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Successful Grant Writing: 10 Easy Steps

By **Kenneth T. Henson**

Even in today's austere economy, you can set your own level of grant-writing success. Just make each proposal the best it can be by using these steps:

Step 1: Recognize the Myths

In my workshops, I have uncovered a lot of wrong ideas about grant writing. For example, I often hear that the grant bank is broke. Or that the available money always goes to the same individuals or institutions. Some say that successful grant writing requires connections, leaving many feeling like outsiders, defeated from the start. But I have also learned how to overcome these myths by making every proposal *the best it can be*.

Step 2: Get Past the Myths

You must get past all the myths. For example, consider the connections myth. I offer three easy ways to make your own connections. First, go to the funding source and meet the funders. Second, pick up the phone and call the funders. But before you do, know exactly what you want the funders to know about your proposal. I always make a bulleted list of selling points that I use to whet their appetites. My third and favorite tip is to volunteer your services as a proposal reviewer. In addition to making connections, you will find strengths you can use and mistakes you can avoid in the manuscripts you review.

Step 3 Fill Up Your Toolbox

You wouldn't start building a house without any tools. Grant writers need tools, too. To begin with, they need a glossary to understand such terms and acronyms as *in-kind contributions*, *RFPs*, *indirect costs*, *DUNS Numbers*, and *sustainability*.

I also load my toolbox with numerical data. Grant evaluators love numbers and percentages. For example, I once read that more than 85% of all high school physics teachers were teaching out of field. That meant that they didn't have physics degrees. I immediately grabbed that figure and wrote a series of grants that funded several physics summer institutes.

I also carry value-added language in my toolbox, which I use to make my proposals "talk the talk." But, as you know, talk is cheap. So I also make my proposals "walk the walk." For example, knowing that *rigorous* was a hot buzzword of the day, I wrote in my first physics grant that my summer institute would be rigorous, and then made sure that it was by requiring participants to take 12 semester hours of physics courses each summer. Now that's rigor!

Step 4 Choose Your Path

Most of my 30-plus grants were written to improve local schools. This is a fertile area for grant writers. Take the example of Kathy Haven, who lives in California. Although I've never actually met her, Kathy is my hero. She writes several grants *every year* to improve her children's schools. In contrast, many of my workshop participants are defeated before they start because they don't know where to begin. I challenge them (and you) to check with the local school district and ask whether they can write a grant for the district or join their grant-writing team. I've used this strategy many times in several states and have never been turned down!

Step 5 Include the Right Parts

In their rush to meet the deadline, proposal writers often fail to address one of the criteria stipulated in the RFP. This simple mistake can bring rejection. I advise grant writers to own that RFP and follow it step-by-step.

Grant writing is all about competing. I take two additional measures to make my proposals superior to the competition's. One is a table of contents that sets out the proposal's components in crystal-clear fashion. The other is a sustainability section, which ensures the funder that my program will continue far beyond the funding period. For that piece I often get community leaders to write letters promising to help me find support once my current grant runs out, and I include those in an attachment labeled *sustainability*.

Step 6: Prepare an Irresistible Budget

One of my favorite aspects of grant writing is preparing the budget, because I believe my budget often tips the scales in my favor. While writing my book, I met a great grant writer who told me how an otherwise excellent proposal he wrote was rejected because of a simple budget error. Later, he had the rare opportunity to discuss his proposal with one of the evaluators. He

asked her why she turned it down. She told him that she could not find a particular budget item in the narrative. His response to her was "Well, you know. It's like Ragu; it's in there." But my friend confided to me that he quickly understood that writing grants is different from making pasta sauce—you cannot just stir your budget items into your narrative. Instead, you must make it easy for the reader to locate each budget item. You can do this by putting your budget items in the same order as they are listed in the RFP.

I offer two more budget tips. First, make your money request the right size: make it too big and you'll look greedy and wasteful, too small and you won't have enough money to do a good job. I expect to have to negotiate each budget, so I prepare for that by adding a section that makes my proposal especially attractive. When push comes to shove and I am asked to settle for less money, I offer to remove the component without diminishing the quality of my proposal.

Step 7: Develop the Right Style

Attempts to impress evaluators with big words and page-long paragraphs usually backfire. The best writing style for grant writing is a simple and straightforward one. Most grant proposals are evaluated under pressure. Far too few readers are assigned to evaluate far too many proposals, most of which are written in a far too complicated style. I replace the tendency toward verbosity with a sincere attempt to help others. So I write clearly, using everyday words and short sentences and paragraphs.

Step 8: Locate the Best Funding Sources

My favorite source of funding opportunities has always been the *Federal Register*. By law, every grant funded in the United States must be recorded in this document, listing the dollar amount of each grant. Experienced grant writers are careful to apply to funders who fund the same-sized projects they target. Fortunately, the computer has made this information much easier to access. The *Federal Register* can be accessed online at www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html.

Another important grant source is the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*. Because of the catalog's size, the government no longer makes this document available free of charge to public libraries, but you can access it online at www.cfda.gov.

Step 9: Form Partnerships

Most government grant foundations were created to help people. It seems reasonable that, other things being equal, the more money spent on a grant, the larger the anticipated number of people to be helped. In other words, most of the megagrants are expected to help many people. The number of beneficiaries and the quality of the services your grant will provide can be increased substantially by forming grant-writing partnerships. For example, two school districts, two hospitals, or two police departments that are facing similar problems might increase their funding potential by writing a joint proposal.

If your community is fortunate to have a college or university, those are excellent institutions to partner with because of the array of expertise they offer and because their personnel are offered incentives to write grants.

Step 10: Keep Your Grant

Once a proposal is funded, getting it re-funded is usually much easier than starting over and writing a new proposal, but only if you follow these steps. First, the moment you get accepted, make a formal announcement of the award, with a member of the press there to cover the story. Keep copies of the announcement. Each time a goal is reached, get similar coverage and file it. If anyone working with the project gets an award or other recognition, get media coverage and file it. Treat the money as though it were your own; waste nothing, and account for every dollar spent. Make the standard for performance the same as you set for developing your proposal—*the best it can be*.

These 10 easy steps have served me well and I believe they can work equally well for you.

Kenneth T. Henson (khenson2@sc.rr.com) recently retired after 11 years as a professor of education at The Citadel in Charleston, SC. He is the author of *Successful Grant Writing for School Leaders: 10 Easy Steps* (2012, Pearson Education), from which this article is adapted with permission.

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