

# AmPhil

A GUIDE FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS:

## Elevate Your Grant Writing in 6 Steps



# Congratulations! Your quest to snag a foundation grant is well underway.

**YOU HAVE FIRED OFF A WINSOME LETTER OF INQUIRY (AND/OR SUCCESSFULLY DOWNLOADED GRANT PROPOSAL INSTRUCTIONS).**

**Before you the main event:** getting your foundation proposal accepted.

You're facing the tough reality that writing a grant proposal can take hours, even days. And if you fumble in the dark, taking a wild guess at what will catch foundations' eye, there's a significant chance those hours will be wasted.

**Let's explore the six things you need to do to ensure you're not wasting your grant-writing time and that the foundation eagerly accepts your proposal.**

# 1

## Include a strong cover letter and executive summary

**MOST FOUNDATIONS ARE OVERWHELMED WITH PROPOSALS, SO IT'S LIKELY THAT THE PERSON WHO REVIEWS YOUR PROPOSAL WILL BE LOOKING FOR A REASON TO REJECT IT.**

Don't give them that reason! Immediately make clear who you are, what you are asking for, and why.

That's what your cover letter and executive summary need to do. Use them to make a strong, concise case for support, including important details such as the amount and purpose of your request.

### **Remember:**

**A lot of the time, foundation decision-makers don't see your full proposal. The cover letter or executive summary might be the only piece of your writing they see—so make them stellar.**

# 2

## Give context for your request

**THIS IS COUNTERINTUITIVE, BUT YOU SHOULDN'T DIVE STRAIGHT INTO THE DETAILS, ENUMERATING WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO AND WHEN.**

**First, you need to answer two critical questions:** “Why are we doing this?” and “Why should you care?”

Don't assume the reader automatically knows who you are and why your mission matters. Take a step back and set the scene. What's the problem you're addressing? Why is it important? How is your organization well-suited to address said problem?

Unsure of whether you're answering these questions well? Try giving the proposal to someone outside of your organization who's relatively unfamiliar with your work. Does it make sense to them? Do they care about what you're pitching? Get candid feedback and modify the request accordingly.

# 3

## Customize the request to the foundation's requirements

### THIS STARTS WITH YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS.

Have you looked at the foundation's giving history, website, and other resources to see if your organization's work falls within the foundation's giving areas? If so, show that you've done your homework by mentioning specifics about the foundation's mission and giving and how you might fit into that picture.

And if a foundation has given you application forms or guidelines, don't just ignore them and do your own thing. That's annoying and gets you off on the wrong foot from the get-go.

**Here at AmPhil, we like to use the acronym ATFQ: Answer the Frickin' Question! Follow the guidelines carefully and ATFQ—and make it abundantly clear that you've done so.**

# 4

## Pass the straight-face test

**IT'S OKAY TO ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE BUT PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE DON'T JUST MAKE THINGS UP.**

Don't come up with a project out of left field for which you have zero qualifications just because you think a foundation might fund it. Don't include everything plus the kitchen sink in your project budget.

**Likewise, don't shoot yourself in the foot by dramatically underestimating the time and budget needed to execute your project.** Have an appropriate sense of humility in your approach and don't promise what you can't deliver.

If the grant is awarded, remember that you'll have to put the foundation's money where your proposal's mouth is. **Set appropriate, achievable, realistic goals from the start** so you're not setting yourself up for failure down the road.

# 5

## Pay attention to the details

**FEW PROPOSALS ARE LITERARY MASTERPIECES, BUT SLOPPY WRITING WILL ABSOLUTELY GET YOURS TOSSED IN THE TRASH.**

If you're not a talented writer, it's worth finding someone who is—even if you have to outsource this task in order to capture your vision in a clear, concise, compelling way.

**Be sure to proofread your materials thoroughly before sending to ensure that the text is free of typos and formatting gaffes, and that key information—such as the funder's name!—is accurate.**

Pay attention to the visual, too. The design of your proposals should convey a sense of competence and professionalism, highlighting the content and making it easy to skim and digest. That said, don't go overboard with your design. It should look polished, but not slick. Above all else, it should be easy to read.

# 6

## Remember that foundations are run by people

**FOUNDATIONS AREN'T STAFFED BY GHOSTS IN A MACHINE—THEY'RE RUN BY PEOPLE.** THEY MAY BE RUN BY THE DONORS THEMSELVES, BY FAMILY MEMBERS, OR BY PROFESSIONAL STAFF, BUT ALWAYS BY PEOPLE.

Think about this as you approach foundations and cultivate your relationship. As with any human relationship, you want to be polite, to listen, to be honest, to remember what they like and dislike, to show appreciation, and not to take their support for granted.

**This means communicating effectively.** Ask questions if you're confused. Say thank you if they give you a grant. Take note of proposal and report deadlines and be timely. If something goes awry, don't wait until your report is due to say that things didn't work out—contact your funder and figure out an alternative path forward.





## THAT'S A WRAP!

WRITING FOUNDATION GRANT PROPOSALS CAN BE A TIME-CONSUMING HEADACHE, BUT (WHEN CRAFTED WELL) THEY CAN HAVE A SPECTACULAR PAYOFF.

Follow the prior six tips to make sure that the time you invest doesn't go to waste!

Reach out to our Writing and Communications leader, **Iain Bernhoft**, with any additional burning questions about how to level-up your grant proposals or refine messaging for your mission-driven organization or business.



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