



10 Common Grant Proposal Mistakes

1) *Wrong Program—Right Funder.*

Problem: You do your research and find a great foundation, interested in supporting organizations with a mission just like yours. But, you fail to research what kinds of programs they have actually given to and for what purposes.

Solution: Read the foundation's annual report, giving philosophy and list of previous awards. Visit the website of the organizations the funder has recently supported. Look at their programs and services, study their mission. Call the foundation and shop your needs to determine the best fit with the foundation's *current* interest. Do your homework!

2) *Right Program—Wrong Funder.*

Problem: You have a fantastic program that has strong community support, impressive demographics and outcomes and is creating systemic change in the community. So, you send a proposal to support this program to every funder in town.

Solution: Use the goal, objectives, and outcomes of the program to help you identify funders with an interest in helping you meet those goals. It is okay to be creative, but be honest. Call the foundation; see if the program passes their litmus test. Know something about the funder before you send the proposal!

3) *Ignoring the Funder's Guidelines.*

Problem: The funder provides an outline of information to be included in the proposals, but you determine your own outline for the proposal, leaving out information that the foundation uses to make their funding decision.

Solution: A funder provides guidelines for a reason; follow them. Reviewers can read hundreds of proposals; failing to follow the guidelines will be more than obvious and will most likely not be appreciated. Make sure you answer each question thoroughly, in the requested order, without repeating information.

4) *Budget Doesn't Match the Narrative.*

Problem: The narrative is done. The budget is done. But, the budget includes costs for transportation and you never mention transporting clients as part of the program. Or, you mention meals will be provided to all program participants in the narrative, but there is no corresponding line item in the budget.

Solution: Develop the budget first. Write the program description using the budget as your guideline. Make sure every line item is explained in the narrative; leave no room for questions or interpretation in the budget. Position yourself as a fiscally responsible and alert organization.



5) **Repeating Information.**

Problem: You feel like a particular point or idea is so important, so you repeat it over and over.

Solution: Say it once and only once. Important points are absorbed better if they are only presented once. Readers have a natural tendency to skip over information that they have already read, or that even *appears* similar.

6) **Portraying a “We Think We Can” Attitude.**

Problem: The proposal uses a tone of uncertainty with phrases like, the program “may” serve and the program “could” provide a safe after-school alternative, which portrays a less than confident program design. In this same category are outcomes that are set too low or evaluation targets that are well within safe zones.

Solution: Use action words when describing your program and services, and project confidence in your programs and organization’s ability to deliver them. You “will” serve, and your program “provides” a safe after-school alternative. Set outcomes and evaluation targets just outside your comfort zone and use them as a means of challenging the organization to achieve more and do better. If you have always achieved a 70 percent satisfaction level, strive for a 75 percent satisfaction level.

7) **Formatting, Formatting Formatting.**

Problem: You love Tempus Sans font and write your whole proposal in it—including all the words you put in **bold**, underlined, used *italics* on and CAPITALIZED. To top it off, you center-justified paragraphs that were on average, more than 10 sentences long.

Solution: Avoid all of the above, with the exception of occasional use of bold, underline or italics to draw the readers’ attention to a specific word or short phrase. Paragraphs should be no longer than three to five sentences. Ideal sentences contain less than 15 words.

8) **Missing a Piece of the Pie.**

Problem: You have a great program, and you project it will meet an unmet need in the community. It is run by an experienced and well-qualified program manager and will take place in your state-of-the-art facility, designed to house programs just like this new initiative you are seeking funding for. But, you forgot to tell the funder about those strengths.

Solution: Mechanics of a program are important. But, so is the need. And, it is one thing to have a fantastic program, but you can raise the bar without a professional and experienced staff in an adequate and accessible facility. You can raise the bar even higher if you are a solid organization with strong leadership, and active board of directors, and positive fiscal management track record. Tell your whole story; paint the whole picture!



9) ***Budget Challenges.***

Problem: Your budget doesn't balance. Your board doesn't contribute. You have an administratively-heavy budget. You have certain line items that send up a flag to an outsider that they are too high or too low. Shall I say more?

Solution: Most importantly, your budget should balance. Your budget should paint the picture of a fiscally healthy organization with diverse sources of revenue that are based on actuals from the previous year. You should have policies, strategies, and programs to back them up. Your budget should share administrative expenses across programs (using the "fund accounting" model). Administrative expenses should not exceed 10-12 percent of the total budget and the budget should contain footnotes to explain unusual items. Your budget should tell the story, and the story better be a good one!

10) ***Assuming the Reader Already Knows Everything.***

Problem: You tell a funder you are going to hire a LCSW or an MSW. You skip the needs section of a proposal, because everybody knows kittens need to be spayed and neutered. You abbreviate the name of your organization through the proposal because everyone knows who you are.

Solution: Spell it out, set the stage, create a case and an interest in what your organization does. Not everyone knows what LCSW or MSW means. And, not everyone feels the same way about kittens as you do. Spell out your name in the proposal to remind the reader who you are. Remember in high school English class when your teacher would say, "write your book report as if the reader has never read the book," follow her advice!