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First Person

Debunking Some Myths About Grant Writing

[By Kenneth T. Henson](#)

Grant writing is all about power. We write grants because they bring us prestige, programs, equipment, travel, and time. Grants free us to do the kind of research, teaching, and service that we enjoy most. So why is such an essential skill so difficult and so mysterious for so many academics?

You can be as successful as you want to be with grant writing, but you have to realize that it's a craft, and like any other craft, being successful at it requires developing and polishing a few skills. It starts with attitude. You must believe in your own ability to master this craft and to succeed at the level you choose. Then you must have some clear reasons for writing grants. As the Cheshire cat told Alice, if you don't know where you are going then it doesn't matter which direction you take. So, begin by taking a step backward and asking yourself, Where do I want to go in my career? Five years from now? Ten years from now? Grant writing can be a powerful force to get you there.

In the past two decades, I've written millions of dollars worth of successful grant proposals and traveled the country giving workshops on grant writing. I've encountered a lot of myths about this subject, and believing them can, and often does, derail even the brightest professor's grant-writing program. I'd like to tackle a few of the myths and then offer some tips.

Myth 1: There is no money available; the grant-writing well has dried up. Wrong! Money is tighter these days but there is still hundreds of millions of dollars waiting to be taken. Furthermore, those who are entrusted with dispersing this money are just as eager to give it away as we are to receive it.

Myth 2: The money that is available goes to big, prestigious institutions, not to individuals or to small institutions. That statement is half true. Enormous amounts of money are given to the same institutions, year after year. But it is not simply because grant agencies are impressed with the institutions' prestigious names. It is because certain individuals at those institutions have proved themselves good stewards of the money. Furthermore, small institutions and people who are "unknown" to the general public are getting hundreds of millions of dollars. But these people are not so unknown to the grant agencies. They have established reputations for delivering quality service and managing their budgets wisely -- two skills that you can easily master.

Myth 3: Successful grant writing requires connections, and I don't have any. This excuse begs for rebuttal. Connections can help but they aren't required. What's required is the ability to craft a quality

proposal that will convince grant givers that you will give the most and best in return for their money. You can do this by keeping one eye on the foundation's request for proposals (RFP) to make sure that you have addressed each of its goals in your application.

A second way to ensure that you submit a quality proposal is to ask the grant agency for a copy of the rating form it uses. Be sure to cover all of the points on which your proposal will be evaluated, and do an especially convincing job on the parts that count the most.

If you still believe that successful grant writing requires connections -- and without doubt, they can help sway the evaluation -- then why not develop some connections? Volunteer your services as a proposal evaluator. This will give you valuable insight into the process and let you inside the heads of those who will be evaluating your future proposals. Or just pick up the phone and call the grant agency. Be prepared to talk about your unique strengths and listen carefully to pick up on any additional expectations that may not be included in the RFP.

Myth 4: Meeting the deadline is the most important goal of a successful grant writer. Not exactly. The two most important goals are to produce a top-quality proposal and target it to the right grant agency. Far too many professors succumb to the urge to put deadlines ahead of everything else. Resist firing off 11th-hour proposals to meet a last-minute deadline. Slow down, produce a quality proposal, and submit it to the agency next year or submit it to a similar agency now.

Myth 5: Collaborating with colleagues will give more time for grant writing. Unfortunately, just the opposite is true. Collaborating on a grant actually requires more time than writing one alone. This does not mean that collaboration is bad. But if you decide to pursue a grant with colleagues, take time from the outset to clarify the roles of all participants. Above all, choose partners who are compatible and who have similar work habits. Choose self-motivated, Type A personalities. People with Type B personalities won't get beyond talking about grant writing anyway, so it really doesn't matter whether they choose to collaborate.

Myth 6: Grants are awarded to those applicants with the greatest needs. Most grants go to applicants whose proposals seem most likely to deliver services and meet the agency's goals better than all other applicants. So, instead of focusing on your needs, focus on how your strengths can meet the grant agency's goals. What unique attributes do you, your institution, and your region have that can be used to excel at meeting those goals?

Buying into any of these myths can keep success at arm's length for many grant writers. In addition to safeguarding against them, perhaps you can also benefit from the following tips:

Tip 1: Make sure that your proposal contains all of the essential parts. At a minimum, each proposal should include a transmittal letter, a title page, an abstract, a table of contents, a list of objectives, a timetable, a budget, and a plan for evaluating your program.

- A transmittal letter is a one- to two-page letter signed by the senior officer at your institution assuring that the institution supports the proposal. The letter should contain the president's telephone number, fax number, and address.
- Your title page should contain the project's title, your institution's name, and the date. Make sure that it responds to the purposes stated in the RFP.

- The abstract should be short and clear. It is an opportunity to sell your idea; so, use it accordingly.
- The purposes, goals, and objectives section offers a second opportunity to present your proposal's strengths.
- An often-overlooked tool is the timetable. Although many RFPs do not ask for a timetable, all grant agencies want to know when you promise to deliver on their goals. A good flow chart can help. Also, be sure and say how you can sustain your program once the grant expires.
- The proposed budget deserves special attention. Be sure it is adequate to do the job but not excessive. The most important parts of the project should be allocated the most money. Be sure to offer in-kind contributions; the more the better. Also, you might consider offering a special feature to enrich the offerings of your proposal but one that also can be deleted during negotiations, without damaging the rest of the proposal.

Tip 2: Clarity is everything. Because so many proposals are poorly written, I devoted a full chapter to writing style in my new book, *Grant Writing in Higher Education: A Step-by-Step Guide*. For grants, the best style is straightforward and simple. Avoid unnecessary jargon, long paragraphs, long sentences, and unfamiliar words. Consciously or unconsciously, many grant writers try to impress their readers with unfamiliar phrases, high-toned language, and complex writing. This is all wrong: By far, the best proposals are also the clearest.

Tip 2: Mention unique qualities. Because they receive so many applications, program evaluators often face the dilemma of having to choose from among several excellent proposals. This gives a distinct advantage to any proposal that has a unique (and memorable) feature. For example, you might know a distinguished expert whom you could use as a consultant to give your grant additional credibility, or your town might have some businesses, social institutions, or industries that would contribute to the effectiveness of your proposal. Accentuate those assets.

Tip 4: Talk the talk, then walk the walk. Professors often ask whether they should use trendy language. My answer is yes, but only if you can show how your proposals will live up to the promises suggested by that language. For example, at one time, the most common word to appear in education-reform proposals was "rigor." So when writing a proposal to finance a series of summer institutes for physics teachers, I claimed that my proposed program would be rigorous. Then, I planned into every participant's schedule 12 credit hours of physics. That's a heavy load to take during the summer. Because of this and a few other unique qualities, the proposal was supported, again and again, beating out the competition four years in a row.

Tip 5: Remain flexible. Sometimes writers become so attached to their articles, books, or grant proposals that they are unwilling to alter their work, even when asked to do so by potential publishers or grant agencies. That can be a big mistake. Grant agencies seldom award the full budget you request without asking for a few adjustments in the proposal. Perhaps a healthy outlook on this is, "If I was creative enough to produce something that a foundation wishes to support, I am creative enough to find ways to meet both its goals and mine."

Tip 6: Take steps to make sure your grant gets renewed. Once a proposal is granted, the time has arrived to begin working to ensure that it stays that way. Start by collecting artifacts that attest to the quality of the job you have done. Consider the level of evidence of each artifact. For example, a handwritten note

that says "Thanks" is evidence but it is not as good as a letter written on official letterhead thanking you for the outstanding job you did.

I have one final piece of advice. Most institutions have fallen on hard times. Instead of worrying about your needs, search for a grant agency that supports needs that are similar to yours and then carefully craft a proposal that assures the evaluators that, if given the opportunity, you will out-perform your competition on meeting the organization's goals. Should your proposal be rejected, realize that in grant writing, rejection is an essential step to success. Just take a deep breath and rewrite your proposal, making it irresistible to the next evaluators.

Kenneth T. Henson is dean of the School of Education at the Citadel and author of a new book on grant writing in higher education.

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