

Grant Writing Demystified

Valuable Tips for New & Seasoned Writers¹

- **Trends in Foundation Giving**
- **Project Funding Tips**
- **Grant Writing Resources**

Trends in Foundation Giving

- More emphasis is being placed on evaluation and knowing how to recognize or measure accomplishments. To be competitive, you must be able to measure your outcomes (impact), not just your outputs (activities).
- Foundations are showing continued preference for targeted philanthropy.
- Many foundations are engaging in proactive philanthropy strategies, determining causes they wish to impact and finding trusted nonprofits with which to partner.
- Budgets and financial statements are not an afterthought. Increasingly, foundations look at your financials as a study of your project planning, strategy, and feasibility. Some funders read your proposal backwards, beginning with the budget.
- Foundations are enhancing their due diligence processes with the growing prevalence of AI and scams.
- Many foundations are exceeding annual payout requirements, indicating desire to create timely, expanded impact as high quality projects are proposed by nonprofit partners.
- There is continued interest in collaborative programs. At the very least, applicants should indicate their awareness of other like organizations and parallel initiatives.
- 66% of grants are designated for specific programs or initiatives while 33% are more flexible and granted for general operating costs or greatest need. It remains important to research specific foundations to understand clearly their individual mission, philanthropy targets and grant guidelines.
- Many foundations are seeking ways beyond granting to support partners such as connecting them to other potential funders, convening peers doing similar work, and providing training/education or other needed resources.

¹ Thank you to Tom Linfield, retired Vice President, Community Impact, Madison Community Foundation, Madison, WI for permission to make extensive use of his publication Grant Writing Demystified.

- Considering the rapid development of AI use, review a funder's AI-related guidelines before deciding whether and how to use AI responsibly in grant proposals.

TrendsSources: Versacare Foundation grant strategies 2026; Foundation Source "2025 Report on Private Philanthropy", Foundant "The 2026 Mid-Year Check-in: What's Held, What's Shifted, and What's Next"

PROJECT Funding Tips

Have Your Finances in Order

No matter how noble your project, appeals to funders' hearts do not win competitive grants:

- Applying to a foundation for funding is similar to approaching an equity investor to make a financial investment in your organization.
- If you are not already tracking your organization's income and expenses formally every month you need to do so.
- The foundation will review your financial statements to assess your financial health, but also to make inferences about your leadership and past decision making.
- Financial statements for tax-exempt organizations help you solve problems, help you identify opportunities, and demonstrate your strengths in support of a grant. The main three types of financial statements are profit and loss statements, cash flow budgets, and if your annual revenue exceeds \$250,000, balance sheet or statement of financial position.

Communication – External

- Seek internal partnership (departmental) and external partnerships (alliances, like organizations, media) to support the project's goals.
- Communicate plans, mission, assets, and success stories with your funding community before, during and after project application.

Planning

- Build a well-designed project and prove to the funder that it has a strong foundation and a plan for sustainability. Ask the difficult questions of your peers *before* the funder asks them (e.g., What will it really cost? Who will do the work? Are the resources in place?).
- Design a realistic timeline. Many foundations take 3-6 months to make decisions. Can you begin before full project funding is secured? Will the project still be as worthwhile to audiences in 2 years?
- Create a business plan. If you cannot identify viable funding sources (individual, corporate, foundation) that exceed your project need, you may stall in your efforts before you reach your goal.

Cultivation of Foundation Relationships

- Use your network – try to get introductions to the decision-maker(s) in the foundation. If you are unsuccessful in finding a connection, try reaching out anyway with a

thoughtful question. The earlier you can begin a dialogue, the greater the likelihood that you will fully understand what the foundation is looking for in an award-winning project, the better you will be able to emphasize points of interest when you tell your story in the application, and the more likely someone will recognize your name or organization's name when the review process begins.

- Nurture an authentic relationship with your funder. Keep them in the loop on your plans, adaptations, and successes.
- Let the funder, and other stakeholders, know of your success. Judiciously share materials that chronicle your progress – participant comments, Web site usage, photos, articles, a final report, impact of project on the public, impact on your organization, etc. Use this information to establish a track record and make the case for new projects as well.
- If they are willing, seek the assistance of your funder in leveraging additional funding. While corporations might prefer exclusivity, foundations appreciate multiple funders. Matching funds double or triple the foundation's investment in your organization. Many foundations are now requiring matching funds as a condition of eligibility.
- If a project is only of local interest and impact, it is rare a national funder will support it. Focus on the local funding community. A local community foundation can be a great partner in raising awareness of your organization or project within the philanthropic community.
- Find ways to appeal to national funders, even if you're focused on a seemingly local project. For instance, model a project that can be replicated by other organizations in phase two of the project. Or consider partnering with several other organizations and sharing the workload (e.g., one designs project structure, another maintains your web presence, another develops extended outreach plan).

Mission Match is Critical

The match between your project's intended outcome and the mission of the granting organization is the strongest indicator of a potential grant application's success. Your writing skills and impactful project cannot overcome a mission mismatch. The rare exception may occur when you have a champion within the foundation who is a decision-maker or had extraordinary influence over the decision-makers (founder, CEO, founding family member, etc.).

Be Careful What You Wish For

Corporations are often looking to polish their social responsibility image when awarding community grants. These grants may be conditionally linked to opportunities for the company to bring some of their employees to your project for a "volunteer day" where they can get great photos of their team in logo apparel and get good media coverage. These situations can create more work for you in the end and may or may not bring the kind of attention you desire for your project. Larger corporate grants usually come with expectations of promotional

opportunities for their brand (social media shoutouts, company logo placed prominently on materials or signage) and have intensive reporting requirements.

GRANT WRITING RESOURCES

Candid – www.candid.org

Searchable database of more than 850,000 non-profit organizations. Includes many 990 forms. Many public libraries have subscription-level access. To find your nearest access point, visit <https://candid.org/resources/candid-near-you/>

Council on Foundations – www.cof.org

Provides information and links to private, corporate, and community foundations.

GrantStation – www.grantstation.com

A paid subscription service matching grantees with grantors.

GrantWatch – www.grantwatch.com

A modestly priced platform for grant seeking, writing, and tracking.

Instrumentl - www.instrumentl.com

A paid subscription service matching grantees with grantors.

Writing for Business and Pleasure – Grants – <http://www.wilbers.com/grants.htm>

A site with good tips and links to helpful articles.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy – www.philanthropy.com

The newspaper of the non-profit world. Some areas are for Chronicle subscribers only. Subscriptions come with free access to GrantStation, a resource for searching government and private foundation opportunities.

The Grantsmanship Center – www.tgci.com

Site designed to help nonprofit organizations and government agencies write better grant proposals. Site provides a collection of over 800 proposals, available for a fee.