



The 10 most common grant-seeking mistakes—and how to avoid them

Here is my list of the 10 most common mistakes made by grant seekers in their proposals, and some advice on how to avoid them. The list is based on my experiences as a proposal writer and reviewer, as well as conversations I've had with several funders over the years:

(1) The writing in the proposal isn't succinct or intelligible, resulting in a proposal that just doesn't make sense.

During my proposal-writing workshops, I often recommend that a finished proposal be given to someone outside the field of education to read before submission. This should help you identify whether any parts need to be rewritten for clarity's sake.

(2) The costs for technology are inaccurate or, in the worst-case scenario, are inflated.

Never guess at the cost of an item in your grant proposal, because chances are good that a staff person or a reviewer will identify a cost that seems inaccurate. This will affect the credibility of your proposal.

(3) No one proofreads the proposal before it is submitted, and the proposal contains typographical or grammatical errors.

Proposals with errors will be read; however, what kind of message does a proposal filled with errors send to a reviewer? (As an added note, don't rely solely on the spell-check function of your word processor; it won't identify words that are misspelled in context but otherwise are valid English words.)

(4) The budget doesn't match the narrative, and the reviewer sees costs on the budget pages that are not mentioned or explained in the narrative.

Always make sure that your budget reflects all project activities mentioned in your narrative, in dollars and cents. Reviewers are likely to suggest that unexplained costs be omitted from the amount of the grant award.

(5) The objectives cannot be measured, because they are too vague and open to individual interpretation in terms of success or failure.

Repeat the following mantra every time you write a proposal: "Objectives must be measurable!" Objectives that are not specific will lead to vague evaluations.



(6) A reasonable amount of time is not allotted to develop a project idea and to write the proposal, resulting in a sloppy, incomplete document.

In most cases, reviewers can easily spot proposals that were written at the last minute. Items are missing, budgets are incomplete, and the proposal sounds choppy and “unfinished.” Never underestimate the time you need to invest upfront to develop a project idea before committing it to paper.

(7) An assumption is made that the reviewers are experts in the subject area and that they understand jargon and acronyms without explanation.

It is important to have command of the language of education and to be able to use some “buzzwords” appropriately, but make sure you explain what you mean to reviewers so there is clear understanding. Remember that a reviewer might not be an educator—he or she might be a proposal writer, bureaucrat, or company representative.

(8) The proposal is full of “buzzwords” and offers little or no substance.

Make sure there is substance to your proposal; don’t hide behind jargon or rely too much on buzzwords as a substitute for telling your own story (see No. 7).

(9) The writer ignores the instructions in the request for proposals (RFP) and violates the rules and directions it specifies.

If you want your proposal to be disqualified without being read, ignore the RFP and write the proposal according to your own rules!

(10) Funders are selected because they have money, not because there is a close fit between the project idea and the funders’ interests.

Funders publish their interests for a reason, and they will not change their areas of interest based on a good project idea. In fact, your proposal probably won’t be reviewed if it doesn’t match the funder’s guidelines. Make sure you do the research first, then write your proposal.