



Reading Guidelines

Learning to read foundation guidelines is an important part of grant seeking. While it sounds intuitively obvious, there is often more to it than meets the eye. An experienced consultant can help you determine what a funder is really asking or looking for, what information is critical and what you should most likely leave out.

Funders provide guidelines for a reason. Guidelines explain a funders expectation of how a proposal should look; they help the funder's review process operate smoothly; and, they create a level playing field for applicants. Believe it or not, there *is* a science to the quest for funding.

Step 1: Read, Read and Re-read the Guidelines

Get out your highlighter and post-it notes. Read the guidelines all the way through. Read them all the way through again and highlight specified requirements or action-oriented language, such as:

- Use 12-point font and 1" margins;
- Title your sections with the following headings; and,
- No more than three pages.

Read through them one more time and make any notes of ideas or items you will need to complete the proposal: board president's signature, copy of IRS letter, staff bios, etc.

Step 2: Dissect the Language

Sometimes what a funder says is secondary to what they do not say. Carefully dissect the language and the requirements. For example, a statement such as "include the following attachments" actually means do not send any other attachments—other than those requested. The phrase "deliver to" means hand-delivered proposals are accepted (not always the case).

Step 3: Outline the Proposal and Get Writing!

Use the guidelines to develop an outline for the proposal. Key words or section titles provided by the foundation should help you divide the proposal into components. Common components, but called something different by each foundation, include but are certainly not limited to:

- The Need;
- Your Response to the Need;
- About your Organization; and,
- Summary of the Request.

Step 4: Share the Proposal with an Innocent Bystander and Test Them on What They Learned

Find someone who knows virtually nothing about the program and only surface information about your organization (a spouse, a teenager or a volunteer who is less than "in-the-know"). Have them read the proposal. Ask them questions from the guidelines: can they pass the test? Did your proposal provide enough information to educate the reader?

Remember that reviewers can sometimes be reading hundreds of proposals. Guidelines give reviewers an expectation of what proposals should look like. Consistent organization of material allows reviewers to compare apples to apples. A proposal that does not follow the guidelines will indeed create a memorable impression for your organization—but not the kind you are looking for. The number one rule should always be to follow the guidelines. When in doubt—seek clarity from the foundation.