiences, and resources do you or your school have that increase the odds of successfully completing the program?

The two main concepts are "all encompassing focus" and "positive leverage." Most districts suffer from "projectitus," a situation in which there are lots of small projects in different classrooms or schools but there is no unifying focus or long-term theme that unites them all and thereby leverages their individually small impact into systemic change. What are your school's two or three top priorities? How does this program support and extend your ability to achieve those goals?

The true meaning of sustainability is not about having future funding sources to pick up a particular set of isolated activities. Rather, meaningful sustainability comes from designing a program that builds off of previous activities and initiatives, that strengthens existing core activities, and lays the foundation for future activities and initiatives -- all of

which fit into your school's long-term strategic plan for the accomplishment of your mission.

7) Evaluation. Different funders require different kinds of evaluation or research. Evaluation reports tend to focus on process and/or output measurements. They provide on-going feedback about how the program is doing. Evaluators may examine if procedures are being followed, if events and materials are occurring or being produced, if participants are attending and feeling satisfied. Research tends to focus on the larger impact of the program. Is it contributing to desired changes in student learning, school culture, etc.?

Good evaluators can be extremely helpful in defining meaningful goals for your project and giving you the information you need to stay on track. Evaluation can be done by a combination of in-house and external people. Research, on the other hand, is a longer-range effort that requires more significant data collection and analysis and almost always needs to be done by an outside professional.

Make sure you know whether your funder wants evaluation or research (be careful: many people use the same words to mean different things!), and what kinds of questions they will want answered.

8) Check the Spelling & Grammar. Spelling mistakes and typos really make you look stupid. Use the spell check. Look for awkward sentences and passive verbs. Is the layout clear? Is the type too small to read? Are all the questions actually answered? Have at least two people read the draft and the final copies. Then have someone read it again. There will always be at least one more mistake that you hadn't yet caught.

9) Include all the Attachments & Signatures. Create a checklist of *EVERYTHING* that is needed in the complete application package. Requirements may include signed forms, letters of support, proof of the availability of matching funds, organizational chart, bio of key staff, etc. In addition, unless the funder explicitly forbids it, you should think of attaching even more than it requires: newsletters or newspaper articles about your program, samples of past products, timelines or schedules, names of your advisory board, etc.

10) Get it in on Time. Deadlines count. In fact, in many situations it is worth submitting a "preliminary" version several weeks before the official deadline and asking for feedback. This doesn't usually work when applying for government grants -- but even then it is worth trying to create a "final draft" a week early and then show it around to some friendly critics before submitting it.