



# Seven Deadly Grant-Writing Sins

Don't let your grant-writing efforts go to waste because of one lethal mistake. Here's what to avoid at all costs.

By Katie Krueger

Is there anything more disappointing than investing weeks of work on a grant application only to have it rejected? You know how hard it is to write a competitive grant, but do you know how easy it is to make one fatal mistake that automatically disqualifies your proposal? Heed the advice of those who've been on the other side of the grant-writing process and avoid these seven grant-writing sins.

## 1. Submit a Poor Match

Even a flawless grant application will be worthless if you submit it to a funder whose mission doesn't align with yours. "Foundations award grants to organizations that will help them reach their long-term goals," says Judy Keel, who worked at the largest healthcare foundation in San Diego for nearly a decade. "Make sure you're applying to an appropriate funder for your project or program."

Funders are looking for reasons to throw out applications.

Before writing your application, review as much information about the grantmaker as you can get your hands on. Study the funder's annual report, brochure, and Web site. Peruse a list of past grantees, and

discern whether your project fits on that list. If you can make a case that your work will help advance the grantmaker's mission, go ahead and apply.

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## 2. Ignore Directions

In the guidelines of each grant application are directions on exactly how to submit your proposal. Funders make specific requests about page limits, margins, and font size. Some want attachments; others don't. Some request 10 hard copies of your application; others only accept online submissions. Read these directions carefully, and follow them meticulously.

Don't try to sneak in extra pages. If you write over the page limit or include prohibited attachments, grantmakers may throw out that information.

No matter how outlandish the directions seem, follow them. If the funder requests that all applications be on aqua blue paper, print yours on aqua blue paper and remember: "They who have the gold make the rules."

## 3. Be a Stranger

Before submitting your proposal, contact the funder's program offi-

cer with a few specific questions. Look on the Web site for instructions on how to get in touch, and read all the information provided there.

Make sure your questions show you've read all the information and still can't find the answers. There may be no such thing as a stupid question, but smart questions can make you look stupid if they've already been answered on the Web site's FAQ page. By beginning with concrete, intelligent questions, you can gauge the program officer's interest and decide if it's appropriate to ask a few more general questions about the chances of getting funded.

Most important, be respectful, courteous, and grateful. If all goes well, these funders will be financing your dreams, and you want to show them the proper respect for that opportunity.

You wouldn't ask the bank for a loan in the amount of "whatever you can give," so don't ask it of a grantmaker.

By contacting the program officer in advance, you'll have an ally within the foundation. This will be invaluable if the decision making committee needs clarification about your project and your new contact can address their questions.

Most program officers are open to inquiries from applicants and happy to help. After all, helping you write a great proposal helps them make great grants.

#### 4. Leave Copyediting to SpellCheck

Simple typos can leave a bad impression or, even worse, change your proposal's meaning. Spell-check won't catch them all. Having typos is like airing your dirty laundry in public. The last thing you want is to fill the grant review session with laughter, thanks to the errors in your application. Let another applicant do that: maybe the Starvation Army or Untied Way.

#### 5. Submit a Sloppy Budget

View foundations as investors looking for positive returns, measured by advancements in their mission. They want to know exactly how much money they're spending and where it's going. With that in mind, ask for a definite amount. You wouldn't ask the bank for a loan in the amount of "whatever you can give," so don't ask it of a grantmaker.

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Request a reasonable amount. If the average grant award from this foundation is \$2,000, ask for a grant below or at that level. Asking for \$10,000 because you think your program is an extraordinary fit only means it will be rejected extraordinarily fast.

Double check your math, and make sure the figures are consistent throughout the proposal. Does the total request on your cover page match the total request in your budget? Do these numbers reflect what's needed to implement the plan you laid out in the narrative? Math errors are a huge turn-off for a potential investor.

#### 6. Miss the Deadline

Computers crash. Copy machines break down. Partners for-

get deadlines. The post office loses mail. Accidents bring traffic to a standstill. And Murphy's Law ensures that the less time you have to deal with these problems, the more likely they are to happen. Give yourself enough time to tackle the unexpected.

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If you work best under pressure, set a false deadline a week before the real deadline. Calling program officers in tears isn't likely to help. They may empathize, but giving you extra time would be unfair to applicants who did meet the deadline.

#### 7. Ask for the Impossible

Foundations are very clear about what they will and won't fund. Examine their Web sites and grant guidelines carefully, and don't ask for what they won't give. For example, some foundations won't fund general operating costs, and others won't fund staff salaries. Make sure what you're requesting is something they'll consider.

#### Funders' Biggest Lament

Your application isn't just a description of your program but your introduction to the funder and a reflection of your work. Keep it clear of careless errors so that it represents your best work and your full potential to be a successful grantfunded program.

The biggest lament of funders is that they always receive more proposals than they can fund. They're looking for reasons to throw out



#### RESOURCES

Hutchinson, Bill & Ann Otter, "Straight Talk from Foundations and Corporations," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 5.

Remley, Dirk, "Two Keys to Successful Grant Proposals," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Vartorella, William, "Focusing on Foundation Grants: The Powerful Reverse Needs Assessment," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 4.

These resources are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members). Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Resource Development and O for Opportunity: Exploring New Revenue Opportunities for Nonprofits (<http://www.snpo.org/lino>).

applications: A simple mistake on your part may be the deciding factor that keeps your application from being considered. Avoid the seven mistakes above and you'll allow your application the full consideration it deserves. ■

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