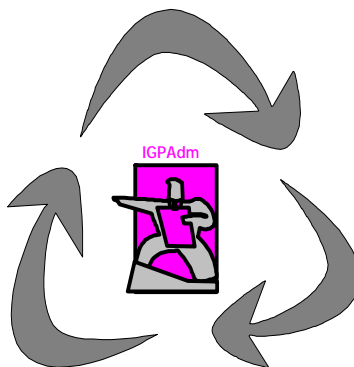


Why Grant Proposals Fail

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Published by:
The Institute for Grant Program Administration



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Introduction

Grant proposal writing is a highly competitive undertaking. The number of proposals submitted and requested dollars far exceed available funding from all sources. The general rule of thumb is that 80% of all proposals submitted fail. Bad proposals should fail but many excellent proposals also fail to make the funding line.

Why? There are many reasons ranging from the most obvious to the most arcane and subjective. Some of the more obvious reasons that grant proposals get rejected are due to any one or a combination of the following:

- You failed to follow one or more of the submittal requirements
- You failed to address one or more of the evaluation criteria
- One or more of your required proposal components was judged weak or non-responsive
- Your budget or budget narrative was unrealistic or incomplete
- Your proposal failed to adequately address the funding source rationale for making the funds available
- Your proposal failed to clearly demonstrate a need for the funding
- Your proposal problem is too ambitious relative to the ability of your organization to have a favorable impact on the problem or need you stated in your proposal
- Your project activities are not eligible for funding source approval
- Your proposal is submitted to a funding source that does not match your giving interest or client focus
- Your proposed project is judged infeasible on legal or technical grounds
- Your proposal was viewed by the readers as incoherent or unconvincing
- You simply cannot write
- You simply cannot follow basic instructions for writing, assembling and submitting a grant proposal

As you look over this list of rejection factors, some of them sound harsh and even unbelievable. But after more than 30 years of writing, reading and funding thousands of proposals, experience tells me that these and more are true. Grant proposal writing is a harsh and unforgiving enterprise.

To succeed in the grant writing arena you must have elephant skin, a tolerance for constant rejection amid notable success; a mind for creative conceptualization within the context of a group; and the ability to absorb details while assembling and submitting proposals correctly.

Finally, grant writers cannot be lone wolves. Proposals are written from within an organization to resolve problems that are defined in part by the organization's leadership and their clients. These organizational needs and problems must be matched to funding sources that have more than a passing interest in what your organization is seeking to accomplish.

It is important to remember that once awarded, a grant does something to you as well as for you. An organization's management must not allow a grant writer to write grants that will have a negative impact on the organization's mission, priorities or business practices. What good does it do to win a grant if its purposes or activities are likely to invite dissension or controversy? What

good is achieved by a proposal that will drive up your indirect costs or cause you to take on other commitments that you are not prepared to assume?

Submittal Requirements

All grants from the simplest to the most complex have assembly and submittal requirements. There are page limitations that may or may not include the forms as part of the page count. There are instructions on things like margins and font size. Ignore them at your absolute peril! Deadlines are important and they are expressed in two ways. Most deadlines are stated as "received by" which means that your proposal must arrive on or before the date and time stated. Late proposals are automatically rejected. Some funding sources specify a "mailed by" deadline which means that your proposal must be postmarked or date-stamped by a time certain with the evidence visible on the sent package.

Evaluation Criteria

Most proposal invitations have some statement of criteria that the funding source will use to judge the merit of your proposal. In complex proposal invitations, these criteria are usually separately stated in the funding announcement or a regulatory document when it is a government that invites you proposal. Your proposal must demonstrate that you have considered and addressed the evaluation criteria. These evaluation criteria are usually expressed in terms of agency needs or priorities and proposal outcomes that should be reflected in your proposal narrative.

Proposal Components

Every grant-giver that invites proposals for funding consideration will have a required list of components that must be reflected in your proposal narrative. A fully responsive proposal must reflect each required proposal component even if you have some discretion to add non-required components to the proposal. If you leave out a critical component or address that component very weakly, your proposal will suffer in the ratings. A seriously deficient proposal will be rejected.

Budget Issues

Most proposal readers will conclude that if you can't do the numbers, you cannot do anything else. The budget is usually worth 10-20% of your total score. However, if the numbers do not make sense, are incorrect or your budget is incomplete, the result is almost always fatal to proposal success. Not only must your line item budget and forms match up but your budget must clearly relate to your proposed activities.

Funding Source Rationale

Grant-givers give money for particular reasons. They want to promote change, advance a particular policy or entice you to address a national problem in a particular way. Whatever the rationale for making the funds available, your proposal must demonstrate that the funding source's objectives are being advanced. You must show how the funding source and its clients will benefit by funding your proposal.

Addressing the Need

A good need statement is supported by a combination of hard and soft data. Hard data denotes statistical information in national, regional and local context. Soft data consists of testimonials and vivid stories that help the reader understand the human and emotional context of your need that statistics cannot convey.

Your Unique Selling Proposition

When you apply for a grant to resolve a problem or address a particular need, a funding source is likely to wonder, why you as opposed to some other organization that is also seeking funding. If there is something that is unique about your organization or key staff that makes you uniquely qualified to achieve uncommon results, you need to articulate what that is to the funding source.

Problem Definition and Scope

How you define your problem and its scope can substantially affect your chances of being funded. If you define your problem too broadly the funding source may rightly conclude that your proposal is too ambitious or that your problem is incapable of resolution. If your problem is defined too narrowly the funding source may conclude that the impact of your proposal will be minimal. If you define your problem in a manner that is not readily apparent to the reader, the funding source may conclude that your proposal lacks focus.

Project Approach and Activities

Even if you have clearly articulated a need for funding or set forth a clearly defined problem, your proposal may still fail if your proposed approach or activities are inappropriate. Your approach or methods used for resolving an identified problem must be realistic and workable. For example, if your problem targets AIDS prevention among a low income minority population and your strategy or approach to reaching the target population is unrealistic, you risk rejection of your proposal. Likewise, if your actual activities are ineligible for funding consideration or do not directly relate to addressing the needs of your proposal beneficiaries, your proposal will be judged unrealistic.

Project Infeasibility

Even when you have demonstrated a particular need and the qualifications to address the need, your project approach and activities must be feasible. Watch out for activities that may have a negative impact or be ineligible for legal reasons. For example, a federal or state agency may not fund projects that will have a serious negative impact on the environment unless your activities are accompanied by a mitigation plan. Another example is a proposal that seeks to protect a group's civil rights through litigation against the government. Such proposals are excluded by law or regulation.

Two other examples illustrate the importance of avoiding projects that are infeasible. Suppose you propose to tear down 50 blighted housing structures and replace them with new units but do not provide for relocation assistance. In this case, your proposal will be rejected because relocation benefits are mandatory when your proposed project will displace families or

individuals. The other example is proposing to build a “white elephant”. Asking to build a 100,000 square foot building for a fire station in a tiny rural town is unrealistic. Besides that, how will you pay the operation and maintenance costs on such a large structure with few residents or other users to pay for its upkeep?

The Wrong Funding Source

It makes no sense to seek funding from a funding source that does not give to your area of focus, does not fund the activities you desire to fund, or does not grant to your type of organization. But careless research and pre-qualification techniques are the main reasons that many grant-givers receive inappropriate proposals.

Problems With The Proposal Writing and Structure

If you are good at articulating your funding concept but cannot write well, find or hire a good grant writer. Taken as a whole, your proposal must be coherent. It must hang together, flow naturally and convince the reader. Before you submit your proposal, have others not involved in its writing read it. If they have many questions or do not understand it, revise the proposal to address logical, structural and grammar weaknesses.

Even if the required proposal components seem illogical or irrational, you must still include them in your proposal. You may have to provide for special transitions or other explanations or cross-references, but this is preferable to going your own way. Remember, the funding source is giving the money. Sometimes a seriously flawed proposal structure is released. You are within your rights to seek clarification about the content and structure of the proposal prior to its submission. Funding sources have been known to amend grant solicitations that are seriously flawed.

Analyze the Funding Opportunity and develop a Requirements Checklist

Is there some way to anticipate or avoid many of these problems in the first place? Sure. Take time to carefully review the funding solicitation. Read it several times so that you understand it as a whole and all of its components. Now make a checklist of submittal and assembly requirements and a checklist of required proposal components. These checklist will help ensure that you address all of the narrative requirements and all of the assembly and submittal requirements.