Proposal Writing Resources

The following are some resources to assist you in understanding and undertaking the proposal process.

**Foundation Center Tutorials:**

Free tutorials are available from the Foundation Center. These tutorials will introduce you to the world of foundations, proposal writing, and more.

**Grantseeking Basics** – A one-hour webinar providing an overview of the funding research process for nonprofit organizations seeking grants from foundations, corporations, and grantmaking public charities.

**Proposal Writing Short Course** – Describes how to prepare a funding proposal, including the planning, research, and cultivation of foundation and corporate donors. (Available in English, French, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish)

**Proposal Budgeting Basics** – The basics of developing a project budget. (Available in English and Spanish)

Several Federal Government agencies also provide advice and instruction on crafting a grant proposal.

**Proposal Tips – Planning and Preparation Stage:**

You have an idea for a new program, a new course, for a summer of research, or for a project in which your students can be involved. You need outside funding to turn your idea into a reality, but don’t know where to begin. Here are a few general tips for planning and preparing a funding request:

**Planning:**

Often the best first step is to make an outline or write a one-page description of what you want to do to help you clarify your goals and objectives. It will also assist the University Grants Writer in helping you identify potential sources of funding.

Answering the following questions can assist you in focusing your planning:

- What do you intend to do?
- Why is the work important? To whom is the work important?
- What difference will it make?
- What has already been done and/or written in this area?
- What work do you need to do (what activities) to achieve your goals?
- When do you intend to do the work? Is it time sensitive?
- What do you need to do the work?
**Preparation:**
1. Decide which funding agency and program is best suited to your project. Your plans need to match the foundation’s goals. Every grant funding source has its own specific goals and priorities that guide their funding investments, so the closer your plan is aligned with their interests and goals, the better your chances to secure support will be.

   The University Grants Writer can assist you in finding potential funding sources.

   Remember, if you have not already done so, submit a completed, signed [External Funding Request Form](#).

2. READ the program announcement or foundation’s guidelines, including ALL instructions, before you begin. This cannot be emphasized enough!

3. During your preparations, take into consideration the level of funding the potential source typically awards and the types of support they will provide.

4. TALK to everyone who can help you. They become your support team.
   - University Grants Writer (overall guidance, samples of successful proposals, contact names, etc.)
   - Program Officer at the funding agency
   - Division or Department Head or Chair
   - Colleagues on or off campus who have been successful in grant seeking

5. Consider collaboration with another faculty member within your department or from another department, college or university, or someone from a community organization, or a K-12 school or teacher.

6. Consider including undergraduate students to assist you with your research projects.

7. Update your CV – It is a good idea to keep several versions of your up-to-date CV on file for quick access. Some proposals require a one or two-page version, some ask for a complete curriculum vitae, while others just require a brief narrative biography

8. If this will be a collaborative effort, secure letters of support from those involved.

**Proposal Tips – Drafting and Writing Stage:**

**Important Things to Consider Before You Start:**
1. Shorter is always better. You want to achieve both clarity and conciseness of your content.

2. You are asking for money. The typical grant range and types of support the funder provides will set parameters on what you should propose to them.

3. Speak to the funding source’s interests and goals, rather than your own. Grant funders each have their own specific goals and priorities that guide their funding investments and which are, therefore, more important to them than are your goals.
4. Follow the funder’s rules explicitly regarding format, content, length, budget and supplemental/or supporting documents.

5. Use headings to identify sections to make access to content easy.

6. Answer these questions:
   - Statement of Need: Why is your project needed?
   - Goals and Objectives: What do you want to achieve?
   - Project Activities: What are you actually going to do to achieve your goals and objectives?
   - Timeline: When – over what period of time will these activities be conducted?
   - Evaluation Plan: How will you measure – prove that you achieved your goals?
   - Sustainability: How will you continue it after the grant money runs out?
   - Organizational Information: Why are you/your organization qualified to do it?
   - Budget: What do you reasonably need to be able to do it? What commitments do you have (institutional and other external)?

7. Be passionate about the need; communicate a sense of urgency or importance – but do not communicate a sense of desperation.

8. Remember – Clear and Concise Content – Shorter is better!

(Adapted from University of Illinois Springfield, Office of Development website)

**Components of a Proposal:**

The components or elements comprising a proposal can vary widely depending upon the funding source. Government agencies typically specify a format and list the elements that must be included and their order. Foundation grantors’ requirements can vary from submission of a letter proposal to completion of an application form, submission of a full-proposal or to a two or three-phase application process.

**Letter Proposals**

A letter proposal will contain the same general elements as a full proposal, condensed in length. If no page limitation is specified, your letter proposal should generally be no more than 3 pages in length. Your letter proposal should include:

- The Ask: A brief statement regarding why you are writing and how much funding you are requesting.
- The Need: Describe the need your project will address.
- What You Will Do: An abbreviated description that will provide enough detail to garner their interest.
- Organizational Information: Your mission statement, brief description of its programs, description of the population served, and information demonstrating your capacity and ability to successfully do this project.
- Budget Information: This may be included here or as an attachment.
- Conclusion: Include a strong closing statement and offer to provide additional information or meet with the funder.
- Additional Information: Provide supplemental documentation as required by the funder.
Full Proposal

Again, while the components of a full proposal can vary based on the foundation, they typically include:

- **Summary or Introduction:** Like an abstract, this is the most important section of your proposal. Summarize all of the key information about your project and present your ask. Think of it as a sales document that will convince the reviewer to continue reading and consider your project for support.
- **Statement of Need:** Provide evidence and statistics documenting the need for the project, and briefly explain how your project will effectively address this need. This section should be brief and persuasive.
- **Project Description:** In this component, you will address five (5) subsections: objectives; methods; staffing/administration; evaluation; and sustainability.
- **Budget:** The complexity of the budget presentation can also vary depending upon the requirements of the foundation. Many require a simple one-page statement of projected revenues and expenses. Others require inclusion of other support (committed, pending and projected), and budget notes and/or justification.
- **Organizational Information:** After you have convinced the funder of the need for your project, you want to demonstrate to them your organization’s ability and capacity to successfully carry out the project.
- **Conclusion:** Summarize and tie together the main points of your proposal, your organization’s unique qualifications to do this project and reinforce your ask.

Multi-Phase Application Process

Multi-phase application processes typically begin with a Letter of Inquiry or a Concept Paper. If your submission is approved to continue to the second phase, this generally entails the submission of a full proposal. Some funders require site visits as the final stage of their decision-making process.

*(Adapted from the Foundation Center’s “Proposal Writing Short Course.”)*

**Successful Proposal Writing Pointers:**

1. As noted above, your writing needs to be clear and concise – shorter is indeed better – and it should be presented in a logical, cohesive sequence. Reviewers have to read a large volume of proposals, so it is imperative that your submission is easy to read, follow, and understand.

2. Passive, conditional language can weaken your proposal. Use active language to establish a positive tone and to convey confidence in your project and in the forthcoming funding.

   - Positive/Active Examples: We will . . .; The Program will include . . .; The results will . . .
   - Passive/Conditional Examples: We would like to . . .; We plan to include . . .; Possible results might be . . .

3. Address every criterion listed in the guidelines, in the order in which they are listed.

4. Identify your specific goals. What are your long-term objectives?

5. Explain the background and significance – the need for your project. Demonstrate your knowledge of relevant literature and/or similar efforts. What is the relevance?
6. Outline your project design and your methodology. How do your methods relate to the goals of your project? Demonstrate your awareness of potential problems and solutions and your familiarity with methodologies.

7. Create a realistic timetable.

8. Create evaluation and, if required, dissemination plans. Some ideas to consider: establish baseline and end points; document meaningful changes; actively promote the new information (via website, on and off-campus outreach; engaging qualified outside evaluators.

9. Get clear commitments from any collaborators and secure appropriate letters of support.

10. If required, the Abstract can be the most important element of your proposal. This summary of your project will likely be read first by reviewers, so you want it to make a good, strong first impression. The following are some suggestions for writing your abstract:

- Write it last after you have fully developed your ideas.
- It should be succinct, logical, accurate and able to stand alone.

It should include:

- Need for project
- Broad, long-term objectives
- Specific goals
- Research design and methods
- Project cost

**Budget Preparation Tips**

The project budget is a key element in the review of your proposal. Many reviewers look at the budget before they read any of the narrative. Your budget should be accurate, reasonable and reflect the scope of work described in your proposal. Think of it as your proposal told through numbers instead of words.

EARLY in the process, meet with the University Grants Writer and/or the Director of Human Resources and Finance. They can offer assistance with budget construction and provide information on salary, fringe benefit and indirect cost rates. If cost sharing is required, it is important to make this known in the beginning when you submit the External Funding Request Form.

Be sure your budget is in line with the funder’s guidelines as to:

- the total request amount
- the type of funding support requested (i.e., program, scholarship, curriculum development, endowment, operating, capital), and
- the types of expenses the funder considers allowable (i.e., personnel, travel, equipment, etc.)
A simple way to begin preparing your budget is by listing all activities your program will entail, then ask what will be needed to conduct those activities. Many grant writers find it helpful to complete the draft of their narrative first so they can use it as a guide to identify expense items. Some sample questions to consider as you are reviewing your list and compiling cost items for your budget are:

- Where will the activities be conducted? On or off campus?
- Is the space available and appropriate? If not, will any refurbishment or renovations be needed?
- Will equipment be needed?
- Will the project require new full or part-time personnel and/or the time of current personnel?
- If yours is a faculty research project, will the principal investigator require either summer or sabbatical salary?
- Will students be involved in the project? Will they need to be paid?
- Will any presenters, consultants or participants need to be paid?
- Will there be any travel involved?
- What supplies (paper, pens, folders, etc.) will be needed?
- Will any special program materials be needed to be either purchased or produced?
- Will there be any marketing costs associated with the project?
- What other miscellaneous costs might be involved (postage, copying, etc.)

Remember to include:

- Fringe benefits if any staff or faculty salaries will be involved
- Indirect cost – sometimes referred to as Overhead (if the funding source allows this – most federal agencies do)

Then review your list cost items to identify which would be considered allowable costs by the grantor and can be included in your request and which expenses would require a commitment of resources (funding, personnel, equipment and facility usage, etc.) by UMF. Remember, commitment of University resources requires advance approval from the administration.

If you are able to include indirect costs in your budget, please make sure you do not include expenses that are covered under UMF’s indirect cost rate elsewhere in your budget!

Please call Kathy Falco, Director of Human Resources and Finance at 207-778-7280, or Lorraine Pratt, Grants Writer at 207-778-7516, if you have any questions or need assistance in constructing your budget.

**What Reviewers Typically Look For:**

Most proposal reviewers look for projects that are:

- Innovative
- Ambitious
- Realistic
- Well-documented
- Well-focused
- Well-developed
- Currently relevant
Other important review criteria include:

- Principal Investigator’s competence and record of accomplishments
- Adequacy of institutional resources and facilities
- Institutional commitment and administrative support
- Evidence of collaboration
- A model that can be replicated
- Use of new technologies
- Student learning through guided research
- Impact on national infrastructure