



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center Tips for Nonprofit Grant Writing Success

In addition to being well-written, successful grants applications require ample research and planning. This preparation is vital to creating a clear, compelling proposal that persuades the grantmaker to fund your project, program, or research. Below, we offer tips for researching, planning, and writing a project or program-based grant. These tips may also be helpful for writing research (e.g., NIH, NSF, USDA) grant proposals, but for a more detailed discussion of this genre, see this resource from the Writing Center at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Research Stage

As you begin preparation for your proposal, consider these questions:

- **What are the particular objectives for this grant?** Carefully read the request for applications (RFA), request for proposals (RFP), or other set of specific guidelines provided by the grantmaker. Make sure you understand the purpose, objectives, and/or priorities of the grant program, as well as the target audiences, and start to think about how your idea aligns with these external goals. Note if the grantfunder expects or prioritizes projects that involve collaboration or community partnerships. If time allows, do some extra reconnaissance on the grantmaking organization to understand how this specific grant fits within their larger mission or programming. You also might be able to find examples of previously funded projects on their website.
- **What are the particular expectations if you receive a grant?** Pay attention to what you will be required to do if you receive a grant, including any reporting requirements or timelines for completion. Think about addressing these requirements in your application.
- **What are the particular guidelines for the application?** Take notes on the due date (including time—grants are often due before midnight), required sections, and formatting requirements. Follow all the requirements, even if they vary from what you have done in the past or from past advice.

Planning Stage

Now that you have done some background research, it is time to start planning the scope and organization of your narrative for the actual proposal. In this stage, you should ask yourself:

- **Who is your audience?** Research grants might be reviewed by academics with specialized disciplinary knowledge, but often, project or program-based grants are reviewed by a person or people affiliated with the grantmaking organization. Think about their potential knowledge of your topic, as well as the kind of argument they might find most persuasive. This understanding can inform your overall proposal narrative and your specific vocabulary.
- **What is your message?** Due to the complexity of many ideas, you can easily fall into the trap of including too much detail, or on the flip side, too little detail. Either way, you risk creating a narrative that obscures the connections between your proposal and the grantmaker's objectives. You need to clearly and effectively convey how your proposed project or program addresses an issue of interest to the grantmaker. A handy tool for refining your story is the Message Box, developed by the COMPASS project to help researchers communicate their science. The Message Box asks you to identify five key components of what you want to communicate to a specific audience (in this case, the grantmaker). The five components are:
 - The issue – the big-picture context for your project/program

- The problem – the specific parts of the big issue your project/program will address
- The ‘so what’ – why does this problem matter to your audience (i.e. how does the problem align with the particular objectives of the grant?)
- The solution – what your project/program would do and how it would address the problem
- The benefits – what are the positive results of your proposed project/program

The following example illustrates how the five components come together in a real grant proposal. For context, the following text answered two prompts:

1. describe the need your project will address and
2. describe your desired outcomes and how they align with our organizational strategic objectives.

The granting agency also required the project/program to focus on one or more of the following objectives: social & community connection, addressing the social determinants of health for families, access to services (mental health and childhood/family), social & emotional well-being support, substance misuse prevention, and/or cradle to career success.

Example Grant Illustrating Message Box Components

The issue – Health habits are a major determinant of disease burden and health outcomes in the United States and are thus among our most pressing public health concerns.

The problem – In the evolving model of healthcare delivery in the US, organizations are increasingly held accountable for the health of populations they serve, which has rightly shifted some of the focus of attention from downstream health outcomes to determinants of health further upstream, including health habits and social determinants. However, patients often lack the resources, skills and confidence to address these concerns on their own.

The ‘so what’ – While there is no quick fix for generational poverty, decentralization of communities and the relative availability of inexpensive, poor-quality calories over healthier options, we can begin to address poor nutrition and food insecurity through increased access to fresh produce, skill-building, nutrition education and community resilience. This will empower individuals and communities with the tools needed to improve health on their own.

The solution – There is an accumulating body of evidence to support benefits of gardening in a wide range of health domains, correlating with increased levels of physical activity and fitness, lower BMI, and improved mood, cognition and social engagement. Community gardens have also demonstrated beneficial impacts on food access, especially in low-income communities. The role of gardening in health promotion is multidimensional, including the physical act of gardening, social interaction, community development, and healthy food production. The known interaction of all of these factors, particularly mood, with chronic diseases suggests an opportunity for a synergistic effect on patients with diabetes, who suffer from higher rates of depression than the general population.

Our program aims to teach people how to grow their own food, with the desired impacts of increased access to affordable healthy foods, improved nutrition education and increased physical activity among participants. We want to build the skills and confidence individuals need to make changes in health habits which lead to significant improvements in long-term health outcomes, with the ultimate goal of realizing measurable changes in objective health indicators such as BMI, blood pressure and prevention or reversal of lifestyle-related disease.

The benefits – Participant impacts include a range of benefits such as emotional and physical well-being, consumption of fruits and vegetables over less healthy foods, activity level, and confidence in growing and cooking with vegetables. Increasingly, studies are also linking the physical act of gardening and the consumption of nutritionally dense foods with improved mental health. We expect the skills garnered from this program, and

their downstream benefits, to be shared within families and communities. These outcomes are directly aligned with CHNA priorities of disease prevention, including cancers, and childhood and family health.

Once you have thought about each of the components, you can start to refine your message. The end goals are to make sure each component of your message supports the other parts and to prioritize information relevant to specific grant and grantmaker objectives. Reaching these goals might require a few iterations of the Message Box. You also might consider sharing your Message Box with a team member or outside party for feedback.

Writing Stage

Now that you have completed research and planning, you are ready to craft your narrative. Big picture, make sure you answer every part of every prompt. Prompts can be very general, such as explaining the impact of your proposed project, or very specific, such as how many people you will reach or how you will evaluate the project outcomes. While parts of your narrative might overlap in different sections, work to not repeat the same information over and over again. A good first step might be to take your “Message Box” components and fit them into different parts of the grant application. For example, your issue and problem descriptions probably fit best in a problem definition section.

When writing, your task is to make the reader’s job as easy as possible and create a narrative that stands out from the crowd. Here are a few specific tips to consider while crafting your application:

- **Use clear, simple language.** Avoid jargon, vague language, and unsupported platitudes. For example, instead of calling your project “exciting” lay out specifically why the funder should find it appealing. If your project is “innovative,” tell them in what way (e.g., “this is the first example of combining X and y”). Use data and statistics to back up your ideas but limit them to a few key examples.
- **Don’t bury your main ideas.** Use clear topic sentences and avoid empty statements at the beginning of paragraphs to make clear the contributions of your proposed project/program. The UVM Graduate Writing Center offers a [separate guide on crafting clear topic sentences](#).
- **Use signposts.** Similarly, you can help make your reader’s job easier by using signposting, or language that guides a reader throughout the text. Topic sentences help guide readers, as do forecasting statements (e.g., “This project proposes”) and conjunctive adverbs, also known as “linking words” (e.g. further, in contrast, although, in conclusion). The UVM Graduate Writing Center also offers a [guide on signposting and cohesion](#).
- **Use active verbs.** Using active rather than passive verbs (i.e., forms of ‘to be’ - is, are, was) will help make your writing more direct, concise, and ultimately, easier for the reader to follow. Constructing sentences with active verbs clearly shows who is responsible or what is at stake. In this way, the active voice also conveys more confidence and may be more persuasive.
 - Passive: Our aim is to teach people how to grow their own food through this program.
 - Active: Our program will teach people how to grow their own food.
- **Avoid small mistakes.** Leave yourself enough time to thoroughly edit your application and take heed of all word and character limits. Even small spelling and grammar errors or one word beyond the limit can take a grant out of contention.

You Don’t Have to Go It Alone

Appointments with the Graduate Writing Center can give you the support, strategies, and outside reader’s perspective you need to work toward a clear, compelling, and persuasive proposal. Learn more at <https://uvm.mywconline.net/>