

# GRANT

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# The Keys to Success

## Writing a competitive grant application

You have already etched out a project plan and are determined to receive funding, but there is one problem—you need to know how to write a grant.

Just as building a GIS requires accurate data in many layers, a competitive grant application integrates many layers of information that demonstrate a cohesive project to reviewers. You can make your application more competitive by meeting five criteria summarized by the acronym GRANT: Guidance compliant, Remarkable, Achievable, Neat and efficient, and Transparent.

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# The Keys to Success

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## Guidance Compliant

Federal grants are generally announced with a guidance document that describes the purpose and details of the program and provides specific instructions on how to apply. It is imperative to comply with these instructions, since most federal reviewers will not continue to review a grant if it is noncompliant. Following grant application instructions can be rather daunting, but the task is easier if you read the instructions carefully; form a checklist; and remember to check for compliance with requirements concerning forms and supporting documents, key criteria, budget, formatting, and submission.

Grant instructions will enumerate any necessary government forms and/or supporting documents. Forms are typically given in the grant application package or are accessible through Web links in the guidance document. Required supporting documents could include letters of support, memoranda of participating entities in a consortium, and resumés of key personnel that will work on the project. If

your application is missing any of the required forms or documents, it will not be reviewed. A checklist of all necessary documents, based on a close reading of the instructions, will help you stay on track.

Grant instructions will typically provide key review criteria along with a list of possible points for each. A competitive application will address these criteria with a clear discussion of each one. It is helpful to be extra thorough for criteria that are worth many points. Remember, your application is not read like an ordinary document; it is scored according to these criteria. The higher your application scores for each criterion, the more likely you are to be funded.

There are also technical requirements that are the easiest with which to comply but are often overlooked by applicants. These minor faults can still result in your application being thrown out of the review process, so it is important to pay attention to them. First, you must be careful not to go over the maximum allowable budget if the instructions do not allow you to do so (and many do not). Second, be sure you meet all the formatting requirements. It does little good to put the effort into writing a good application if it is thrown out of the review process because of incorrect font size or spacing. Properly formatting the application is a crucial step; without that, it will not matter what your application says because it will never make it to the reviewer.

Although it may seem obvious, be sure you meet the

deadline! Since most grants are submitted online, register with the appropriate systems and leave enough buffer time for technical difficulties. Many grants have time deadlines as well as date deadlines, so do not attempt to submit a grant at 5:00 p.m. Pacific time if the instructions list 5:00 p.m. eastern time. The little details can greatly affect your initial competitiveness; make sure they are compliant so your application lands in the hands of a reviewer.

## Remarkable

For most grant programs, the number of applications received far exceeds available funding. Often less than 25 percent are funded. You must capture the attention of the reviewer and be persuasive. Your application will be scored based on the key criteria, but that score will be enhanced by an application that is qualitatively different from the others.

An interesting application will grab the reviewer's attention and will generate excitement for your project design. An innovative approach or plan that builds on existing research or work (including the work of others) makes your project more competitive. Your grant application should clearly show this thoughtful approach to project design and knowledge of similar work in your field. Also, many applications are more competitive if the project design is replicable. By discussing the contexts in which the project could benefit others and how lessons learned and other information will be disseminated to others, you show a commitment to the grant program's purpose and to continuing your work beyond the project period.

## Achievable

Your application must persuade reviewers that your project is achievable. The reviewer will look for information that indicates your team will be effectively managed, fiscally responsible, and able to do the technical and evaluative work involved with your project.

Key personnel qualifications should be noted and demonstrate their ability to contribute to the project. If your team lacks key personnel and is planning to hire consultants, the application should either provide information on the consultants or companies you plan to hire or should incorporate a brief discussion of the competitive process you will use to select an appropriate entity. In either case, it is imperative to discuss your organization's capacity to manage the grant (including

reporting and funding).

When the grant requires a cost share, the application must also clearly state what is offered as matching funds and any uncertainty involved. Pay special attention to the grant instructions: can the matching funds be in kind or must they be cash? Ultimately, you must show that the project is feasible with the time and money proposed.

**Neat and Efficient**

Your grant application should be well-organized and demonstrate your organization's efficiency. Having a clear work plan with milestones shows the reviewer that your project is feasible within the project period and that you have intermediate deliverables to keep your team on track throughout the project's life cycle. It is helpful to present your work plan as a table or Gantt chart (or something similar), which allows the reviewer to see a clear progression of milestones and the overall scope of the work. As most grant applications have page limits, presenting your work plan in this way also serves to save space. As you read over your work plan, ask yourself: Is it clear how we are doing this project? Are there any pieces

missing? Are there any milestones that need an explanation? Additionally, if milestones will be reached by the contribution of multiple people and/or organizations, it is helpful to include who will be responsible for each.

Remember, reviewers fund projects, not milestones. So while a good work plan will make your application more competitive, having clear outcomes and deliverables for your project is essential. Milestones show that your project is feasible and structured. Measurable outcomes in your project design show a plan to measure the project's overall success relative to the problem your project is solving.

**Transparent**

Your application should be well written. A poorly written application appears sloppy to reviewers and will cause them to struggle to comprehend your project design. A clearly written application will be, first and foremost, honest about your team's project design, capabilities, and level of preparation. It is better to write an honest evaluation of your project and fail to get funding than to obtain funding dishonestly, then fail to perform. If your proposal does not receive funding, the

reviewers will likely provide recommendations for improvements that will give you a plan for the following year's grant cycle. If an organization fails to adequately perform on a project or is lax in fiscal management and reporting, it is often prevented from receiving funding in subsequent years from a federal agency. Therefore, honesty is the best policy.

Aside from being honest, a grant application should be concise, clear, and written for an educated layman. The style should be to the point, without any redundancy or noninformative statements. Every sentence in a grant application should help a reviewer understand your project and your organization's capacity to perform or should be responsive to review criteria. Repetition or "fluff" statements are not looked on favorably. It is very helpful to have a person who is not on your team read the application and mark statements that are vague. These can then be tuned up so your application has maximum clarity.

As mentioned above, applications are generally best written for the educated layman. This assumes the reviewer is well educated and generally familiar with your subject matter but is not a professional in your exact field. Your application should, therefore, either avoid or define jargon and acronyms and should clearly explain any technical portions of your design and work plan.

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