

Grant Proposal Writing Tips from La Crosse Community Foundation

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- **Verify eligibility and nonprofit status** – Make sure your organization is a qualified recipient of grants. Community foundations can only award grants to 501(c)3 organizations registered as a public charity and educational or government institutions. If your organization doesn't have charitable status, but your project has charitable intent, you may be able to find a fiscal sponsor to apply on your behalf.
- **Confirm your project aligns with the grantor's funding priorities** – All grantors have funding priorities. Some may be very wide, while others may only be a specific area like education or the environment. Funding priorities are usually listed on a grantor's website, or there is a designated contact to call like a program director. *If the grantor has a program director, that individual is your friend. His or her job exists to facilitate the grantmaking process. Don't be afraid to reach out with questions as it could save you valuable time.*
- **Know your organization's history** – Make sure your organization hasn't received previous grant awards from the source. Because grant funds are limited, most grantors will not fund multiple grants for the same thing or ongoing services. Also, many grantors have a 'one grant at a time policy.' If your organization is larger and has many departments or programs, your organization may already have another active grant award you aren't aware of. Don't forget to complete any required follow-up reporting from previous grant awards.
- **Consider other partners (for both service delivery and funding)** – Most grantors prefer, and may even require, collaboration with other partners to consider an award. It is not uncommon that many grantors do not want to be the only funder for a request. Having other funders on board shows viability. Funders also don't want to award grants for requests that are duplicating other existing services or programs.
- **Make sure you can meet funder expectations if the grant is awarded** – Nearly all grantors have set grant guidelines, conditions or policies that grantees must adhere to if a grant is awarded. Familiarize yourself with those requirements to make sure your organization has the capacity to abide by those. Grantors can request funds back (even after the funds have been spent) if they become aware of noncompliance with their conditions/policies.
- **Get started early!** – Try to give yourself at least two weeks to work on the proposal; rushed, last minute applications often have errors that can cause disqualification. If the proposal requires letters of support or other third-party documents, you also need to allow an appropriate amount of time to request and obtain these things to submit with the application before the due date.

AS YOU WRITE

- **Read the questions carefully** – Make sure your responses are clear, concise and answer the question. If you're using snippets of previously written grant proposals, be absolutely certain you've adjusted them to answer the question on your current application and don't reference another funder name.

- **Demonstrate need** – Provide real evidence why your request is needed and needed now. Third party data or evidence is always best, as opposed to just anecdotal evidence you’ve observed or experienced. Quotes from articles, peer-reviewed research, census data and other relevant local studies can provide evidence related to your need.
- **Set clear, measurable goals** – Make sure your request includes specific goals that can be measured to track results (or impact). Goals should be SMART – S(specific), M(easurable), A(achievable), R(realistic) and T(ime-bound). For example, “Our program will serve 3 meals a day to 45 total clients for one year.” This is better than “Our program will feed many people for a year.” Share how you will use what you learn from your results to continually improve your work in the future.
- **Avoid industry jargon** – Grant evaluators are not experts in your service area or organization. Avoid jargon and acronyms that might confuse someone outside your organization or area. Write your proposal as though you are explaining your work to somebody for the very first time who has no experience or background in your work.
- **Get to the point** – Use clear wording and be specific. Applications often have word or character limits, so get straight to the point and leave out unnecessary “fluff.” Grant evaluators are reading many proposals at a time. “Fluff” can distract and detract the reader, and in-turn your score.

FOR THE FINANCIAL PIECES

- **Check your numbers** – Use the form provided by the grantor. Does your math add correctly in your budget? Are your expense and revenue columns equal? Have you included other pending and committed funding partners you plan to ask?
- **Only ask for what you can get** – Only request money for what the grantor is willing to fund, i.e. some grantors have policies indicating excluded expenses.
- **Only ask for what you need** – Don’t ask for too much or you’ll risk looking greedy or unprepared. Many grantors provide information on previous grant awards you can use to “qualify” an appropriate amount to request. Do NOT add an additional percentage above the amount you really need assuming the grantor will not award the full amount. Grantors will recognize you’ve done this if you’ve completed your budget forms correctly.
- **Prioritize your needs** – Sometimes funders can’t award the full amount, so if you specify your priority items or needs in your budget narrative you may still be able to at least get a partial grant award.
- **Have a realistic sustainability plan (if the project is ongoing)** – Funders are very interested in knowing what will happen to your work after grant funds have been used. If the program is ongoing, make sure you can demonstrate how you plan to maintain your program after the grant dollars have been spent.

BEFORE HITTING SUBMIT

- **Proofread** – Check for errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation; although your content might be wonderful, typos can easily undermine your credibility. Read your proposal outloud to make sure it flows nicely. Then, ALWAYS have at least one other individual (preferably somebody totally detached from your work) read the proposal. If this individual is confused and

unconvinced, the grant evaluators may be too. Plus, a second set of eyes can find a lot more typos.

- **Confirm all required attachments are included** – A lot of online applications won't allow proposals to submit with missing pieces, but that isn't always the case. Doublecheck to make sure you aren't forgetting to attach somebody the grantor requires, like your Board of Director's list, tax determination letter, or organizational budget.

IF YOUR GRANT GETS FUNDED

- **Follow the conditions of the grant** – Even if there isn't a written grant agreement in place (which is not uncommon), the grantor most likely has specific conditions or expectations for every grant awarded. Know what these are and comply; you don't want to risk having to give back awarded funds for not doing so.
- **Spend the money as awarded** – This is a part of most grant agreements or conditions but cannot be stressed enough. ALWAYS use the funds awarded for their intended purpose. If your project or work isn't going as you planned in your request, check in with the funder to ask how to proceed. Most grantors will understand and allow you to move forward under a new plan.
- **Track your progress to complete follow-up reporting** - Most grantors require a follow-up report after grant funds have been spent; it is good practice to do this with a grantor even if a report isn't required. The report could include a projected vs. actual project budget, so keep up to date financial records of your grant expenditures in addition to progress made on your proposed goals to be able to easily complete this report once it is due.
- **Share your story** – Advertising is expensive, but the work you are doing with your grant award may be worthy of a media story which could provide free PR. Spreading the word might generate more public awareness – and donations – for your organization. Make sure to give appropriate recognition to all your funders in any stories.