

# Finding What Works?



## “Getting the Highest Proposal Score”

### Guiding Principles

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### 1. Where Do I Even Begin?

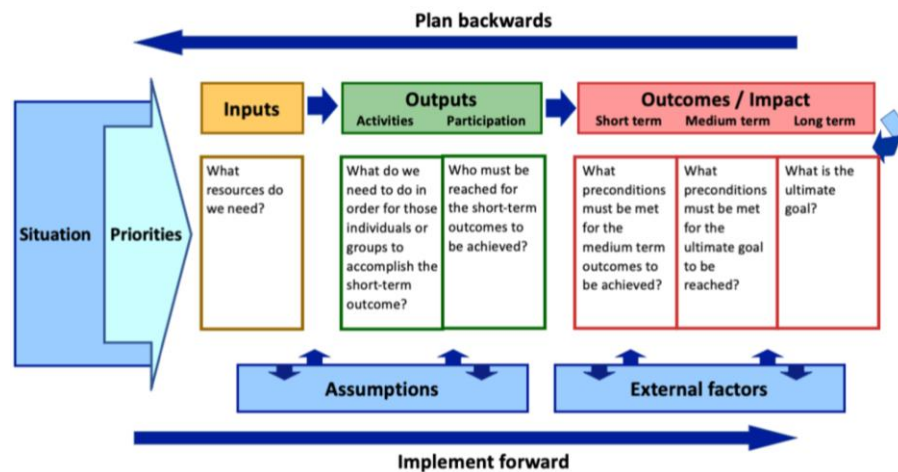
Before you put your hands on the keyboard, successful grant preparation begins with a series of critical preliminary steps. Rushing into writing without laying the proper groundwork is a common mistake that can undermine an entire proposal. Getting started is about preparation, not prose. Your initial actions should be administrative and non-negotiable for federal funding.

- First, you must register your organization with the necessary federal systems at [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov). Register with the System for Award Management at [www.sam.gov](http://www.sam.gov). This registration allows you to bid on government contracts and apply for federal assistance. As part of this process, your organization will be assigned a Unique Entity ID (UEI). Be aware that these registrations can take time, so do not leave this to the last minute.
- Second, once your registration is active, the next step is to obtain the Federal Funding Announcement and read it thoroughly. Do not just skim it; this document is your blueprint for the entire proposal. It outlines the funder's purpose, priorities, eligibility requirements, and—most importantly—the review criteria that will be used to score your application.
- Third, pay close attention to the agency contacts provided. Many agencies also host technical assistance webinars for applicants; these are invaluable opportunities to gain clarity and insight directly from the funder. Attending these sessions should be considered a mandatory part of your preparation process. This deep dive into the funder's requirements and expectations is the foundation upon which every successful proposal is built.

### 2. How Do I Build a Winning Vision?

Every successful grant proposal is built on a clear and compelling vision. If there is no vision, there is no viability and no reason to apply. A practical tool for articulating this vision is a logic model or a vision map. This exercise forces you to connect your resources, activities, and participation to your desired short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes. Within this vision, you must clearly define your Unique Value Proposition (UVP) which is the distinctive quality or approach that sets your project apart. This is typically done using a Logic Model as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Logic Model as Unique Value Proposition in Grant Proposal



### 3. How Do I Structure the Proposal for Reviewers?

Reviewers have limited time to evaluate dozens of applications. Your job is to make it easy for them to assign the evaluation points. Use the funding announcement and its scoring rubric as your proposal's outline and checklist to do this. Specifically, mirror the language from the announcement by using the same headings and addressing the criteria in the order they are presented. This alignment between your narrative and the funder's evaluation criteria is essential.

Table 1 provides a basic example of how to map your proposal sections directly to the review criteria, a strategy that ensures you have addressed every requirement. By structuring your proposal this way, you guide the reviewer through your application and explicitly show how each component meets the criteria for scoring, making it easier for them to award you the highest possible score. The specific review criteria may vary by grant announcement.

**Table 1.** Mapping Proposal Narrative to the Funder's Review Criteria

Narrative Section	Review Criteria Addressed
Introduction	1: Need
Organizational Information	5: Resources & Capabilities
Approach	2: Response and 4: Impact
Work Plan	2: Response and 4: Impact
Evaluation Capacity	3: Evaluative Measures
Budget Narrative	6: Support Requested

### 4. What Are the Final Steps to Success?

A winning proposal is more than just a collection of innovative ideas; it is a polished, compelling, and strategically positioned document. In a competitive funding environment, it is this final polishing and strategic positioning that separates a funded proposal from an unfunded one.

- First, build in time to polish, perfect, and position your application for success. This means your writing process should include phases for drafting, internal review, and revision. Assemble a team of readers and reviewers, including individuals who were not involved in the writing process, to provide fresh eyes and objective feedback. This critical feedback loop helps you see the proposal from a reviewer's perspective, ensuring your key points are easy to find and understand.
- Second, know your competitors and what makes your project unique. This is your Unique Value Proposition (UVP). It should be a consistent thread woven throughout the proposal that answers the question: "Why should our project be funded over any other?" Make sure you tell a clear and consistent story that states your case in just a few short sentences. Being consistent in your language and terminology throughout the document reinforces this story and prevents any confusion for the reviewer.
- Finally, ensure you assemble a competent team. Grant writing is a team sport, not a solo activity. Avoid collaborating with individuals who are not committed to the demanding work required. A formidable team is enthusiastic, coordinated, and aligned with the vision. This collaborative energy and expertise will be evident to reviewers and significantly increases your chances of success. Be sure to allocate sufficient time for the final stages of development, as this is where good proposals become great ones.

### 5. Want to Learn More?

Success in grant writing requires a commitment to continuous learning and improvement. Integrating best practices from the start will enhance your proposal's quality and fundability. To sign up for the "Finding What Works" newsletter series, scan the QR CODE. If you sign up, you can also request the Power Point slides from the webinar that go in depth.

