

Tips for Writing Grant Proposals

By Dwight Shepherd, Former Chair of FOTL Grants

One of the many ways to fund programs and projects for your Friends group is through applying for grants. This can also be one of the most daunting ways. Especially if you have little or no experience applying for a grant. Friends of Tennessee Libraries has put together some tips that will, we hope, help make that process a little easier.

Read the instructions and application: Carefully read all the instructions, information, and the application before you begin. Make sure you understand what the Grantor is looking for and what is required by you. I once got a college scholarship in part because I was the only one who had included everything that had been requested. A few years ago, I received an application for a Friends of Tennessee Libraries Grant in a category that I thought it would have been better suited in a different category. They did not get that grant. The next year, they submitted it in the other category and won.

Make sure you: 1) Meet the qualifications of the grant, 2) answer all the questions on the application, and 3) include everything that the application or instructions ask you to submit.

Deadlines are important: Make sure you submit your application by the deadline. Earlier is always better. In some cases, grants begin to be reviewed as soon as they are received. The earlier your grant is received, the more it will stand out, and the likelihood that grants received after that will be compared to yours.

If you realize that you are going to miss the deadline for a legitimate reason, contact the Grantor as soon as possible to ask for a slight extension and explain why. Do not wait until the deadline, or after it, to ask unless it's absolutely, positively necessary.

Just as important, make sure the grant cycle matches the timeline of your project. A grant that has an application deadline of June 1, with a decision to be announced July 1, will not do you any good if you need it to fund an element of your project that has to begin on May 12.

Cover everything: Unless the instructions say otherwise, it is a good idea to include a cover letter with your application. Make your application stand out in some way. Make sure they know who you are (see below) if details about your group are not called for in the application. Is there something unique about your project? Does your group have some special tie to the Grantor? Close by thanking them for considering your application.

Know what you are applying for: Know what the Grantor is looking to fund and make sure your request meets that. Is the grant for capital (building) projects, youth service, technology? Your request must fall within that area. Is this grant for a one-time project, a new program, or an ongoing project? Again, make sure that your application meets their criteria.

Specifics Matter (What, How Many & How Much): **WHAT:** Exactly what are you asking for? I once received an application that gave the details on how they would decide to spend the money if they received the grant. They should have gone through that process BEFORE applying.

HOW MANY AND HOW MUCH: Details are important. They say (or should) a lot about your proposal. Are you asking for money for promotional materials? “Flyers, yard signs, and banners” says you have not put much thought into it. “Seven hundred and fifty fliers, twenty-five yard signs, two four foot by twenty foot banners, and one two foot by ten foot banner” says you have done planning. Those figures accompanied by “costing a+b+c+d=total cost” say you have really done your homework. This lets the Grantor know exactly what they are funding. If you have gone to this much detail, your grant proposal and your project stand a better chance of succeeding.

SIDE NOTE: I once was in a grant-writing workshop where they recommended asking for an odd amount of money. It makes the proposal stand out, will almost certainly guarantee it will get a second look, and will show that you have really researched your proposal. So a request for \$987 is more likely to be noticed than fifty other requests for \$1,000. If the grant is for a set amount, they are likely to go ahead and give you that amount anyway.

Why do you need the money? That seems like a very basic question, but it is often one that applicants fail to answer, or do not answer adequately. Sometimes applicants do not go far enough in answering grant questions. Sometimes the questions do not seem to offer the opportunity to fully explain why you need the money.

Are you looking to start a new program in addition to the ones you currently fund? Are you looking to expand a program already in place? Explain why the start-up costs require more than you can fund through your normal fundraising efforts. Are you looking to replace a major asset (a building expansion, thirty-year-old tables and chairs, onsite storage to save on rental expense)?

Especially if you are asking for funds related to something you have already been funding, you need to show that there is a genuine need for the grant. Make sure you find a way to work this information into the answers to your application. It is also a good idea to include it in that cover letter.

Why do you deserve the money? Of course you want the money. You may really need the money. Well, so do most of the other 50 (or 100 or 1,000) applicants. You need to show why you deserve the grant more than the other applicants. That should be spelled out within your application. It should also be included in your cover letter.

Are you trying to fund a new program or project, but much of your funding is tied up in sustaining ongoing programs or projects that are needed and would suffer if you diverted funds from them? Are you looking to serve an unserved or underserved demographic or population? Has something happened suddenly and or drastically to alter the needs of your community (natural disaster, large industry closing/opening)? These are factors that could influence the decision making. You cannot expect the Grantor to know the situation where you are (see the “**Know who you are and let them know**” tips).

How will it benefit/what end result will the grant

accomplish? Tell the Grantor what you hope to accomplish (besides not having to go look for the money somewhere else). If it is to serve an unserved/underserved demographic, what percentage of that demographic do you *realistically* intend to reach/serve? If you are wanting to expand the Children's Reading Room, include pictures of a packed story time program and an architect's drawing of the proposed space. If you are wanting new shelving to organize a storage space, include a picture of the stacks of stuff in there now and a photo of a similar sized, well-organized space. Are you wanting to increase publicity for a fundraiser? Have a *realistic* estimate of the increase in attendance and money raised that it will bring in to your group.

Make sure you have a measurable way of tracking the usefulness of the grant. This benefits both you and the Grantor.

Know who you are, where you are, and whom you serve. Make sure the Grantor knows:

Again, this is basic information that too often gets overlooked. You are a "Friend of the Library" group. And that means? Are you recognized as a tax-exempt, charitable organization by the IRS (commonly referred to as a 501(c)3)? Often this one fact could be THE make-or-break question on receiving a grant. Are you chartered by the State of Tennessee as a "not for profit" corporation? Not necessary, but it shows more organization and legal standing. Do you operate as part of another group (a Foundation, a Chamber of Commerce, etc.)? This could have an effect on your status in applying for a grant.

Exactly where is the Anytown Friends of the Library located and whom do you serve? What city and county are you located in? In what geographic area of the state are you located?

What is the population? It can also be helpful to know the demographics of the area: ethnicity, age distribution, per capita income, and poverty rate. These demographics could play a factor in grant selection.

What library/library system do you support? How many branches if it is a system? Does your group support the entire system or primarily one branch? What is the library's budget? How many people does it serve? How much do you fund for the library on an annual basis?

If you can't work the information into one of the questions on the application, make sure it is in that cover letter. You do not have to put all of it in there, but do include enough so the Grantor has a clearer picture of who you are and where you are located.

Helpful hint: Not many of us know these statistics off the top of our head, but those helpful people at your local library can help you find it. They probably have all, or most, of it in a report they have had to submit to the State. Make a note of when you got the information, so you know it is up to date.

What's your track record? What programs and activities do you regularly do or support? How much funding do you provide to your library on an annual basis? How much of your funding comes from memberships and how much from fundraising? Show how wisely you use your money.

Have you received any significant grants in the past? How were they used? If this is not your first rodeo, show that you have worked with grantors in the past to successfully fund and complete projects or programs.

Endorsements could make a difference: Of course you are going to put your application in the best light. What do other people think? Could you get a letter of endorsement to go along with your application? Someone who will reiterate that the grant is needed and that your group is an able and capable organization? There are obvious choices: the library director, the city and/or county mayor, the school superintendent, or the head of your local economic development. If it is a state grant, then your state representative or state senator would be good (they vote on the budget of the person making the decision). If it is a corporate grant, include the manager of their local facility. Endorsements show community support beyond your own group. Again, it also helps your application stand out.

Save your work: Save a copy of your grant application, including all supporting documentation, either on paper or electronically. This is important for two reasons. First, “just in case” something happens, and your application doesn’t make it to its intended destination. ***Side note:*** if you don’t receive an acknowledgment that your application has been received, it is perfectly acceptable to send a short email just to verify that it was delivered. Second, you may be able to use much of the information in that application in applying for a different grant somewhere or sometime else. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel each time you start working on a grant application.

You got the grant! Now what? First, be sure to thank them. It is just a nice thing to do. Second, let them know your progress and success. Many Grantors will have a form to fill out to let them know that the project has been completed and its outcome. If so, make sure it gets filled out and returned. If not, make sure someone follows up to let them know. Copies or attachments of photos are nice. Publicity where you made sure the Grantor was named (unless they specified anonymity) is a definite to include. Doing these things lets the Grantor know it was money well spent. It could also increase your chances of getting another grant from them in the future.

You did not get it. Now what? You are not going to get every grant every time. You can put together a truly excellent proposal, but there may have been someone else that demonstrated an even greater need than you. That is called life in the real world.

Use this as a learning experience. You can probably use much of the information and supporting documentation from this application on an application to another grant. Also, the more grants you apply for, the easier it gets.

Ask for feedback. Contact the Grantor and ask what you could have done differently to have submitted a stronger application. Keep your inquiry as polite and neutral as possible. I once received an email from an applicant that said, “We’ve received grants from you in the past. Why didn’t we get one this year?” I’m sure they did not mean it the way it read, which was they expected a grant just because they submitted an application and that the grant was considered by them as a regular line item in their budget. Also

keep in mind that if a grant was determined by more than one person, the person you ask might not be able to answer your question fully. Again, maybe someone else just showed a greater need for the grant. Then just be happy for them.

I hope these tips will help you put together a solid, winning grant proposal. You can also check with other Friends groups or Friends of Tennessee Libraries officials. They would be glad to offer appropriate assistance as you work through the grant process.