



Formula for a Perfect Grant Application

By Barbara Norris Coates

If you don't know a lot about grant writing, you're in good company. Over the course of my years as a grant writer, many of the educators I've worked with have admitted that they don't know what makes a "good" proposal and what constitutes a "bad" one. I have a simple formula I follow for laying the groundwork for a fundable grant proposal.

A successful grant proposal describes ...

A Proven Need + An Innovative Idea + A Written Plan + A Superhero Funder = Measurable Change for the Better!

Before we look at the qualities that characterize an effective grant, let's look at a short list of what a grant should not be . . .

- A cool idea just for the sake of a cool idea. Ask yourself whether the idea aligns with your school or district's strategic direction. Can the impact of the idea be measured? What is the bottom line benefit to students, teachers and staff?
- A "cut and paste" job. Grant writing that isn't customized to each potential funder simply isn't worth the effort. After receiving perhaps a hundred or more applications for a single solicitation, grant review committees are looking for ways to bring your proposal to the forefront. Make sure your proposal tells grant reviewers that (1) you understand the mission of the funder from whom you're asking money, (2) your proposed project is a "win-win" for both your organization and the funding organization, (3) you care enough to follow the funder's guidance about how much to ask for, what activities and costs are allowable and, of utmost

importance, how well your project responds to the grant- making priorities that the funder has established.

- **Just About Getting the Money.** Grant funding is a competitive process no matter how you consider it. So it is pointless to request money without a competitive project. Remember that the money is simply a vehicle for your organization to do the “right thing” to improve teaching and learning.

So . . . what do you need to get started? Go forth and come up with an idea!

- Innovative ideas are all around you. One of the best places to look is in the process of daily teaching. Once you get a broad idea, hone it into an idea that addresses specific educational priorities.
- The idea should relate to a specific need or problem. Can you take the idea and relate it to specific measurable objectives? Grant funders look for measurable objectives because they provide evidence that their contributions have truly made a difference.
- Ideas must pass the “so what” test. Does the idea have the potential to make a difference in the lives of students, teachers, and/or the community? What, specifically, will the idea change?

To be grant worthy, good ideas need a sprinkling of innovation.

- While you don’t have to reinvent the wheel (and in many cases funders don’t want you to), you do have to build a few new spokes. Look for existing models for your idea that have proven benefit in the field. How can you take an existing model in a new and exciting direction?
- Your idea should reflect “best practices.” Know what they are, where they have been implemented, and what results may be expected. Talk to successful project directors locally and nationally for advice and strategies, and existing gaps you might be able to fill.
- Many grant funders like to see cross-disciplinary efforts. Talk to your internal experts. Grant proposals that are too insular and don’t show adequate internal and external collaboration can be a red flag to a funding agency.

Now that you’ve had an innovative idea for a project worthy of funding, you’ll need a plan and the right funder to make it a reality.

Let’s look at the Written Plan portion of the formula....

Just about every grant proposal requires that you create a plan describing how you will implement the project if funded. First, sketch out the major activities and then elaborate by including details.

- Start with the end in mind. What will be achieved? Build in processes for data collection as one aspect of measuring the impact of your project.
- Can some staff members be released from their current duties to direct project activities or provide other project services? If not, think about what type of personnel positions you will need for the project and whether you can sustain new positions beyond the grant- funding period. Lay out project staff responsibilities in a timeline. Funders will want to know who is doing what to get the “work” of the project completed.
- Do you need a recruitment plan or outreach plan? If so, build this into the timeline.
- Will external partners play a role? If so, describe their roles in the timeline.
- Cross-check your timeline against the project budget. Both sections should tell the same story.

Once you have a blueprint for a fundable proposal, you need to find the appropriate funding partner. While you might be the champion of your project’s cause, an interested and engaged funder is your superhero—a partner who will help you get your project off the ground and running (what is sometimes called “seed funding”).

- If the funder’s website provides lists of past grantees, review the lists to see if the funder offers grants to institutions like yours and/or projects that are similar. Take note of any geographic restrictions the funder may have. Read the organization’s annual report so you’re aware of their strategic direction and major accomplishments. Take a look at the funder’s board of directors to see if you, or any of your colleagues, have networking ties with the organization.
- After you’ve done your homework on the funder, call a program officer (if this is allowable. Some funders don’t allow phone calls, so check first!) When you call, have a one-page concept paper in front of you that summarizes your project idea. Why is it innovative and important to achieving your goals, and how does it respond to the funding priorities. Don’t use this time to ask questions answered on the funder’s website, or in its public materials.
- Remember that you’re requesting money not begging for it. Contextualize your discussion with talking points regarding how your organization and the funding agency could act as partners in addressing common goals and priorities. Talk constructively about your organization and its capacity for change while emphasizing the educational challenges the grant funding will help you overcome to facilitate this change.
- Understand that funders choose projects that address their mission and highlight their commitment to and impact within the community. Mention opportunities for which the funder

will receive public recognition for helping your school or district. Make an effort to include a publicity plan in your project timeline.

When you work through this simple formula for success, you'll be accomplishing the hardest part of grant writing—developing a sound, innovative, detailed concept with a plan for how it will be accomplished, and identifying a select group of funders who are the best fit to champion your cause.

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