

Grant Writing: Getting the Most Out of Volunteers, While Giving the Most to Them

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Many nonprofits treat grant writing as a final step before a deadline. The most successful organizations involve grant writers early, creating stronger projects and better funding opportunities.

These three lessons explain why a grant writing class is different from every other writing class in college, and they explain why a nonprofit might invest in training volunteers and staff in the skills of grant writing.



Lesson 1: Grant Writing is Only Very Slightly About Writing

Amateur grant writers believe that learning grant writing is like learning other kinds of writing. It is not.

There are textbooks and workshops that promise to teach students grant writing, the way that community education classes promise to teach students poetry or memoir writing.

These courses help amateur grant writers pick up some important vocabulary. They teach amateur grant writers the names for genres (e.g., a “Letter of Interest” or LOI). These terms and other tips and tricks help an amateur grant writer polish their work.

But, there are fundamental analytical, project management, and budgeting skills that need to be developed first, before the writing techniques come into play. If these skills are not developed first, the quality of writing will not matter.

Lesson 2: Grant Writing is About Matching Applicants’ Goals to Funders’ Values

Amateur grant writers believe that the best-written grant proposal is the proposal that will be funded. But the quality of the proposal is only a deciding factor when the results are close. The process really begins with matching applicant goals to funder values.

When teaching grant writing, assign students to learn more about some of the philanthropic foundations in the region, for example, the Ordean Foundation, the Lloyd K. Johnson Foundation, and the Blandin Foundation.

Each of these organizations has a story, sometimes more than one:

Albert Ordean has a story that explains his reason for establishing the foundation that carries his name.

Lloyd K. Johnson has a story, one that involves his wife, too.

The Blandin Foundation has a different kind of story, about a major employer wanting to serve its community, and understanding that story makes clearer what the goals of the Blandin Foundation are.

The most effective grant writers understand that funded projects are projects that match applicant goals to funder values. Role-playing exercises, which begin by understanding the vision of the founder of a philanthropic foundation, help amateur grant writers measure their work against this metric.

The goal of grant writing is not writing up “the best program,” or “the most impactful initiative.” The goal is to demonstrate that an applicant’s program or initiative will contribute to the vision of the funder. How does your proposal make Albert Ordean’s vision manifest, or help make the Blandin Foundation’s vision for its community come closer to a reality?

The same principle can guide state and federal grants. State and federal grants begin with goals set by the government that (legislators believe) can be enacted by grants to others (nonprofits, schools, universities, sometimes even private businesses, and more).

Funded projects and programs are selected because they are well-written, sure, but clear and persuasive writing convinces the program managers that this applicant will achieve the priorities that created the funding opportunity.

Lesson 3: Grant Writing is About Creating a Fundable, Finishable, and Measurable Project

Grant writing is not something that can be added at the end of the project or program development process. It’s not frosting to be added after the cake is baked; grant writers should be involved from the beginning. The grant writer needs immediate access to answer some of the key questions in the grant writing process.

The grant writer can offer input to ensure that the project is fundable. The grant writer can ensure that the applicant is eligible and that the expenses are allowed within the budget.

The grant writer can help assess whether the project, program, or initiative is finishable. (There is art here, while an applicant may know that the project is finishable, based on their resources and past experience, the grant writer needs to be able to write persuasively that the project can be completed in the time allotted.)

Finally, the grant writer can help persuasively convey that project success is measurable. Funders want to know that their dollars have an impact. There are strategies for program evaluation that the grant writer brings to the table that can be brought into the design process.

Bring a grant writer into the everyday workings of your organization. Their proposal will be improved, your programming may be improved, and the project may be more likely to be funded.

Conclusion: Grant Writing Can Be a Gift to the Organization, a Way for a Volunteer to Live Up to Your Values and Goals, too.

The description of the ideal grant writer in this essay, then, is someone who is familiar with your organization’s mission and vision and who understands how programming manifests the organization’s values. The grant writer is trusted enough to participate in the development of the programming or project that the proposal will fund.

I'm not talking about a grant writer who gets a stack of papers two weeks before the proposal is due and works to whip a proposal into shape. I'm talking about a grant writer who is already and organically a trusted part of an organization.

I'd like to suggest that it's in the best interests of every nonprofit to cultivate volunteers who can give to an organization through grant writing.