

Grant Writing Basics

Gerald Lindahl, NYSCA/SLP Program
(edited for local DEC applicants)

"Grant Writing Basics" - is designed to help you help DEC applicants write better proposals.

The process of writing an effective proposal is an **educational** one. It encourages you, the applicant, to "take stock" and look at what you do with a critical eye, and helps you describe your programs clearly to potential funders.

This document focuses on two primary goals in better grant writing practice:

- To write less, but better.
- To avoid stylistic and factual errors that distract the panel's focus on the merits of the proposed project.

Note that we will only be able to skim the surface of effective grant writing in this tutorial.

Lesson 1: Control the Panel Discussion

Each proposal that comes before a panel begins a new discussion. You, the proposal writer, want the discussion to be short and favorable to your project. You accomplish that goal with a good narrative and budget.

You don't want the discussion to get off on the wrong track, or on some minor point that doesn't support your argument for funding. **Your job is to control the panel discussion**, and make sure that nothing in your narrative and budget distracts them from your project.

LESSON 1 SUMMARY:

Make sure every word supports the funding request. Keep proposals free of extra words. Avoid praising yourself or criticizing the panel. Too much information is as bad as too little information!

The best way to accomplish a brief and focused panel discussion is by presenting them with a brief and focused proposal! Here are some tips:

1. **Try not to project an attitude.** Panels don't want to hear how "important" or inspiring" your program is. You invite a panelist to disagree with your assessment, and dangerously side-track the discussion. On the other side of this coin, avoid flip or sarcastic remarks; this works against your interests every time.
2. **Keep historical and background information very brief.** The proposal is requesting support for future activities, not past ones.
3. **Don't write about activities that are not part of the proposed program.** Inexperienced proposal writers seem to think that quantity makes a good impression on panelists. In fact, too much information tends to confuse panelists and to cause exactly the kind of questions you are trying to avoid. ("Is this what they want support for?" "When did they do that?")

Lesson 2: The first sentence is the most important sentence

Compare these **two sample opening sentences** and see which one tells the fundraising story better:

1)The Atlas Dance Company began in 1956 when my father, Harold Atlas, determined that the state of modern dance in the Central New York Region needed serious improvement.

or this:

2)The Atlas Dance Company requests a grant of \$2,000 in support of artist fees, musicians and costumes for its 1997-1998 season.

Only one sentence can be the first sentence, and it is important to use it wisely. **The first sentence of the request must clearly state how much money is requested, and what that money will be used for.**

This principle is simple: **the most important and relevant information appears first!** The next most important and relevant information appears next, and so on. This is how people read - they start at the beginning and work their way down to the end.

A proposal is not a history lesson! Or a music lesson, or an art history course, or a personal statement. It is usually a simple request for support of a project.

CONTEXT

Often there is a reason to place the current project in some kind of context. Perhaps it is the fifteenth year of a successful concert series; perhaps a current program is going to be expanded. This kind of context can help make a strong argument for support. However, it should appear later in the narrative, as briefly as possible, and not distract from the main point.

LESSON 2 SUMMARY:

The first sentence of your proposal is the most important sentence, so don't waste it!

Structure the narrative so that the most important information is at the top, the next most important information is next, and so on.

When extra context is needed, keep it brief and place it at the end of the request narrative.

Lesson 3: Create the narrative and budget at the same time

Your proposal narrative and budget provide the same information in two different forms. You should write them together, so that they support each other and strengthen your case.

There are two fundamental mistakes made in project budgets (and many less fundamental mistakes!):

1. Including a budget item not mentioned in the narrative.
2. Excluding a budget item that IS mentioned in the narrative.

If you have been paying attention to lessons 1 and 2, you know what the result is in the panel discussion when they find either of these basic mistakes. They DISCUSS those mistakes! And that's just what you want to avoid.

The solution is to write the narrative and the budget at the same time, side by side.

Here are some examples:

NARRATIVE	BUDGET ITEM	
The concert will include three musicians ...	Musicians (3 @ \$250)	\$750
We plan to record the concert for future distribution and possible sales ...	Recording Service (include, engineer and equipment)	350
	Recording tape	75
We will advertise our concerts in several local newspapers and with a mailing ...	Advertising (Print)	600
	Brochures (500) production	25
	Mailing (500 Brochures @ .32)	160

As you see, **every line in the narrative that describes any kind of cost must be reflected in the project budget.**

INCOME:

Many DEC project budgets project **no income** of any kind outside of the DEC award. This immediately **raises two questions in the mind of panelists** (or should raise the questions):

1. If this project has value to the community, why is there no community support?
2. If we award less than the request amount, how can they carry out the project?

The best way to avoid these questions is to show other sources of support, earned or contributed, even in-kind support, which shows someone else besides the applicant cares about this project.

LESSON 3 SUMMARY:

The budget and narrative tell the same story, but in different forms.

If they don't match up, item for item, panelists will be distracted from your project and ask embarrassing questions.

Write the budget and narrative at the same time and pay attention to the budget implications - expenses and income - of each narrative line.