How to Write a Successful Grant Application

Some Helpful Hints from a 45+-Year Grant Writer

Most people get interested in grants when they hear someone got a big pot of money to do something really cool—something they wish they'd thought of! But, really, successful grant writing doesn't start with money being available; it starts with having an organization or collaboration that has a vision and a plan, that knows itself, the needs around it and how it can make a difference, and that is just looking for financial help to translate those plans into action. So successful grant writing doesn't start with someone else's money—it starts with *your* leadership and organization. Grant writing then becomes one of the tools the leadership and organization uses to bring about its vison and to fulfill its mission.

If you're reading this, you're probably one of the leaders of a congregation or an organization with at least the beginnings of a vision and mission, and you're looking for ways to move forward. If you don't know how to do that, you can look for "developmental" grants that will provide small sums for facilitation to help you get further down the road with organizational development and strategies. Nonprofits often will provide such assistance at lower cost. You also potentially can get a volunteer from the Diocese or another congregation to help you, through a vestry retreat or similar activity. You need to know who you are—*and think about what God is calling you to do at this time and place in your community*—to be able to write a grant that authentically reflects who you are and what you care about deeply enough to carry off, and possibly sustain, in order to make the difference you're called to make!

So with those few words of introduction, let's get down to the steps of putting together a winning grant application! Here goes:

FIRST STEPS (PLANNING):

1. Know what you want to do—ALWAYS start with the project, not the "grant."
   a. What are you going to do? Who are you going to impact?
   b. Who—individuals or organizations— needs to partner with you in this work to make it successful? This is critical to decide early on so that invitations to join what will become your project team can be issued before you get too far down the road.
   c. Why are you doing this (need and opportunity)?
   d. How do you know this is feasible for you to take on?
   e. How are you going to do this? You may have some ideas, but check out the Appendix to this document, "A Quick and Dirty (and Fun) Way to Create a Project Plan," for the best, easiest, quickest (and most fun!) way to determine your plan.
   f. How will you know if you succeeded in doing what you hope to accomplish?
2. Know who you want to do/are doing it with, in terms of other organizations, etc.—and be sure they're on board. In short, who are your "project partners" going to be? What is each going to do? Every partner needs a representative on your project team.
3. If this is a project that involves the community, you MUST have some representatives from the community on your project team—and not just in name only. They will help keep you focused on what the community really wants/needs/expects, plus get you community support. No reputable grantor will give you funds for a community-based project without you being able to

talk about how you've engaged the community, and the best/fastest/easiest way to do that is to make a contact and get them involved!

4. Work out how you're going to get to your desired outcomes—develop your project plan in collaboration with your project team. Check out the Appendix to this document, "A Quick and Dirty (and Fun) Way to Create a Project Plan" for how to do this, if you know what you want to accomplish but aren't sure how to get there. It's a group process, and since your project plan will be the basis for your budget, it's important to develop it on the front end unless your project is incredibly simple. Trust me, this time and group involvement on the front end will save pain, confusion and do-overs on the back end!

5. Write up your goals, objectives and activities, and start costing them out, along with identifying who'll do them (which may have already started if you've done the project planning in #4). Get your project team and project partners involved in the "who does what" and "how much does it cost" work, especially costing out the work.

6. Add up the "how much does it cost" work—and you've got your budget!

7. Have a plan for where you need the money to come from. Here's when you need to start researching grants! Ideally, have a few bucks in hand or know how to fundraise for this special project within your organization or congregation. Remember that "bucks in hand" can also come in the form of donated labor or materials, or what's called an "in-kind" match, but you have to put a value on it to be able to show it in your budget. The best way to put a value on it is to ask what people would charge for it if you had to pay them for it.

Get all this down in writing and get your project team—all your stakeholder representatives— together to be on board with it—and then you can have help doing the rest of the work. Divide and conquer!

NEXT STEPS (IDENTIFYING FUNDING):

8. START looking for outside sources of funding!
    a. **Diocesan grants:**
        i. Mission Endowment Grants
        ii. Missionary Resource Support Team (MRST) Salary Support and Seed Grants
        iii. NC Episcopal Church Foundation (NCECF)
        iv. Parish Grants
        v. Green Grants, from NCECF
        vi. Global Missions Grants
        vii. Theological Education Grants
        viii. Mini-Green Grants from the Chartered Committee on Environmental Ministry
    b. **Local foundation/non-profit grants:** Think about the largest employers or wealthy families in your community. Chances are, if they're at all civic-minded, they've created a foundation! You probably can find them through Google! If you're looking at offering direct services, you can also check into United Way grants; you may not need to be an official "United Way Agency" to get a one-time grant.
    c. **Local government grants:** Many times, local governments will fund even religious institutions for direct services or community projects, at least on a one-time basis.

    d. **National Church and foundation grants**: These are the most difficult to get, and they require you REALLY have your act together, are very focused and have the ability to develop a relationship with the funders. Among these are grants from The Episcopal Church, the Trinity Church Wall Street Foundation, The United Thank Offering, The Lilly Foundation, Constable Grants, Jessie Ball duPont Fund Grants, the Reynolds foundations, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, etc. If you are interested in going after one of these, you should consult with your regional canon, who can direct you to the person(s) in the Diocese best able to assist you with these programs.

9. **How to approach researching grants:** If you're really lucky, whoever asked for your help in writing a grant will already know where there's money and will direct you to that website or funder for more information. But, if not, here's how to go about finding funds from the list above:
   a. If it's a diocesan grant, talk with your regional canon first! They can be a huge help! Consult them also about National Church and foundation grants. Then…
   b. Look up each potential grant online (AND read all the information):
      i. **Who they'll fund:** A lot of private or corporate foundations won't fund religious institutions.
      ii. **What they'll fund, and what kinds of projects they've funded in the past**: This will tell you if they have ever shown any interest in what you're hoping to do.
      iii. **How much they'll fund and what kinds of matching funds you'll have to put in:** For example, the Cannon Foundation will fund religious organizations, especially for direct service projects, if the organization is in a location where Cannon Mills had a plant. However, you have to have 70% of the project cost in hand before Cannon will supply the remaining 30%.
      iv. **Application requirements and deadlines:** Can you meet these?
      v. **If they're a foundation, who's on their board, and with what groups are they affiliated:** It never hurts to find out one of the vestry members of your congregation or another in your town is on the board. If you're lucky like that, be sure to let them know what you're trying to do, and try to be sure that they're supportive of it!

10. **Why the research matters:**
    a. For large projects, you'll want to apply to several sources, and match the "asks" to the funders who'll want to pay for the various parts of what you need.
    b. You'll also want to shape your grant language to the needs of the funders. More on that later.
    c. Some funders require pre-proposal letters or only accept applications they have solicited, so, if that is the case with any of your potential funders, it's especially important you contact them before you apply.

Once you have researched the grants and found out whose funding criteria and priorities, application timelines, and grant award amounts best match your needs, you're ready to add a funding strategy to your project write-up and get buy-in from your project partners/team for it.

Once you have buy-in, you're ready to start writing!

HOW TO WRITE THE GRANT ITSELF:

1. Download the BLANK applications from every funder to which you want to apply.
2. Re-read the guidance and ALL the fine print, including what needs to be attached, who needs to sign off on the grant application on your end, etc.
3. Divide and conquer among your project team who'll take responsibility for assembling the information you need to complete the application.
4. Once you have the information in hand, start writing.

WRITING TIPS:

1. Know your mission and vision.
    a. You need to be able to express it clearly and succinctly.
    b. You need to be able to explain how your project furthers your mission and vision—AND how that mission and vision supports the funders' missions and visions.
    c. Don't blow smoke—you have to be authentic. Smoke can be seen through—always!
2. Know your readers.
    a. Government grants or grants from organizations related to government agencies (or that are using in part government funds) ALWAYS want you FIRST to answer the question they ask you to answer, then expound on it if they give you space. Don't bury the answer to their question in the middle of a paragraph! And that's also good advice in general— FIRST answer the question asked. For example, if you're asked how many people your project will serve, your response needs to be something like, "We will serve 15 people at the outset and expect to increase it to 30 within one year." THEN you can expound.
    b. Repeat language the funder uses on its website or in its priorities—but be authentic about it. Funders can always tell when you're trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.
    c. Be clear and succinct, which is sometimes hard because applications sometimes ask for information that's seems duplicative. Read each question carefully, and, if there's outright duplication, repeat yourself succinctly (but using slightly different language). If there are nuances among seemingly similar questions, be sure you address the nuances. But if you can't be clear and succinct, it comes across that you AREN'T clear about what you're trying to do.
    d. Don't use jargon that's specific to your profession unless you're writing a grant that's going to be read by people in your profession. It frustrates board members reviewing a grant to read a bunch of stuff they don't immediately understand, and frustrated board members don't approve grants that frustrate them. Don't use a lot of acronyms either, even if you've stated what they stand for—that's especially true if the acronyms tend to have similar letters or otherwise be confusing. You're fine using things like the NAACP, but you get the point!
    e. Use data to support your case, where appropriate—but don't belabor it! Around 3-4 compelling stats and a few real-life examples (stories) are almost always better than pages and pages of graphs and charts, unless you're applying for research funding.

      f.   Wherever possible, make sure that funders know:
  - i. You know what you're doing from experience—and have the capacity to do it—by showing what you've done successfully in the past or by highlighting the experience of your project team.
  - ii. The evidence of your ability is your past success in x, y and/or z. This is a great place to put in some NUMBERS of people you've impacted in the past, etc.

      g.   If the funders ask you to present your program objectives, timelines and project outcomes in quantitative (numerical) as well as qualitative terms (which many will), you need to do so—"some" or "significant" will not cut it! Be sure your projections have buy-in from the team; you want to under-promise (but promise enough) and then over-deliver! By the way, a good, specific program objective sounds like this: "By June 30, 2021, to have offered 3 Racial Equity Institute Level I training programs, each training 50 area clergy, school staff and community leaders." See why that project plan matters?

Once you have a first draft of your application, circulate it to your project team. Get their feedback, comments and edits. Ask them in particular to help you strengthen it and TIGHTEN UP your narrative! Almost all grants start out too wordy! This is particularly important for online applications that have word or character counts—your first draft will always be too wordy, and it may take several revisions to get to the necessary word or character limit without losing the essence of your message. (And a P.S.: It's always easiest to write your responses in a word-processing program, checking the word and character counts, and make your edits in that program before copying (NEVER CUTTING) and pasting them into an online form or editable PDF!)

PROOFREAD—AND HAVE SOMEONE ELSE PROOFREAD. Typos, misspellings and grammatical errors send the wrong message to lots of funders.

While you as the grant writer are doing this, part of your team should be assembling the budget using the form the funder wants you to use, and another part of your project team should be gathering all the attachments and endorsements you need (if any).

Letters of support may or may not be allowed, but, if they are, definitely include them, from project partners, the people to be impacted and other funders. Make sure they're not cookie-cutter—you can send a sample letter or points the letter should include, but ask your supporters to PLEASE do just a bit of customization. All attachments and letters of support should be converted to PDFs before including them in your final application.

BUDGET NOTES:

1. Be sure your budget is realistic. Low-balling your budget is not helpful to anyone, least of all you—funders can see through it, and, if you're lucky enough to get it past them, you won't have enough money to complete what you've told them you'll do!
2. Get quotes, so you're not guessing at how much things will cost.
3. Be specific about what you're asking each funder to pay for. Many grants will ask for a budget justification, and they won't fund you if you can't make a good case for what you say you need.

4. Develop your budget in Excel or another spreadsheet program. Check and double-check all your formulas, especially as you make revisions during the preparation process. Everything needs to balance. Once your budget is finalized, make sure all your numbers agree wherever they appear on either the application cover page or in your project narrative. You don't want to ask for $50,000 on your cover page and have your budget show a request that only adds up to $47,893!

ON GRANT SUBMITTALS:

So you've FINALLY gotten everything together, and everyone's on board—you're ready to submit!

1. Be sure you know where, how and when to send the application. Almost no funder will consider a late application.
2. Make copies of your application for yourself and project team members before you submit it.
3. If you are doing an online submittal, please make sure you have solid internet connections. And DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE to submit, in case there are problems!
4. As noted above, make sure your application is formatted as required by the funder. It's great to have, or know someone who has, Adobe Acrobat Pro so all your application files can be combined into one "binder" of application, budget, photos, endorsements, etc. It's easier for funders, and you can be sure nothing is left out. This is not a quick process, so you'll need to get the application to whoever is going to assemble it (at least!) 1-2 days before your final deadline.

ON GRANTS MANAGEMENT:

When you're awarded your grant, you want to use it property, spend the money as you said you would, keep good records and be able to show that you exceeded expectations. Here are some tips:

1. Carefully read your award letter and any documentation that goes with it. You may have additional forms to fill out, as well as reporting requirements and other conditions to meet. Be sure to read the fine print, too—and keep these documents handy for reference!
2. If you get funded, but not for everything you requested, you'll likely be asked to submit a revision to your work plan. If you aren't asked that, then you'll need to do it anyway—because if you asked for $20,000 and only got $15,000, you reasonably can't be asked to produce the same results with $5,000 less unless you can raise that money from somewhere else. It's always a good idea to let the funder know up front of any changes you plan to make in your work plan.
3. Set up a separate account for grant funds. (You can include matching funds in the same account so long as you keep records of who was providing them.)
4. One account per grant is good, and your life will be easier if you also set up sub-accounts for each line item in your grant budget. It will help you stick with your budget and let you know quickly if you're running into issues.
5. Track your spending as you go—at least monthly—and be sure as well to get documentation of in-kind support in real time.
6. **One really important note:** Just about every grant requires you go back to the grantor if you want to make budget changes. That may not be needed if it's just a few dollars, but more than that—money you've found you can't spend or need to spend on something other than what you

told the funders you'd spend it on—needs to be run back by them for "prior approval" BEFORE you actually make any spending changes! Failing to do so can leave you stuck with the bill!

5. Keep regular progress reports—at least biweekly. COUNT things, like how many people attended your workshop, came to your workday or received financial assistance. Track your activities based on your work plan, to be sure you're not straying too far afield of what you said you'd do. If you keep up with this on a biweekly basis, it will save loads of time, pain and perhaps even heartache when the time comes to report to your funders!

6. Capture stories, do interviews with participants, make videos—anything that you can do to make it clear to your funders what impact you, and their money, are having is GOLD to funders! That includes any news coverage in print or other media you receive!

7. As noted above, be sure to get prior approval from your funder if you plan to make any changes in your approved grant budget or in your work plan, throughout the life of the grant.

8. If periodic reporting is required, report on time!

9. ONE PERSON needs to be in charge of making sure all this gets done—they don't have to do it all themselves, but they do have to be sure that it's done.

That's it! It's not mysterious, and it's not terribly hard, to write successful grants if you know what you're about and what you're trying to do, and if you can explain it to someone who will likely not know a whole lot about your situation or the particulars of what you're trying to do. Just remember the KISS principle—the simpler and more straightforward your language, the stronger your application will be! And as tedious as it may seem to do biweekly or monthly check-ins on your own progress and finances once you get the grant, it is necessary because, without that kind of regular attention, it's very easy for your project plan and your budget to start going off the rails. That's something that you do NOT want to have happen because it can affect your credibility not only with the funder whose grant has been inappropriately spent without desired outcomes but also with other funders. They do talk to each other!

And as long as I'm around, I'm always happy to review any grant applications and answer questions!

The Rev. Deacon Rebecca Yarbrough,
February 16, 2021

Appendix: A Quick and Dirty (and Fun) Way to Create a Project Plan!

Back in the mid-70s, I worked on a project that was huge for its time: a grant for around $350,000. My colleague and I had drafted a grant application, but the organization I was working for had applied the year before; the fact the application didn't get funded was part of the reason the person who worked on that grant was no longer there! Our boss didn't want the same thing to happen to us, and neither did we, so we hired someone who taught us this method of putting together a project plan. Not only did we get every penny we asked for, but our grant was one of the highest-scoring in the country! It works!

So here goes:

1. Find a time you can get the key members of your project team together—the key people you need to be able to pull off what you want to accomplish. Depending on the complexity of your project, you'll need between a couple of hours and a couple of days—but probably allowing half a day or an evening will work for most projects.
2. Find a room big enough and with enough blank wall space for you to work. Be sure you have permission to put stuff on walls with painter's tape, or make sure you have post-it flip chart sheets that you can stick things on (not Post-It notes; they're not large or sticky enough).
3. Gather materials: typing paper, scissors, markers, painter's tape and refreshments.
4. Since you're engaging in a spiritual venture, start with a prayer once everyone arrives.
5. Start off by naming the major "deliverables" of your project. What do you want the END to look like? If you're doing anti-racism training, do you just want to train people? Or do you want them to also change how they relate to people of other races/ethnicities? Or do you also want to change the way your organization does business? Think about the GOAL of your project, in terms of the major components that make it up. Write down your GOAL; that's your main header that goes up on the wall first. Then write those major components of your goal on cut strips of typing paper, and make them "column headings" on your wall.
6. Then, start brainstorming each activity, each step that will have to be done to accomplish each component of your overall goal. Each brainstormed step gets a strip of paper taped to the wall.
7. Keep up this process until you have everyone's ideas down for each component so that you have anywhere from one to five or six columns (depending on the number of major components you project has).
8. Then, take a break. Take a step back, and spend some time reviewing. Think about things like:
   a. Do you have the activities for each component in the right order? Are the things that need to happen first, happening first? Rearrange until you're happy with the order of activities.
   b. Are there any activities that you're seeing can serve multiple purposes, address multiple components, to get you to your goal? Will this allow for any streamlining?
   c. How will you document/measure/evaluate your outcomes? How will you demonstrate to the granting agency that you've done what you've said you were going to do? Be sure to add in paper strips for things like documenting how many folks come to trainings, any surveys you might want to do of "pre/post" attitudes, etc.
   d. How will you monitor progress and make adjustments if needed? Don't forget that in most projects that roll out over a year, adjustments are needed, so put regular check-ins in your paper columns.

e. Who's able to do what? What, if anything, are you going to have to either hire out or find someone else to do? If you have to wait until you have grant funds to hire out things, you need to build the hiring-out process into your activity list. You might want to use some "super" sticky notes to demarcate the things that will have to be hired out.

f. What are the approximate time frames in which things need to happen for you to reach your goal? Add some paper slips with month categories perpendicular to your columns.

9. Before you leave—TAKE PHOTOS OF EACH COLUMN!

CONGRATULATIONS! You've just developed your project plan and timeline! Because you did it as a group, you've got automatic buy-in from your project partners—and you've put their brains to work so as to do your best to not overlook anything! Plus you have already developed your evaluation plan and built in your feedback loops!

Now you can use this to build your budget; you've already identified tasks that may need hiring out, so now you just need to think about other "stuff" that will cost money—and because you've been through this process, someone has probably already said something like, "I wonder if so-and-so could donate printing?" or the like! Keep a few extra slips of paper handy to jot down those notes, and tape them up in the appropriate spots as you're working.

This may seem complicated, but it isn't. It's a wonderful way to clarify your thinking and be sure everyone's on the same page before you get too far down the road of grant-writing. And if you've got a very complicated project, you may want to sleep on your first day's work, and come back the next day to give it another look. It seems like a lot of time, but it's worth every minute because it will head off so many wrong first steps and eliminate a lot of backtracking.

And when your grant asks for goals, objectives and activities, you've got them! The goal is the goal, the major components become objectives and the activities are activities! Plus you've got the timeline for each!

Finally, yes, it's true one person can do this on a computer with project management software. BUT…it's not fun, it doesn't bring everyone's brain to the table, it's not collaborative, and it doesn't build buy-in in the process or generate the creative thinking this process does. The only thing you have to look out for in this process is having so much fun and getting so creative you get sidetracked!