10 Biggest Mistakes to Avoid

Next Issues:
Your Top Grant Writing Questions Answered
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Every business today is under economic pressure. Each step you take to lower that pressure will lower your anxiety and ensure that your business will be around next week, next month, next year.

This is true as much for taxed, for-profit businesses as much as it is for the 1.6 million tax-exempt, non-profits like schools, churches, charities, even local government agencies.

One easy step you can take right now is to **stop wasting time**. One of the biggest time-wasters is **making mistakes**. You don’t have time to waste. Am I right?

Since 1993, I’ve noticed that novice – even many experienced – grant writers often make many of the same mistakes that keep them from getting funding.

Avoid these common mistakes, and you’ll stop **wasting time** AND increase your funding success rate.

In this first issue of the *Grant Writing Newsletter*, you will learn about the **10 BIGGEST Mistakes** (plus 1 bonus mistake) I see grant writers make.

Enjoy!

Phil Johncock, Editor
Mistake #1 - Don’t Follow Instructions

One of the top two reasons funders give for denying proposals is because applicants fail to follow instructions.

Now, before you disregard this one as being “too simple,” take a look at one federal government agency’s instructions. Their guidelines include:

- When sending the application packet, do not use staples, paper clips or fasteners. Nothing should be attached, stapled, folded or pasted.

- All type should be printed in Times New Roman, 12-point font.

- All margins must be at least one inch and only one column per page.

- Page limits for the narrative and any appendices will be explained in the notice of funding availability and must be strictly followed.

- Do not use heavy or lightweight paper, or any material that cannot be copied using automatic copying machines.

These guidelines come from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). SAMHSA prefaces their list of instructions with the statement, "If you do not adhere to these requirements, your application will be screened out and returned to you without review." Ouch!
**Mistake #2 – No Match**

One of the top complaints from grant funders is the huge percentage of proposals they receive that do not even match their funding priorities.

As many as eight out of ten proposals don't fit. That's 80%!

If you want to set yourself up for failure in grant writing, be amongst this 80%.

Here are two top reasons funders give for poor matches:

1. **Stopping short.** Grant seekers like you and I often do keyword searches on the Internet. Everyone does it, right? The Web is easy and fast. Let's look at an example. Say that a particular foundation shows up in your results. Instead of delving deeper into the funder's description to see exactly what their priorities mean, novice grant writers stop too soon. They submit a proposal without further research. Big mistake.

2. **Failure to look at prior grantees.** Another reason for the high percentage of off target proposals is that grant seekers often fail to contact prior grantees. It's not your fault, though. No one taught you to first seek out agencies and groups who have received grants from your target funder in the past. Contact one past grantee. Quickly, you will discover if your project is on target or not.
**Mistake #3 – Too Late**

According to the Catalog for Domestic Assistance’s guidelines for grant writers, “deadlines for submitting applications are often not negotiable. They are usually associated with strict timetables for agency review.” This means that if your application is late, you can expect that it will be returned without being reviewed.

Here are some of the top reasons for being late:

- The dog ate my proposal. (Just kidding! It would be fun, though, to find out the top excuses funders get for being late.)

- **Not enough time set aside to develop letters of support** with related public and private agency partners. It usually takes several months to secure these, since items of value (i.e., buildings, staff, services) have to be negotiated and approved by boards and committees. **TIP:** Successful grant writers develop strategies to generate proposal support from a large number of community groups before they get started.

- Spent **too much time on less significant parts** of the proposal. For example, if the final selection criteria for your grant allocates 5 points to the “Summary” section of the proposal and 35 points to the
“Problem” section, which one would you give more time and attention? The one with the most importance in the eyes of the funder, right? In this case, the answer is … the Problem section.

- **Not enough time available in your job.** A colleague complained that it took her 40 hours to write a proposal and took her away from her usual job responsibilities as a librarian. “How much money did you get?” I asked. “$40,000,” she replied. “A return of $1,000 an hour is a pretty good hourly rate don’t you think?” She smiled.

- **Poor maximization of funder clocks.** Remember: “Watch multiple funders’ clocks for the best time to submit proposals.”

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For example, the federal government’s fiscal year begins October 1 and ends September 30. That means money has to be spent during that period. So any government grant funds received, even if received late in the year, must be spent before September 30.

The federal clock also tells us:

1. A few months before publicizing guidelines, federal agencies often request input in any current programs and their rules, as well as work with applicants by phone or in technical assistance workshops.
2. After going public, fed’s typically give you 4-8 weeks to write and turn in your proposal.
3. Federal agencies often take approximately 4-6 weeks to review proposals before notices of approval or rejection are sent out.

Mistake #4 – Reinvent the Wheel

In my first grant 22 years ago, our relatively small college (10,000 students) did not have a system in place to pre-test and post-test the English language skills of immigrants. I intuitively knew that someone, somewhere had a solution to my problem. I just didn’t know who or where.

With a little research, I discovered that our neighboring state, California, had developed Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS) to provide valid competency and standards-based assessment for adult students who speak English as a second language. After speaking with the CASAS people, I was convinced that their system would work for our students, as well.
There was no need for us to develop our own assessments, since CASAS had already done all the work. All I had to do was justify using CASAS in the Evaluation Section of the proposal and include the cost in the Budget. The justification was that it was more cost-effective. This one strategy added credibility to our grant and saved us time and money.

No sense in reinventing the wheel, if you don’t have to, right? In every case that I know of, it has been much faster, easier and even cheaper to research what has been done in a given area of interest and build on the successes of others rather than start from scratch.

**Mistake #5 – 1st Draft with 1st Draft Errors**

OK, this is one of my biggest gripes. After reading tens of thousands of proposals, this is the one thing just rubs me the wrong way. Here it is …

When I read a proposal that has basic spelling and grammar errors that could have been caught by at least one person going over the proposal before submitting it, I cringe. There, I said it!

Now, other than using the spell-checker on your computer, here are 12 key components that any reviewer can look for in your 1st draft that you can fix before you submit your proposal (I’ll be forever grateful, too):
1. Does the outline (format) of the proposal match the format required by the funding source? Yes or No

2. Does it have few, if any, unsupported assumptions? Yes or No

3. Does it include quotes from authority figures or clients, and/or statistical evidence like Census data to support assumptions and statements? Yes or No

4. Is it neat, clean and easy to read? Yes or No

5. Is it brief, clear and concise? Yes or No

6. Is it “positive” in its focus? Yes or No

7. Does it have a professional look and layout, with plenty of space? Yes or No

8. Does it establish the credibility of the applicant and include a proven track record of successful projects? Yes or No

9. Are the program objectives measurable? Yes or No

10. Does it include a timeline for completing program activities? Yes or No

11. Does the budget include a brief narrative that can be aligned with the objectives? Yes or No

12. What is your overall evaluation of the proposal?

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Funder Facts
Annual Giving

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Corporations

$24.41 Billion
Individual Bequests

$41.67 Billion
Foundations

$217.79
Individuals

Source: Giving USA 2011
Mistake #6 – No Pre-Proposal Contact

In a study of 10,000 federal grant proposals, the only variable that was statistically significant in separating the funded and rejected proposals was whether or not the grant writer made a pre-proposal contact with the funder.

Once you have determined some potential funders for your project, the importance of contacting them before you submit your proposal is paramount. Consider these facts:

- According to one expert, your chances for success increase an estimated threefold when you contact a funding source prior to writing your proposal.

- Most government agencies welcome pre-proposal contacts. It saves them – and you – time.

- Private sponsors – like foundations and corporations – vary in their receptivity to a pre-proposal contact. Their preference often appears in the grant guidelines.

Pre-proposal contacts serve three primary purposes:

1. To verify the information you gathered during your search for a funder.

2. To gather more information that will help you customize your proposal to the preferences of the funder.

3. To make a positive first impression.
Here's a bonus pre-proposal contact tip I got recently from the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance* …

“Sometimes, it is useful to send the proposal summary to a specific agency official in a separate cover letter, and ask for review and comment at the earliest possible convenience. Always check with the Federal agency to determine its preference if this approach is under consideration.”

Thanks To All Who Submit Their Grant Writing Questions!

feedback@GrantWritingNewsletter.com

Next Issue …
Mistake #7 – No Measurable Objectives

The hardest thing for most beginning grant writers to do is write clear, concise program objectives that are measurable. Writing “help our students be successful, sounds good on the surface, but doesn’t go deep enough. By contrast, stating “70% of students will complete the program and pass the GED exam” is better.

I hate to say it, but it’s like taking statistics in graduate school. No one likes it (well, except that one guy). But, it’s necessary to understand enough statistics to conduct your research and complete your master’s or doctoral thesis. Without it, you won’t graduate!

“Help our family members read and write” is admirable, but it will not get you funded. This is better … “Within one year, parents who participate in our adult literacy project will make one grade level improvement in their literacy skills, as measured by the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE).”

This particular section of the proposal is “not” creative writing, folks. It’s “not” exciting or even glamorous. Learn the tricks of the trade here, though, and you’ll make it through this section of your proposal with the least amount of emotional and physical pain.
Mistake #8 – No Client or Funder Focus

Funders frequently ask, “Is this proposed project concerned more with the needs of the applicant or the needs of the client?”

Prospective donors seldom fund proposals written from the perspective of the needs of the applying agency. This doesn’t mean that you should ignore your agency’s needs – or your own.

The key is to present your project from your clients’ perspective rather than from the point of view of what your agency needs. Instead of requesting computers because your school has old ones or “needs them,” be creative.

Yes, you can be creative, here! Show how new computers will lead to increased student engagement, faster research time and improved test scores.

An experienced grant writer was much more emphatic when he admitted to one of my classes, “My mother once taught me that no one really cares about what you want or need. So, move beyond yourself and view the world through the funder’s ‘value glasses’ and what needs they want to see addressed. Write your proposal to address the funders’ interests, needs and values.”
Mistake #9 – No Track Record

What I’m about to say is a hard pill to swallow for newly formed nonprofits. It’s a Catch 22 … you can’t get money, unless you have a track record. You can’t get a track record until you get money.

Well, that’s not entirely true. There is a trick you can use. Here it is …

One of my favorite sayings is “The quickest way to success is to have success quickly.” This means two things: 1) the quickest way to get money is to demonstrate that you have been successful already, and 2) the quickest successes you’ll ever have are the small ones (do these first).

Let’s look at the first one … demonstrate your success. Success at what? Success at being a good steward of money can be proven by good accounting records. Success at serving your clients can be indicated by testimonials and self-evaluations. Success at fulfilling your mission can be demonstrated by updated strategic plans.
You’re not going to be successful at managing money right away, so forget that one. Instead, focus on the other measurements of success. Also, focus on #2 … delivering small successes that your agency can create quickly, with or without money. Do something, anything. Serve your clients. Document what works and what you are doing well.

In other words, if you don’t have a track record, be ready to get one quickly. Don’t forget to document your success, too.

Another proven strategy when you don’t have a track record is to “borrow another agency’s track record.” But, I’ll leave that for another conversation.

http://FunderResearch.com
Mistake #10 – Unsupported Assumptions

An assumption is defined by the Encarta Dictionary as “something taken for granted” or a “belief without proof.” It is something we believe or presume to be true without having evidence or proof.

For example, when defining a societal problem – like poverty, hunger, racial tensions, educationally disadvantaged youth, seniors – many new grant writers assume that statements like “many seniors lack the necessary transportation to get their medical needs met” is good enough. But it is too general. “4,502 seniors surveyed in Clark County (82%) lack the necessary transportation to get their medical needs met” is much better. It is more accurate and specific.

Funders agree that for problem statements, a statistically supported one is far superior to an unsupported one.

When you’re looking for support for your ideas, use statistics whenever possible (at least one federal or state statistic, as well as one local statistic) from a credible source, like the Census Bureau, research study or professional journal. You can also use statements and quotes from authority figures and experts in your industry.

Get good at spotting “unsupported assumptions.” Use strategies to bolster them with evidence and proof. Then, add additional strong arguments (even emotional ones) to prove that your project is “worth funding.” In other words, when you’ve laid a foundation of agreed-upon facts and figures, it’s easier to construct a solid, fundable structure that will withstand opposition.
BONUS Mistake #11 – Stop After the 1st Try

Pay attention because this is the closest thing to a guarantee in grant writing that you'll ever hear ...

Imagine being a fly on the wall to this conversation ...

"Why do you think that the majority of people who are denied in their first try for a grant seldom, if ever, apply a second time?" asked one funder, an Arts Council selection committee member.

"Well, that's a good question," I replied. "My best guess is that the applicants never realize that re-applying is even an option. They take rejection personally and never find out why they are denied or how to improve their proposals."

“Good question,” I replied. “The applicants probably never realized that reapplying....)

"Yes, you're right." She added, "The interesting thing is that if applicants ask for feedback, we would give it to them. Then, if they revise their grants and submit them a second time, the chance we would fund them actually doubles."

Here's the truly amazing part ...

She continued, "If an applicant is denied that second time, but asks for feedback, improves her proposal, and re-submits the revised grant a third time, I can pretty much guarantee you that the proposal will be funded."

Wow! Did you hear that?
It's not "1-2-3 strikes, and you're OUT" like in baseball. It's actually "1-2 strikes, and you're IN!" Guaranteed!

Now, that's a whole new ball game.

No teacher, book, expert or mentor ever taught me that.

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Since this is our first issue, we need your feedback in order for us to continue to improve our publication for you.

- We want to know how you liked it.
- We want to know your most important grant writing questions so the experts can address them in future issues.
- We want to know what you want to know more about.

Send us an email with what you liked, your most important questions, and what you want to know more about.

Send all emails to:

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