

GRANTWRITERS' KEYNOTES

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People who write winning proposals do two things. Every time they submit an application, they first, as a refresher and a discipline, read the guidelines. They make certain their proposal answers every question, implicit and explicit, they find embedded there. Then they build their argument from

the four cornerstones of good grantwriting: tone, content, readability, and credibility.

TONE

Tone is the most basic element and the hardest to quantify. It's the swing to the song, the polish to the presentation that gives a proposal a voice and a heart, and makes it stand out above the rest.

The preferred tone for major foundation and federal proposals is formal, *not academic*; academic is too verbose. **Good proposals are written in simple English**, and can be readily understood by the intelligent layperson. Grantwriting is not an opportunity to use your ten-cent college words, your marketing hype, your cor-

porate sell. Major proposals have a serious formal tone that emphasizes educational objectives.

Good proposals are concise and do not push the page limit. Too many words obscure your thought and tire your reader. Good writing is logical thinking, brevity is the soul of wit. If you can't explain your project in the space allotted, you probably need to rethink, rather than rewrite, your idea.

Winning proposals exude confidence without bragging. Museums that **are** truly leaders in a particular program area need only to recount their experience, and let the experience speak for itself. **Bragging and the use of words like unique, largest, and best only invite others to argue the point - something you want to avoid.**

Never, ever criticize others, especially your peers. Criticism is an ill wind. You can review the state of the art on any exhibit topic or program area and highlight where your project has its niche without ripping the competition to shreds. And likewise, since you don't know who might be called in to review your pro

posal, you should be very careful to give credit where credit is due.

All the little tricks of good writing except hyperbole apply equally to grantwriting. An *elegant* use of metaphor, a *little* alliteration, a *restrained* sense of fun, puns, and joking all put a little strut in your stuff.

CONTENT

Content is the core of your proposal. Good content is a detailed description of a thoroughly-conceived idea, an advisory committee that is not a paper tiger, numbers that are not rounded off to the nearest thousand. Inquiring minds want to know on page one: what are the project goals?; who **are** the partners?; how many people will it serve?; why is it important?; and how

will costs be shared? Many proposals simply spell out the details on these five topics, but winning proposals, because of the imperative for accurate, substantial details, take six months or more to develop and write.

Good proposals have a sound theoretical base and **document a compelling need for funding. Exhibit proposals walk through a complete description of themes, content, pedagogical strategy, floor plans, devices, and label copy.** Exhibit or program descriptions make up one-third of the narrative. Collaboratives describe which partner will perform what role and why, how quality control will be assured, how funding will be distributed. Teacher enhancement proposals detail an hourly agenda of professional development activities. Whatever its stripe, good proposals have accurate, substantial content and reassure reviewers that the proposed project is sufficiently innovative to merit major funding.

READABILITY

The way to start thinking about readability is to remember that your proposal, a stack of papers, is the barometer of your professional ability to carry out a major project. So strive for more than good grammar and correct spelling; strive for **balance**. Balance quotes from experts with quotes from kids, balance statements of national significance with insights into what a project means in your small corner of the world, balance hard facts and dry statistics with heart-warming scenarios that speak about the people in the project.

Good proposals think carefully about the way the narrative is structured onto a page. The presentation should have a balanced "fulsome" look that is built with short paragraphs, frequent headings, and textured text—usually achieved by an interplay between doubled-spaced narratives and single spaced bullets. Every page should contain some "white space" to allow your reader to stop, breathe, and think a moment. Breathing room alone is a good argument for white space in a proposal, but these "rest spots" also let

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readers pace themselves through long narratives and help avoid reviewer fatigue. Narratives that exhaust reviewers negatively predispose them towards your request. Good proposals are concise, use words with precision, and do not push the page limit.

CREDIBILITY

Credibility criteria ask: does this institution have the capacity to bring the project to successful fruition? Many proposals answer by delineating relevant staff and advisor experience, displaying broad knowledge of the proposed topic or program area, demonstrating urgent need, and documenting endorsements from target populations.

There are three other aspects to the credibility rule. First, attempt a reasonable project. Reviewers look for innovative projects with attainable goals tied to adequate budgets; these projects are good investments. Second, be certain that the words in your narrative and the numbers in your budget add up. Third, have all your ducks in a row **before** you submit.

If you plan a traveling exhibit, solicit as many letters of keen interest from probable venues as you can and attach these in an appendix. If you don't have

the in-house capacity to fabricate exhibits, you should have agreements with credible sub-contractors and attach their resumes along with their **signed bids**. Teacher enhancement projects rise and fall on the strength of their alliance with local school districts. Curriculum projects need publishers; collaborators need feasible management schemes. Some of the most persuasive projects show how directors have already thought through possible pitfalls and planned for contingencies, attrition rates, failing city budgets, quirks, and cranks. These proposals demonstrate credibility with foresight and detailed content.

Lastly, submit no proposal before its time. Half-baked proposals stress the staffs of funding agencies and jeopardize your credibility. Reviewers have memories. Mediocre proposals not only don't win, they also make that hill a little harder to climb the next time. The analogy with fine wine is instructive here. Winning proposals reflect depth, character, and clarity. They are not "fast food for thought."

Grantwriters who consistently produce winning proposals take the time to do it right. Major grantwriting can be a tremendously worthwhile process; many museums use it to structure program development. Major foundations and federal agencies have been known to invest in significant but ailing institutions to help turn them around and place these public resources on their feet. Major funding can give your grassroots community project a national name. So, I advise you to be deliberate about the way you position yourself for a long-term dance with a major funder. Have respect for the proposal as a product and a process, believe in yourself, and make it sing.

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