Secrets of Successful Grant Writing to Support Rural Special Education Programs

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Abstract

This article explains the process of identifying grant funding sources and writing a grant proposal and attempts to demystify the process as it relates to grant funding in special education and disability services. It offers a series of simple steps to help new or less experienced grant writers in locating funding agencies, reading and understanding the request for proposals, and preparing a competitive proposal. Each step includes suggestions for how anyone can become a more successful grant writer and reach the goal of having a project funded.

Key words: grant proposals, rural funding, disability funding, grant writing

Educators never have all the money they would like to support innovations, even with all the extra federal and state funding available in special education. Rural school systems and community agencies, as well as colleges and universities located in rural areas, often have greater needs; yet, they may have fewer resources. Public and private grant funds can be an important source of additional funding for seed money to develop, implement, and evaluate new models and programs. In fact, over the last several decades, many if not most of the truly innovative and exciting service delivery and personnel preparation programs in rural special education would not have been possible without extensive external funding.

If you are a new faculty member, a graduate student, a beginning teacher, or administrator, or even if you are just someone who has never tried your hand at grant writing before, like many aspiring grant writers, you may find the process somewhat intimidating. You may feel you do not have any ideas that could get funded or enough skills to write a convincing proposal. Perhaps you say to yourself "No one would ever give me a grant" or I can't compete with the big guys who get all the grants." This self-defeating thinking is just that—in fact, people like you get funded every year. Why? Because what funding agencies (and proposal review panels) value and reward are innovative ideas that address their priorities, well-thought-out plans to accomplish meaningful goals, qualified personnel and adequate resources to implement the project, and the determination to get it all done within a reasonable timeline and budget. In the right circumstances and given the right support, any professional, including you, can manage to do just that—but first you have to believe that you can.

The suggestions that follow are based on years of successful grant writing, teaching courses on grant writing for doctoral students at more than one university, and mentoring colleagues in writing grants. Grant writing is like playing a game of poker—you have to understand the cards you hold (innovative idea, expert personnel, management experience), pick up some stronger cards (collaborators, consultant services, support letters), and play your best hand (addressing agency priorities, following all guidelines, writing a clear and detailed proposal). No matter who you are or where you work, everyone already holds SOME cards and anyone CAN win at grant writing by following a few simple rules to play your hand well.

How to Develop Basic Grant Writing Skills

Successful grant writers are made, not born, and getting a proposal funded is based more on skill than on luck. Grant writing is a "craft," that anyone can master by developing and practicing specific skills (Henson, 2003). A doctorate is not needed to write a grant so teachers and administrators should try their hand at seeking funds to support school projects (McCabe, 2007). Novice grant writers should get help where available for activities, such as proposal writing, budget preparation, legal and compliance issues, and technical support for online submission (Glidewell & Oerly, 2012). Here are some suggestions for learning more about how to write grants.

1. Learn as much as you can about grant writing fundamentals. The more you know about grant writing, the more likely you will prepare a high quality proposal. Perhaps you can attend training sessions about grant writing offered by your own institution or by professional organizations at their conferences. You should read one or more of the many books about how to write grants. A list of books about various aspects of grant writing is provided in Table 1.

Look for the free live webinars or online tutorials about the grant proposal process for specific competitions offered by some federal agencies or by non-profit or for-profit groups. Some of these activities are available at no charge, while others may require that you pay a fee. A list of other resources for more information about grant writing is provided in Table 2.

2. Read other proposals for projects previously funded in the same competition. Some funding agencies publish abstracts or even narratives (never budgets!) of funded projects, while others may provide some samples if you request them. With government funding agencies, it may be possible to make a request for a specific federal proposal under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or a state proposal under "sunshine" laws, although it may take some time for the request to be processed and materials to be sent. You can ask

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Table 1.

Books About Grant Writing

Bauer, D. G. (2011). *The "how-to" grants manual: Successful grantseeking techniques for obtaining public and private grants* (7th ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.

Brewer, E. W., & Achilles, C. (2007). *Finding funding: Grantwriting from start to finish, including project management and Internet use* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Browning, B. A. (2015). *Grant writing for dummies* (5th ed.). New York: John Wiley.

Browning, B. (2007). *Perfect phrases for writing grant proposals.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Carlson, M., O'Neal-McElrath, T. (2008). *Winning grants step by step.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Coley, S. M., & Scheinberg, C. A. (2013). *Proposal writing: Effective grantsmanship* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

Gerin, G. H., Kapelewski, C., Itinger, J. B., & Spruill, T. (2010). *Writing the NIH grant proposal: A step-by-step guide* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Giddings, M. (2011). *4 steps to funding: Avoid rejection and get your grant funded on the next try with this simple step formula.* Boise, ID: Marketing Your Science.

Henson, K. T. (2004). *Grant writing in higher education: A step-by-step guide.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Howlett, S. (2011). *Getting funded: The complete guide to writing grant proposals* (5th ed.). Seattle: Word & Raby Publishing.

Karsh, E., & Fox, A. S. (2009). *The only grant-writing book you'll ever need: Top grant writers and grant givers share their secrets* (3rd ed.). New York; Carroll & Graf Publishers.

Koch, D. S. (2009). *How to say it: Grantwriting: Write proposals that grantmakers want to fund.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Licklider, M. M. (Ed.). (2012). *Grant seeking in higher education: Strategies and tools for college faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Locke, L. F., Spirduso, W. W., & Silverman, S. J. (2013). *Proposals that work: A guide for planning dissertations and grant proposals* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Miner, J. T., & Miner, L. E. (2008). *Proposal planning and writing* (4th ed.). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

O'Neal-McElwrath, T. (2014). *Winning grants step-by-step: The complete workbook for pkanning, developing, and writing winning proposals* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pequegnat, W., Stover, E., & Boyce, C. A. (2010). *How to write a successful research grant application: A guide for social and behavioral scientists* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.

Ping, L. (2012). *Having success with NSF: A practical guide.* New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Shore, A. R., & Carfora, J. M. (2011). *The art of funding and implementing ideas: A guide to proposal development and project management.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Smith, N. B., & Works, E. G. (2012). *The complete book of grant writing: Learn to write grants like a professional* (2nd ed.). Napierville, IL: Sourcebooks.

Taylor, C. (2009). *Granted: A teacher's guide to writing & winning classroom grants.* Chandler, AZ: Five Star Publications.

Thompson, W. (2007). *The complete idiot's guide to grant writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Alpha Books.

Wasin, S. (2014). *Webster's new world grant writing handbook.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Yang, O. O. (2013). *Guide to effective grant writing: How to write a successful NIH grant application* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer.

other grant writers if they would be willing to show you a funded proposal; in the small world of rural special education, colleagues across the country are often remarkably generous in sharing their proposals with others.

3. Locate all available grant writing supports. Like many schools, service agencies, or colleges and universities offer grant writing assistance, your institution may provide assistance for grant writing efforts. As a prospective grant

Table 2.

Other Resources for Grant Writing

Federal Government Agencies
The Department of Education offers information about grant processes at http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/about/grantmaking/index.html and available grant programs at http://www.ed.gov/fund/grants-apply.html.
The Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) offers information about education research funding opportunities at http://ies.ed.gov/funding/ and special education research funding opportunities at http://ies.ed.gov/funding/ncser_progs.asp, and webinars on writing research grants at http://ies.ed.gov/funding/webinars.
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) offer a series of tutorials about every aspect of the research grant writing process at http://www.nlm.nih.gov/ep/Tutorial.html, a video of the grant review process at http://www.csr.nih.gov/video/video.asp, and resources for new investigators at http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/new_investigators/index.htm.
The National Science Foundation (NSF) offers a Grant Proposal Guide at http://www.nsf.gov/publications/pub_summ.jsp?ods_key=gpg, a Guidebook on Evaluation at http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/start.htm, and suggestions for preparing the proposal at http://www.nsf.gov/funding/preparing/.
The National Institutes on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) offers information about research finding opportunities at http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/nidrr/index.html?exp=2
Non-profit and For-profit Agencies
Foundation Center offers a free Proposal Writing Short Course at http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/shortcourse/index.html.
The Teacher's Network offers free resources for grant writers at http://teachersnetwork.org/Grants/Howto.
SchoolGrants offers free resources for grant writers at http://www.k12grants.org.
The School Funding Center offers a searchable database of grant programs for K-12 schools at http://www.schoolfundingcenter.info.
Castle Technology offers a tutorial on writing grants to fund classroom technology at http://www.castletechnology.com/PDF/grantwriting.pdf.
Grants4Teachers offers a searchable database of grant programs for classroom teaching projects at http://www.grants4teachers.com.
American Grant Writers' Association offers training and consulting services at http://www.agwa.us.
Grant Professionals Association offers training and consulting services at http://grantprofessionals.org.

writer, you may be able to access a range of supports, such as workshops, online tutorials, mentors, and proposal writers. You also may be able to get funding to travel to regional or national grant writing training events or enroll in webinars or courses. You should take advantage of whatever level of help you feel will be beneficial in planning the project or preparing the proposal.

4. Seek out grant writing mentors. Individuals who are successful grant writers (especially those who have had a funded project in the same competition) or who have served as reviewers for funding agencies (again, especially if it is the same agency or competition) can offer you many useful ideas for developing a proposal. People where you work and elsewhere in the field may agree to share a copy of a full proposal or some specific components (e.g., a sanitized budget with identifying information removed or a project management chart) that you can use as an exemplar. Your employer may even be willing to pay an honorarium to a local or national mentor to provide you with more extensive assistance.

5. Start small and work your way up. If you are approaching grant writing for the first time, perhaps you should consider trying for a small grant rather than a large one; if you are successful in gaining funding, you will gain the confidence to try for a longer proposal or higher funding. Some funding agencies even expect applicants to do that and have structured their competitions so that you can prepare separate and sequential applications that start with a pilot project, move to a demonstration project, then extend with a scale-up project or dissemination project. Or, ask a colleague if you can collaborate on a planned project and take responsibility for preparing a specific part of the proposal and/or assist in writing other parts. Planning a project and drafting a proposal with others allows you to learn useful tips and get helpful feedback from successful grant writers that will develop your skills for future solo efforts.

How to Plan a Grant Proposal

Special educators are fortunate in that there are many sources of funding to support new initiatives. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes funding

Table 3.

Selected Public and Private Sources of Grant Funding

Public Grant Sources
The U.S. Department of Education discretionary grants are listed at http://www.ed.gov/grantapps, with programs offered through the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) listed at http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/funding.html.
The U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (IES) research grants are listed at http://ies.ed.gov/funding, with programs offered through the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) listed at http://ies.ed.gov/funding/ncser_progs.asp.
The U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grants are listed at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fipsecomp/index.html.
The U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality Enhancement grants are listed at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/heatqp/index.html.
The U.S. Department of Education Small Rural School Achievement Program grants are listed at http://www2.ed.gov/programs/reapsrsa/index.html.
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Institutes of Heath grants are listed at http://grants.nih.gov/grants/oer.htm.
The National Science Foundation Grants are listed at http://www.nsf.gov/funding/.
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Children & Families grants are listed at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/grants.
The U.S. Department of Agriculture grants for rural communities are listed at http://ric.nal.usda.gov/funding-resources.
Private Grant Sources
The National Education Association (NEA) Foundation offers grants for teachers at http://www.neafoundation.org/pages/grants-to-educators/.
The W. K Kellogg Foundation offers grants for education with a rural focus at http://www.wkkf.org/what-we-support/what-we-support.aspx.
The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation offers grants for education and community services at http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/General-Information/Grant-Opportunities.
The Walmart Foundation offers grants for education at http://foundation.walmart.com/apply-for-grants/.
The Verizon Foundation offers grants for education at http://www.verizonfoundation.org/grants/.
The Toshiba America Foundation offers grants for education at http://www.toshiba.com/taf.
Hewlett Packard offers grants for technology for teaching at http://www.hp.com/hpinfo/socialinnovation/us/programs/tech_teaching/index.html.

specific to special education and related services made available through the U. S. Office of Special Education Programs and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) that can be tapped by local and state education agencies or colleges and universities (Mehring & Schwenn, 2010). Special educators, however, also have access to funded programs provided by the other government agencies and private foundations that focus their support on educational programs, rehabilitation and health services, exceptionalities, or rural communities. A list of the major public and private funding agencies with competitions related to rural special education and disability services is provided in Table 3. Some grants are based on formula (also known as block) funds, where designated recipients are all but guaranteed funding if they submit a reasonable proposal, while others are based on discretionary funds, which require a formal review with scoring of all submitted proposals to select the highest ranked for funding. Formula (also known as block) grants (e.g., OSEP awards funding to all states annually to support professional development for inservice personnel) are not usually competitive, but sometimes only a specified number of designated recipients will receive funds in a single round.

Thorough and detailed knowledge about the funding agency is fundamental to writing a grant proposal. "Proactive grant seeking" requires learning everything possible about the agency's funding priorities and proposal requirements to

focus effort and increase the chances of success (Bauer, 2011). Proactive grant writers look for multiple funders who may align with the project while reactive funders focus on a single funder whether or not it aligns with the project (Smith & Works, 2012). The designated competition officer or manager can be a valuable source of information about the agency's priorities and criteria (Licklider, 2012). Here are some suggestions for finding the funding agency that is the best match for the project.

1. Start with a creative solution to a pressing need. This many seem obvious, but the proposal cannot be planned and written until there is a project to propose, so your first step is to consider the needs in your institution or community and how you can design a project to address them. In most cases, you will already have a project in mind that addresses the many urgent needs in rural special education and disability services, but funding agencies want to give their money to the most innovative proposals and the ones most likely to produce results. So you need to consider how to document that this need is urgent and even more important than other needs as well as how to demonstrate that your project is not only an innovative approach but also will have a significant impact on addressing that need.

2. Search out available funding from multiple sources. Keep in mind that your prospects for obtaining funding are better for some projects than for others or with some funding agencies than with others. Discretionary grants are often extremely competitive (e.g., in some national competitions, there may be 200 applicants for 20 awards, with funded proposals distinguished from unfunded proposals by tenths of a point) so the chances of getting your project funded are much less certain. If you seek funding in such competitions, you need to become quite knowledgeable about the funding agency's priorities and skilled in addressing the required components. Even in formula funding, however, preparing a high quality proposal may help you acquire funding earlier or at a higher amount. By considering different funding agencies, you increase the chances of finding one that is right for your project.

3. Select a competition that represents a good match between the proposed project's goals and the funding agency's priorities. ALL funding agencies are focused on what their priorities are and what types of projects they are interested in funding rather than on the needs or goals of the projects people propose for them to fund. You can learn about the agency's priorities by reading the guidelines for funding as well as the agency's mission as outlined on their website. You may even find a list of projects funded in prior years. The more closely your project aligns with their priorities and the more your project resembles others they have previously funded, the better your chances of getting funded. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you read the funding guidelines: Am I working in or with an institution of higher education, school system, or community agency that is eligible to receive funds in this competition? Is the community in which I intend to implement the project included within the geographic area (national, state, local) served by the funding agency? Are the funding agency's priorities aligned with goals or outcomes for the proposed project? Does my project include components that can be competitive with other proposals likely to be submitted to this competition? If you are uncertain whether your project is aligned with the priorities, you should contact a funding agency representative to discuss your idea and plans and get feedback that will help you determine (a) if this is the best funding source for the project and (b) how to match the planned project to the priorities of the funding agency as closely as possible.

4. Read the Request for Proposals carefully. The Request for Proposals (RFP) is a document that outlines important information about the grant competition and may include specific forms that must be completed and submitted. You should read the RFP from start to finish as soon as it becomes available. Use a highlighter to note important points, such as the priority, the allowable budget total, the page limits, and the deadline for submission. Tag certain sections of the proposal that you can use when writing the proposal (e.g., terminology, section headings, templates for components like budgets or personnel charts). It can be helpful to contact the competition's manager to get answers to any questions you may have about the RFP or to discuss how your planned project may meet the competition's priorities.

5. Study the funding agency's review process and criteria. Both public and private funding agencies typically conduct a formal review by requesting feedback from field reviewers (who are experts in the discipline) and agency staff (who manage the competition) based on detailed guidelines. These guidelines often include specific point values for components of the proposal. The typical field review panel includes people who have complementary expertise directly relevant to the competition's priorities, may be representative of diverse groups (ethnic groups, disability conditions, geographic areas, professional roles), and sometimes have prior experience with the funding agency or competition (as grantees or reviewers). You definitely should read the reviewer guidelines, which are often included in the RFP or made publicly available on the web site, to learn as much as you can about how your proposal will be judged. You also may find it helpful to become a reviewer for the funding agency, if possible, so you get a better sense of what field reviewers and project officers look for and what successful proposals look like.

6. Assess potential competitors. The more prestigious the grant and the higher the funding level, the more proposals will be submitted and the more highly qualified the grant writers are likely to be. You should consider who else will probably submit a proposal. Read the section of the RFP that indicates the number of projects the agency is likely to fund —if that number is very low and the size of the monetary award is quite high, the competition will be fierce. In the case of very specialized competitions, such as those for a national center (e.g., a research center on universal design for learning, a technical assistance project on transition to post-secondary education), you already may know the individuals and agencies that have a significant track record in the area who will be seeking these funds. Consider how competitive you, your institution, and your idea will be when compared with these competitors and what steps you may be able to take to strengthen your proposal. If you decide to pursue this funding source, do whatever you can (e.g., collaboration with

others, greater contribution of matching funds, more products for dissemination) to increase your proposal's chances.

7. Identify key and support personnel early. Every project needs key personnel (those who will assume responsibilities for implementing project) as well as support personnel (those who will provide assistance by virtue of their existing roles in the organization). Most projects (whether a research study, a model program, or a service activity) will require the expertise of more than one person and support from many individuals and agencies. Plan to build a powerful team to develop the proposal and conduct the project. Your proposal will be stronger and your project will be more likely to succeed if you secure participation of individuals who have qualifications that complement and extend your own abilities. For an online training program, you can support your content knowledge with someone who has technical expertise in instructional technologies. When it is a research project, your research skills might be enhanced by assistance from a consulting statistician. If you are a novice grant writer, you may want to add a co-author who has substantial experience and documented success in grant writing.

8. Plan your work and work your plan. Note the proposal submission date and plan as far in advance as you can so you have plenty of time to get everything done before the submission due date. If you are looking for funding for a project, you can begin to keep a file of project ideas, professional literature references, resources that you can pull out when you find a competition that fits. If you have already identified a funding agency and know the target competition is typically announced at a certain time of year, begin working well in advance to plan the project and gather documents. Prepare a timeline of activities you will need to accomplish to have a completed proposal ready for submission on or before the due date. If your institution requires earlier submission for review and approval prior to submission, be sure to include those processes and due dates in the timeline.

How to Develop a Grant Proposal

A grant proposal is the document that presents the project to the funding agency. The proposal is the tool used not only to plan the project and request funding but also becomes a blueprint to develop, implement, and evaluate a funded project (Shore & Carfora, 2011). The proposal must focus on details and include all of the information and supporting documentation required by the funding agency (Mehring & Schwenn, 2010). Preparing a grant proposal can be a challenging activity, since it involves preparing a narrative and supporting documentation, coordinating team responsibilities in some cases, and managing time and effort to meet deadlines (Campbell & Carter, n.d.). Here are some suggestions for developing the most critical components of a proposal.

1. Establish a few well-defined goals with supporting objectives. The goals and objectives serve as the foundation for the proposed project. Project goals should state important but measurable outcomes that can reasonably be accomplished within the timeframe of the project period and with the personnel, facilities, and equipment to be funded by the grant. The objectives for each goal should show measurable sub-steps or sub-components that must be achieved to produce the outcome. Once goals and objectives have been set, you can use them to development of the action plan and budget, secure consultants, and request support letters.

2. Prepare an action plan to show how the project will accomplish its goals. The action plan (also called the management plan or plan of activities) provides an explanation of how the proposed project will use all resources to accomplish and evaluate its outcomes—it is the heart of the proposal. This section needs to convince the agency and reviewers that the project is well thought out and ready to be implemented competently as soon as the money is made available. It is impossible to provide too much detail in the action plan, although there may be space constraints if the funding source has set page limits on the proposal. You should provide sufficient detail in the action plan about every aspect of the project. Leave nothing to the understanding or imagination of a field reviewer or project officer; assume that some readers may have minimal expertise in the area of research or program development that is the focus on the proposal. You need to convince them that you know exactly what needs to be done, have the people and resources in place to do it all, and are only waiting for the funding to get started. You can enhance this section by the use of figures that display relationships between proposed project components, such as organizational charts, timelines, tables and matrices, and graphs, diagrams, and flowcharts.

3. Prepare a thorough but reasonable budget. It is helpful to prepare a draft budget before the proposal is written to assist you in determining whether the project is feasible. First, review the information in the RFP about the maximum amount of funding available. Next, determine what percentage your institution requires to be set aside for financial and administrative (F&A) costs (also known as indirect costs), then calculate that amount and deduct it from the maximum amount of funding to determine what is left for the direct costs of implementing the project. If the funding agency places any constraints on how money can be spent (e.g., a specific percentage to be set aside for student scholarships, a ratio of cost sharing or matching funds to be contributed by the funding agency and the funded institution, or disallowing specific line items such as facilities or equipment), consider how that will affect project activities. Finally, outline a preliminary budget that lists specific line items in each of the major budget categories, such as personnel salary and fringes, participant support, travel, contractual services, facilities/equipment/supplies, and communication/dissemination. Insert the actual costs (or a close estimate) for each item and calculate the total cost. In the unlikely event that you have not yet reached the total available for direct costs, you can increase amounts or add other items until you come as close as you can to the available amount. In the more likely event that your budget exceeds the total available funds, you will need to reduce amounts or delete items to reach the available amount. If the available funds cannot support your project, you will need to either re-conceptualize it or find another funding agency. Once the proposal has been completed, you can finalize the budget and prepare a thorough and convincing justification that explains what each cost represents and how it is critical to accomplishing project goals and activities. Remember that reviewers are not familiar with the context

in which you work and will apply their own frame of reference when judging the budget unless you provide one for them.

4. Make a strong argument for the value of the proposed project. The opening section (typically called a statement of the need or problem) presents evidence of a need and how the project is designed to address it. Most funding agencies and the reviewers who read and judge grant proposals assign considerable weight to the need statement, so you should establish a significant need aligned with funding agency priorities. The needs statement is most convincing when it presents current data on the extent of the problem in the national and local contexts, information and citation from the current professional literature and news media documenting consensus on the urgency of the problem, and the extent to which the outcomes will support the funding agency's priorities A proposal for research funding may focus on establishing new knowledge and its broader implications for the evidence-based practice in special education, while a proposal for training funds may focus on the impact of additional personnel on services to students with exceptionalities It is vital to establish a compelling rationale for the critical problem that your project is designed to address if only the funding agency will provide some money. Although this is the first section of the proposal, it can generally be written late in the process where it can be used to provide a rationale and supporting evidence for the various components of the project to follow.

5. Secure support letters and institutional permissions early. When the goals and objectives and action plan have been drafted, you should contact individuals and organizations from whom some documentation is needed. Since it may take time for the person or agency to accommodate your request, the sooner this is done, the better to ensure everything is available by the time the proposal must be assembled and submitted. For support letters, make a personal contact as early as you can with each potential supporter by email or telephone to request the letter, then send them a one-page abstract of the project with the program goals and benefits to them or the group they represent. You also may wish to attach a draft letter outlining the points you need or want them to make and suggesting they make whatever changes they want; many supporters will simply copy this text onto their letterhead and add a signature line. If some supporters have written a support letter for a previous proposal, you may send them a copy of the letter to update and send back to you. For institutional approvals of research projects (such as the Institutional Review Board [IRB] for the Protection of Human Subjects) or commitments to use of facilities or equipment (such as design of a web site for the project or access to the online learning management system), you should contact the representative to get information about the request process and any applicable deadlines. In some cases, such permissions may take several weeks, so be sure to complete these tasks early on, especially when the funding agency requires the approval to be submitted with the proposal.

6. Obtain supporting documentation. Most, if not all, proposals will include appendices that contain documents that offer additional information to support the proposal. The most common documents include the following: (a) a curriculum vitae or resume for all key personnel or a detailed job description for key positions to be hired after the grant is funded; (b) sample materials to be used in implementing the project, such as course syllabi or internship manuals; (c) questionnaires or interview protocols for research; (d) lists of specific resources to be purchased; and (e) descriptions of field sites. If you are using existing documents, it may be a simple matter to collect them, but if you need to revise some documents or prepare new documents, you also may need to know whether review and approvals by others is required before they can be submitted with the proposal.

How to Prepare and Submit a Proposal

The proposal is a formal document that presents the project for the funding agency's consideration. Grant writing is like advertising–it focuses on persuading someone to pay money for the project as the primary goal (Browning, 2014). Getting and keeping the attention of the reviewers by including the right level of detail and making the narrative interesting to read is another important goal for the grant writer (Yang, 2013). The well-written proposal describes the project well enough for others to evaluate its chances of success and uses terminology that matches language in the RFP (e.g., plan of action versus management plan, scholars or trainees; Bart, 2009) but does not over-hyper the project, promise more than can be delivered, or use jargon or acronyms (Jakob, Porter, Podoas, Johnson, & Vessey, 2010). To ensure that the final proposal includes all information required by the agency, it can be helpful to construct and follow a checklist of required components and documentation (Karsh & Fox, 2009). Here are some suggestions for writing a proposal that is clear and easy to read.

1. Apply the KISS principle. You can prepare an effective proposal when you follow the time-worn rule to" Keep It Simple, Stupid." Reviewers have multiple proposals to read and evaluate and generally only a brief period in which to get it all done, so you should make it as easy as possible for them to find the information they need and understand how it meets the funding agency's criteria. In general, you should devote more narrative and greater detail to sections that can earn higher points (e.g., if the problem/need statement is worth 20 points and the evaluation plan is worth 10 points, put more time and care into the first). You must make sure that the reviewers have access to ALL the information they need to understand the project and evaluate the proposal fairly and positively. Anticipate what reviewers might ask as they are reading the proposal and include the answers to them in the narrative; consider asking someone not familiar with the project to read the proposal and identify areas that need clarification. When assembling materials to include in appendices, stay focused. Identify what will matter most to reviewers when assigning points; trim resumes to address the person's accomplishments most directly relevant to the project, and reduce course syllabi to include information, such as learning outcomes, the sequence of required activities, and a few key policies.

2. Use meaningful headings and subheadings. You should incorporate headings and subheadings that guide the reviewers through the narrative and assist them in identifying the information they need to assess the project's quality and

alignment with agency priorities. Where possible, you should use the titles of the components identified by the funding agency as essential for the proposal or for which points will be awarded so the reviewers can find the information quickly and easily. For the headings and sub-headings, you should choose wording that reflects the required components outlined in the RFP or the criteria for evaluation.

3. Write in a direct, concise style. Write in a way that is organized, logical, succinct, and, of course, persuasive, supporting key points with appropriate references to the professional literature. Use active voice and basic vocabulary and sentence structure that helps the reviewers to visualize participants engaging in activities across the time sequence of events. Here are some examples: It is easier for someone to picture the project director mailing out flyers than to know what happens in distribution of announcements or to imagine the research team using smartphones to record interviews with graduates than to understand what is meant by technology-mediated evaluations. Watch out for long complicated sentences, jargon or other unfamiliar terms, and unnecessary words adjective and adverbs.

4. Be mindful of page or character limits. Many funding agencies set page limits for the proposal narrative and appendices that address paper submissions or electronic document submission) or character limits (for online submission). The purpose of such limits is to ensure a level playing field for all participants and the project officer will delete or direct reviewers to ignore any sections that go beyond those limits, which can result in a loss of points. Make note of page or character limits when planning the proposal. If your narrative exceeds the number of pages or words specified by the funding agency, you can edit it by cutting out any extraneous words and replacing longer words with shorter ones (flyers rather than announcements), substitute acronyms for terms (SWDs for students with disabilities). Make every word count!

5. Follow the submission directions precisely. The RFP outlines how, when and where the proposal must be submitted and what components must be included. More and more funding agencies are using online submission systems, which may require typing or copying and pasting into textboxes as well as uploading attachments in specific file formats. Read the guidelines carefully, and get technical assistance, if necessary. If original signatures are needed on some documents, make sure you know how they can be transmitted. For online submissions, you should target a day before the final due date so you have enough time to resolve any problems that occur during the submission process. Before you put the envelope in the mail or hit the online Submit button, check all components one last time to make sure all documentation is included in the correct order or location.

What to Do After Proposal Submission

Writing the proposal is just the beginning—not the end. When a proposal is funded, there are many complex tasks to complete from negotiating the final award to implementing the project (Quick & New, 2000). When a proposal is not funded, there is the next proposal to write, using reviewer scores and comments to improve the contents (Markin, 2013). Rejection is inevitable at some point in a grant writing career and should be seen as an essential step in the process that leads to a successful funded proposal (Henson, 2003). Here are some suggestions for participating in the review and approval process.

1. Be patient while you wait. The time from submission of the proposal to the notice of the award can be many months, so you need to find other activities to occupy their time while waiting to hear whether your project has been funded. There may be activities that can be completed prior to funding that will enable you to get the project up and running more quickly if funded or write an improved proposal if not funded. Or, you can spend some time searching for alternate sources of support from your own institution or other funding agencies to assist in implementing the project.

2. Agree to make changes if needed. If the funding agency initiates a negotiation process and offers to fund the project contingent upon making specific changes recommended by the reviewers or mandates reductions in specific budget items or the total funding amount, be open to change. When you are contacted by the program officer, listen carefully to the suggestions, be accommodating in making modifications to your action plan or budget, and focus on securing the funding rather than getting your own way. The best proposal is the funded proposal—not only do you get to implement the project but you also have a funded grant to use as evidence to support your skills when writing future proposals.

3. Celebrate success! It is no small achievement to have a proposal rated highly and a project receive funding, no matter the amount. Many successful grant writers have established rituals to relish the satisfaction of achieving the goal. If you are lucky enough to get notification of a grant award from the funding agency, break out the champagne (or other special beverage), treat yourself to a favorite meal at home or in a restaurant, or take some time off for a fun activity to enjoy the rewards of all your hard work. Or, if you had collaborators in preparing the proposal, invite them to a celebratory event. And don't forget to thank anyone who served as a mentor or provided other key assistance to you during proposal development and submission.

4. Get down to business. With confirmation of funding comes the expectation that the project will be implemented as outlined in the proposal. If you are like most grant writers, you have planned to accomplish a lot with limited resources and in a short timeline. There will be much to do to get the project up and running and moving to a successful outcome, so plot a new timeline based on the action plan and start working.

5. Learn from your mistakes. Even when a proposal is not funded, it is a valuable learning experience. Whether this is your first attempt at writing a grant proposal or you are an experienced grant writer with a history of multiple funded projects, whenever you submit a proposal to a new competition, it may take you some time to find the best way to match project goals and agency priorities to secure funds. The feedback provided by reviewers is a valuable resource that can be used when preparing future proposals for the same project as well as for other projects. Whether you intend to revise and submit the same proposal for the next funding cycle in the same competition or you plan to develop a different proposal for another competition, you can learn a lot from the

reviewer's comments. The strengths they identify are components you should retain and use again, while weaknesses are areas you need to address now and avoid in future. Keep in mind that it is this process of submission–feedback–revision that will hone your skills as a grant writer and result in a funded project at some future time.

6. Resolve to try again. Failure is inevitable in grant writing–even the most experienced grant writers with a history of multiple funded projects may not get funded, especially when the competition is tough. Grant writers are made, not born, and grant writing skills are honed in repeated efforts to write grants, learn from reviews, and resubmit following feedback. Many (perhaps even all) highly successful grant writers did not get funding on their first attempt and maybe not even on their second attempt. When you receive the reviewers' scores and comments, take time to read them through and make notes on changes you can make to the project or the proposal to use in the next attempt. You may learn that your idea is sound, but it needs to be fleshed out in more detail. Or, you may find the project is not aligned with this agency's priorities, and you need to look for others more compatible with your goals.

Final Thoughts

Many educators are intimidated by the grant writing process, but, if you BELIEVE IN YOURSELF and your ability to write a winning grant proposal, you WILL SUCCEED, if not at first, then at least after some experience. Grant writers are made, not born, and every successful grant writer was once a beginner just like you. Grant writing is a skill like any other, learned and refined through practice, practice, and more practice. As all poker players know, gambling can be addictive (often in a destructive way), but, when you win funds, grant writing is equally addictive (but in a constructive way), so as your skills improve, you will want to compete for higher stakes and against more skilled players.

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