



## **What Makes a Well-Conceived Proposal for Federal Help?**

A successful federally funded project, whether a research, conservation, marketing or other proposal, is no different from any other good project.

- It has tightly defined purposes,
- a clear strategy to accomplish them,
- on a defined and realistic timeline,
- the people, money, and other resources needed to accomplish them,
- a basis for evaluating the process when done,
- and an effective means of communicating results to any audience that needs to hear them.
- Many projects are strengthened by thoughtfully built supporting coalitions.
- Good projects use existing resources to leverage additional ones. Funders favor and often require matches of funding as an indicator of local commitment to a project. Matches usually can be "in-kind" contributions (e.g., volunteer labor, existing equipment, etc.), as well as actual dollars.

### **Prerequisites to Designing a Good Project**

- Include only active stakeholders in the planning process.
- Give yourself enough time. Setting project goals, objectives, strategies, timelines, budgets, evaluation processes, especially in a group, takes time.
- Be sure to ask the right questions and answer them carefully.  
(See next page)

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## Questions to Consider in Developing a Proposal

- What's the problem you seek to address?
- Have other people, locally or elsewhere, addressed this problem? If so, what have you learned from their work, and how does your effort relate to theirs?
- Who else might be concerned about your issues? Should they be involved in your project? What will they contribute?
- What is your principal strategy to resolve that problem? Why is this strategy better than other approaches you might consider?
- What's a realistic timeline, for action?
- What resources do you need to implement your project? What resources can you and other stakeholders offer for a non-federal match?
- Would others profit from knowing about your initiative? If so, are they local, regional, national? What's the best way to get the word out to that audience?
- How will you measure and evaluate your project's outcomes? Keep in mind how to assess your work impartially against both your project's goals and its measurable objectives.

## Understanding Federal Programs and Meeting Them Halfway

In assessing which federal programs, if any, can help achieve your goals, recognize that rarely are programs designed for needs precisely like yours. Instead of wasting your time chasing programs with incompatible goals or overlooking compatible ones, take time to research how well your project fits within various programs.

- Think creatively and broadly about your project's needs. Problems for which you seek help from federal resources are often complex, and often more than one type of assistance may contribute to their solution.
- Identify programs whose purposes and available resources seem most suitable to your purposes.
- Get as much information as you can about past projects that programs have funded or collaborated with.
- Some questions to consider include:
  - What is a program's stated mission and objectives? What projects has it funded or collaborated with in the past? Is its form of assistance appropriate to your needs?
  - What is a program's funding pool, percent of applicants who typically get funded, average amount and duration of grants?
  - What are eligibility requirements, financial match requirements, and restrictions on a program's use? Is funding available up-front or (more typically) only on a reimbursement basis?
  - Are a program's application deadlines and funding timeframes appropriate to your project's timeline? Does the program fund multi-year projects?
  - Do past grantees feel that a program's reporting requirements are reasonable and that the program is well-administered?

## Submitting Federal Applications... an Emerging Art Form

Once you've designed a good project, prepare your proposal for submission so it has the greatest chance of being approved. Some things to consider:

- Read the Request for Proposals (RFP) or Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) at least three times! Pay close attention to format, deadline, non-federal funding match and other stated requirements. Be willing to readjust your proposal for each program to which you submit it.
- Identify your central points to make, including how your proposal addresses a program's key goals.
- Be precise and accurate; don't be tempted to exaggerate the need or over-promise results.
- Use clear, concise language to make your application or proposal readable.
- Have it reviewed by someone whose editing skills you trust. Is it clear? Readable? Grammatical?
- Be sure your budget is accurate, clear, and accompanied by a budget narrative if you need to clarify any points you think could be misunderstood by reviewers.
- Call the program staff contact if you have questions. Don't guess whether an RFP or NOFA's language applies to you. Clarify by asking.
- Make sure you understand the review process. Is it based on only a few people, or is it comprehensive? If the contact person makes funding decisions, get to know their preferences. Be pleasant and non-combative in discussing your project.
- If you've been turned down before by a program, find out why before writing another. **Don't be discouraged!** Many successfully funded proposals are the result of some earlier failed attempts.

## **Preparing to Apply to USDA Grant Programs Using Electronic Submission**

Information from: <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/funding/electronic.html>

**Do I have to register with Grants.gov before submitting an application through Grants.gov? Yes.**

If you are preparing an application for your organization, be aware that you and/or your organization must register. <http://www.grants.gov/applicants/apply-for-grants.html>. Grants.gov has streamlined the process of finding and applying for federal grant opportunities. The Grants.gov registration process usually takes **3-5 business days** to complete. However, it **can take up to two weeks if all steps are not completed on a timely basis, so register early!**

### **Register Your Organization**

Information from: <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/organization-registration.html%20>

Before you can apply for a grant through Grants.gov, your organization must obtain a [Data Universal Number System \(DUNS\) number](#) and register with the [System for Award Management \(SAM\)](#).

### **Individual Registration**

Information from: <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/individual-registration.html>

An individual submits grant applications on their own behalf, not representing an organization, institution or government. Individual applicants are only eligible for grants that are open to individuals and are published on the Grants.gov website.

**Individual registration is a one-time process and can take up to one day to complete.** Individuals wishing to submit a grant application using Grants.gov are required to [register with the Credential Provider](#) and [register with Grants.gov](#). *Neither a DUNS number nor the SAM registration (see below) is necessary for an Individual Registration.*

Grants.gov safeguards organizations from individuals attempting to submit grant applications without permission by providing organizations with an E-Business Point of Contact (POC). The E-Business POC determines who in your organization is allowed to submit grant applications via Grants.gov. [Click here for a checklist to login as an E-Business Point of Contact \(POC\)](#) .

[Click here for a handy registration checklist](#) .

**Software and Hardware** What software do I need to apply through Grants.gov? You will need to download the latest version of PureEdge viewer. The [Download Application Viewer page](#) includes PureEdge Viewer system requirements and other information. Additional Recommended Software instructions and compatible operating systems are located on the [Grants.gov Recommended Software Technical Support webpage](#).

For NIFA applicants, software to create PDF files is needed. On the [Grants.gov Customer Support webpage](#) you will find a variety of information and tools. The National Library of Medicine has a nice resource to [Convert Documents to PDF](#) via DocMorph, as the grants.gov converter has been discontinued

**Questions?** If you have any questions related to Grants.gov, contact: 1-800-518-4726, Monday- Friday, 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM EST, excluding federal holidays. You can also email: [support@grants.gov](mailto:support@grants.gov)

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## **Grant Writing Tips**

### **General**

- Read and follow the directions.
- Give yourself plenty of extra time. Everything will take longer to do than you think, so expect delays, especially with larger and more complex projects, and increasingly with electronic submissions processes.
- Neatness and accurate spelling adds important credibility to the project.
- Avoid acronyms, agency jargon, and scientific verbiage.
- Cooperative efforts show local support for the project. Do not list cooperators from whom you have not gotten support.
- Communicate with the grantor/program staff to answer questions about the project content or how the Request For Proposal (RFP) guidelines apply to your project.
- Do not include reference materials, pictures, articles, letters of support, etc. unless the RFP says you may.
- Do not try to apply political pressure to get the project funded. Let your project stand on its own merit, and let the reviewers do their job.
- Have someone not involved in the project read your proposal and provide feedback.

### **Plan of Work**

- Read and follow the directions.
- Follow the format required in the RFP guidelines.
- Make it clear why your project advances the mission and goals of the grantor.
- Limit the project to a maximum of 3 goals and objectives. The more measurable your objectives, the better.
- Make sure action items pertain to your goals and objectives.
- Develop a realistic time line for action items, including what/when/who.
- Quantify activities as much as possible, such as # of events, newsletters, attendees, etc.
- Do not get too technical, as not all reviewers will have relevant technical background.
- Give careful attention to both outreach activities and project evaluation process.

### **Budget**

- Provide as much detail as possible, e.g., quantify # hours, # purchases, etc.
- Many things cost more than you think, so do your homework on actual costs before you submit the grant.
- If there is any question or doubt about an expense, contact the grantor and ask.
- Do not include expenses that are not eligible (except for matching).
- If you think something isn't clear, explain it in a "budget narrative" as part of the proposal's text.

## **Common Reasons Proposals Are Not Funded**

1. The deadline for proposal submission is not met.
2. The guidelines for proposal content, format and length are not followed exactly, or the proposal is not complete.
3. The study or the project is not a priority topic to the grantor or sponsoring agency.
4. The proposed research question, research design, and(or) research methods offers nothing unusual, intriguing, or innovative and(or) lacks significance.
5. The proposal isn't absolutely clear in describing one or more elements, e.g., how the project would be managed, activities monitored, or results evaluated and reported.
6. The project appears beyond the capacity of the individual or institution to carry out.
7. The methods are not explained, justified effectively, or seem unsuited to the project.
8. The budget is unrealistically high or low or isn't well justified.
9. The costs of the project appear greater than the benefits.
10. In the literature review section or the background section, the writer shows lack of knowledge relevant to the proposed initiative. For example, sources cited are out of date, or the writer overlooked important reference material and previous studies.
11. The rationale for choosing a particular approach as the best solution to a problem is missing or not very well thought out.
12. The constraints most likely to be encountered are inadequately considered, and there are no tactics for overcoming them presented.
13. Lessons learned from previous institutional projects are not shown or not made relevant to the proposed project.
14. The quality of the writing is poor. The proposal is hard to read, makes sweeping generalizations or illogical statements, is excessively repetitive or too long.
15. The document contains an unreasonable number of mechanical errors (e.g., typos, pages upside down or in backwards) showing an inattention to detail and quality of work.