

Writing a Successful *Grant Proposal*

By Marty Malone, MBA, PC, Client Services Director
P. Joseph Lehman Inc., Consulting Engineers



Effective grant writing is often seen as a mysterious process in which success rests at the pen tip of professional grant writers who can command large sums. While there can be great value in working with a professional, municipalities shouldn't fear or hesitate to put together their own grant packages.

There is no one-size-fits-all recipe for success. That doesn't mean defining across-the-board principles can't provide a better understanding of what successful grant writing looks like.

A grant is a type of funding assistance used to achieve a particular purpose. Grants can be vehicles for transferring funds from one agency to another and can be a standardized method of distributing taxpayer dollars or private funds to worthwhile projects.

Grant writing includes completing an application, which is often referred to as a grant proposal or a grant submission.

Grantsmanship

Successful grant writing requires a clear understanding of grantsmanship, or the artistry of writing a grant proposal. While the fundamentals of grantsmanship apply broadly, it is important to know the target audience and to be able to tune the language appropriately.

Understanding the creation process of a grant proposal can be a big part of grant-writing success. The basic parts of the proposal include:

- Analyzing the intended audience,
- Analyzing the purpose,

- Gathering information about the proposal's subject,
- Writing the proposal,
- Formatting it,
- Revising, editing, and proofreading the proposal, and then
- Submitting the final product.

Basic grant writing principles that can be applied to most scenarios follow.

Follow directions. Before typing a single word, read the instructions. Then read them again. Make a list of questions about the grant directions. Then read the instructions again and look for items that are *not* to be included in the application or

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proposal. Remember, padding a grant proposal with unrequested information can be a way for a submission to be pushed to the bottom of the pile. More is not always better.



Start the process early. Put the grant submission deadline on the calendar. Make sure everybody involved in the effort knows the deadline as well. Work backwards from the deadline to create a grant schedule. Outline milestones using this information and create a priority checklist based on items or actions that will take the most time, such as securing letters of support, past municipal audits, etc.

Early in the grant-development process, start building a budget of project items and activities. Make sure to include only the items and activities that are allowable for the grant. Show how the borough will acquire or achieve items and activities that are not fundable under the grant.

In addition, make sure the grant writers understand if there are

percentage caps for certain items and activities. For projects such as infrastructure improvements, determine if any design or feasibility study is required ahead of time.

If the grant proposal or application process has been started late, consider waiting until the next round of funding, rather than rushing a submission.

Make connections. Find out who the appropriate person is at the funding organization and call him or her as the borough's first contact with a decision maker – have a very clear understanding of the project and what is being requested before the call, in case it comes up.

Be professional and courteous during the call and thank the person for his or her time. Ask the individual what the best way is to contact him or her with any questions during the grant

writing process. End on a positive note by saying that the borough is looking forward to working with the individual.

Write clearly and persuasively. Sloppy or unfocused writing detracts from and obscures the vision of a project. Don't underestimate the importance of sentence structure, word choice, and proper grammar. Do not include too much technical jargon. Incorporating white space to enhance readability and give your readers' eyes a break is important.

Take the time to effectively use relevant figures, charts, diagrams, and photographs. These tools can help save space by conveying large amounts of information in a condensed form and simplifies complex concepts for reviewers who might not be experts in the field. Flow charts and timelines can be effective as well.



Break up long paragraphs by inserting headings, subheadings, and bullet points. Proposals with large blocks of text can become tiresome to read for reviewers.

Define the project well. Create a clearly defined picture of what the project will look like once completed and what role receiving the grant will play in the project's success. Define overall project goals and objectives, describe project milestones in measurable terms, and talk about *who* will benefit and *what* will happen if funding under the grant is not secured.

Think like a reviewer.

Remember that many grant application or proposal reviewers make up their minds very quickly. This is where the ability to rapidly make a compelling case becomes important. Make things easy, enjoyable, and interesting to review.

Proofreading is key. Read the writing two or three times, then stop. At this point, find a fresh set of eyes. At least one proofreader should know little or nothing about the project. In addition to getting input on spelling and grammar, ask the proofreader if she or he understood the project vision and funding request.

Beverly A. Browning outlines nine tips for effective grant writing in the blog *Grant Writing for Dummies Cheat Sheet*.



“To make your grant writing stand out from other proposals and get your grant funded, you have to know how to write applications effectively,” she wrote.

Browning suggested doing research for the specific grant proposal and incorporate the following guidelines for the greatest chance at success:

- **Use a storytelling approach** (with supporting statistics) in such a compelling way that the reader can't put down the application until he or she makes a positive funding decision.
- **Incorporate a case study** of a real person (if applicable). Of course, change the name for confidentiality reasons.
- **Write to government funding agencies** and request (under the Freedom of Information Act) copies of funded grant

applications. Use these documents as examples of how to write an award-winning grant application.

- **Research proven best practices** for the proposed solutions and incorporate language from the experts.
- **When best practices are found, look for the evaluation results** of previously implemented programs that are similar. Know what works and what doesn't work before writing proposed solutions.
- **Hire a proofreader or editor** to read the writing and clean it up. Don't have any money? Ask a trustworthy and capable co-worker.
- **Write in short, hard-hitting sentences.** Long-winded sentences almost always lose the reader.

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Do Your Homework

An excellent source for Pennsylvania municipalities to find grants is the *Pennsylvania Municipal Leaders Grant and Resource Guide: A Guidebook for Municipal Leaders and Community Service Organizations* which is available at pasenategop.com/baker/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2018/05/grant.pdf. This directory offers information regarding grants available to local governments from various state departments.

The Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs' (PSAB)


also offers state, federal, and private grant opportunities on its website, boroughs.org/grants.

Effective grant writing is not impossible – and not easy. If it were easy, every municipality would secure grants every time.

Consider improving staff's and officials' understanding of grant writing by participating in grant writing seminars. PSAB offers grant writing classes to help boost skills.

With study, careful preparation, and organization, combined with a compelling story and thorough budget, a borough's

grant application can zoom to the top of the pile.

About the Author: Based in Hollidaysburg, Pa., Marty Malone, MBA, PC, is the client services director for P. Joseph Lehman Inc., Consulting Engineers. For more than 20 years, he has worked closely with boroughs, townships, and counties to secure millions of dollars in grant funding for vital infrastructure projects. Celebrating 50 years of providing engineering and environmental solutions, P. Joseph Lehman provides grantsmanship services to municipal clients at no charge. Malone is available at mmalone@LehmanEngineers.com or 814-695-7500. 

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