

Top Ten Grant Writing Mistakes

1. The writer ignores the instructions.

Novice grant writers often write eloquently about whatever they want to say, regardless of what the funder has asked. It is essential to read the directions thoroughly, and then clearly address the scoring criteria in the written response. Sometimes it helps to re-word the scoring criteria as questions, and then answer the questions directly in the narrative.

Every grant has rules and directions that must be followed. If you want your proposal to be read and considered read and re-read the directions. Otherwise, you risk having your proposal disqualified without being read.

2. The proposal doesn't match the funder's objectives.

Sometimes individuals are more interested in the funding than what the funding is supposed to accomplish. Just because a funder has a lot of grant money doesn't mean your project will get any. Don't expect funders to depart from their objectives just because you have a good project idea. In fact, if your project doesn't match a funder's interest, your proposal will likely go unread. Be sure to do your research and find a funder that closely matches your project idea. Remember that this rule applies when approaching individuals for funding also!

3. The writer assumes the reviewer has the same program or local background.

Don't assume that grant reviewers are experts in the subject area and that they understand your jargon and acronyms. Most people know that they should spell out acronyms and be very clear about local terms, but many writers forget that the people reading the proposal will not know you or your organization. Explain what you mean.

4. The proposal is full of buzzwords, clichés, or emotional or vague language.

Avoid vague claims and trendy language (e.g., "increase their self-esteem", "hopefully"). Avoid obscure terms that might annoy the reviewer. Stay away from laudatory words about your program that don't add any real information (e.g., "world-class facility", "exciting new program") unless you have the data to back it up like awards, certifications, or quotes from experts or partners about you. Even then, the data should speak for itself with no need to embellish. A proposal with these sorts of claims won't impress the funder and may actually harm your chances.

5. The objectives are not measurable.

Project objectives must be measurable. If the objectives are too vague, not specific and measurable, and/or open to individual interpretation, it will lead to vague evaluations and, likely, rejection of the proposal.

6. The narrative isn't succinct or intelligible or is too long.

One of the keys to successful grant writing is conveying your need and plan to the reader in a way that is as clear and straightforward as possible. If you put too much information in the narrative, you will confuse the reader. The proposal may not even make sense. To avoid this situation, give the finished proposal to someone outside the organization to read before you submit it. This will help identify parts that need clarification.

7. The requested amount is not reasonable.

Asking for an unreasonable amount can get your proposal disqualified – asking for either too much or too little. The amount requested should be relative to expected outcomes, numbers served, populations impacted, size of the total project budget, size of the total organizational budget, and size of the funder and the funder’s giving history.

8. The proposed budget doesn’t match the narrative and/or includes suspicious cost estimates.

Be sure the budget accurately reflects the costs of the project’s activities. Don’t include costs in the budget that are not mentioned or explained in the narrative. In a grant proposal, never “guess” at the cost of any item. Don’t inflate or pad estimates. Quote the source of your cost estimate (e.g., vendor) or document the method you used to arrive at the cost estimate. Chances are that a reviewer or staff person will identify inaccuracies, which will affect the creditability of your entire proposal. Do a final check for arithmetic errors before submission.

9. The proposal was not reviewed or checked before submission.

Make sure your proposal makes sense and is free of grammatical, typographical, and budget errors. Take the time to have at least two other people proofread your proposal before you submit it. There are two parts to the proofreading and editing process. The first is to have someone read the proposal for content (see #6 above). That person should have the instructions and scoring criteria handy and should read the proposal as if he or she were scoring the proposal. He/she should pay particular heed that everything is internally consistent – the need, plan, and budget.

The second part of the review process requires someone to proofread the document for typos and the conventions of writing (e.g., grammar). Do not rely on spell-check to catch all the typos.

10. The proposal was hastily assembled.

Reviewers can spot proposals that were written at the last minute. Items are missing, budgets are incomplete, and the proposal sounds choppy and unfinished. Never underestimate the time needed to develop a project idea and complete the paperwork and assemble the required attachments.