Best Practices for Writing a Compelling Proposal

Presented By Helene Herbert, Grants Plus

Meet Your Presenter

Helene Herbert, MBA
Assistant Director

ABOUT GRANTS PLUS

Grants Plus is the nation's most trusted and experienced professional grant seeking firm.

We partner with nonprofit organizations as their trusted advisors to find grant opportunities, guide funder relationship building strategies, write compelling grant proposals, and make long-term grants gains.

$250 million raised in grants from private, corporate, and government funders

Over 15 years experience serving nonprofits with diverse missions, locations, and sizes

Award-winning team of 30+ of the country's top fundraising professionals

First: What is your ask?

First Things First: A Clear Ask

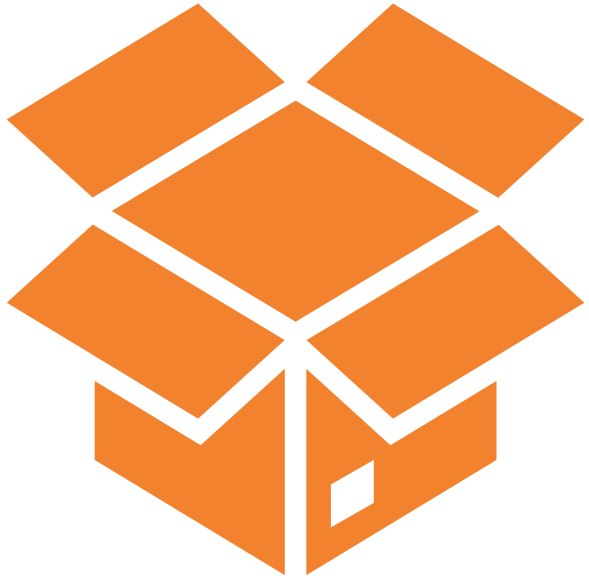
A clear ask distills the essence of your request into 2-4 memorable sentences

- Simple, clear, concise
- The “thesis statement” for your proposal

If it’s the only thing the funder reads, they will know what you plan to do with the grant and why you need it

Components of A Clear Ask

- Need in the community
- The activities will you do to address this need
- Who and how many will benefit
- What will result
  - This can include short-term outputs, medium-term objectives, or progress toward a long-term goal



Example: An Unclear Ask

The Achievers Academy seeks funding to grow our after-school connections program, which provides multiple opportunities for many teens to learn and grow.

Developing a Clear Ask

Prompt	
What is the need in the community?	• Hundreds of students in our service area are at risk of dropping out of school before graduation
What will you do to address the need?	• Provide after-school tutoring that uses both in-person tutors and online learning tools
What do you need to address the need?	• Computers, curriculum, training
Who will benefit?	• 75 high school students
What will result?	• Improved academics and increased graduation rates

Example: A Clear Ask

The Achievers Academy provides after-school tutoring for 75 public high school students that the district has identified at risk for dropping out. Studies have shown that at-risk students who receive hybrid in-person tutoring with online activities perform better than those receiving only tutoring. This $15,000 request will improve the academic performance of students by allowing us to provide hybrid tutoring for the first time through the purchase of an online curriculum, 75 Chromebooks, and training for our three in-school tutors.

Writing a Strong Proposal

Purpose of a Grant Proposal

- Show how your work advances the funder's mission and creates the change they want
- Explain to the funder what problem exists and how you are solving it
- Explain who will benefit and how
- Give the funder confidence that you are the best organization to address the problem
- Explain exactly what you will do
- Move your idea to the top of the list!

ELEMENTS OF A STRONG PROPOSAL

A Strong Proposal is Complete

Clearly and completely answer all questions

- Avoid copying/pasting from section to section

Follow the instructions!

- Adhere to funder guidelines around formatting and page, character, or word count
- Follow the letter and spirit of the law

Explicitly address any required criteria for funding

- Make it obvious that you are eligible

Include all required attachments

A Strong Proposal is Error Free

Free from misspellings, typos, and grammatical errors

- Ideally edited by someone other than the writer

Free from contradictory information

- Each section should say the same thing
- Be consistent in names for programs, program elements, staff titles, etc.
- Make sure your math is correct even in the narrative

A Strong Proposal is Clear and Logical

Most reviewers are reading multiple proposals

- Make their life easier with clear, logical writing

The best writing is simple and easily understood

- Short, easy-to-digest paragraphs
- Avoid jargon and “terms of art”
- Precise, concise language

Provide navigational aids when possible

- Headings, titles and sub-titles
- Bullet points and lists
- Visual aids and photos

A Strong Proposal is Engaging

Use lively writing that creates a connection with the reader

Use the active voice

- Write about making things happen

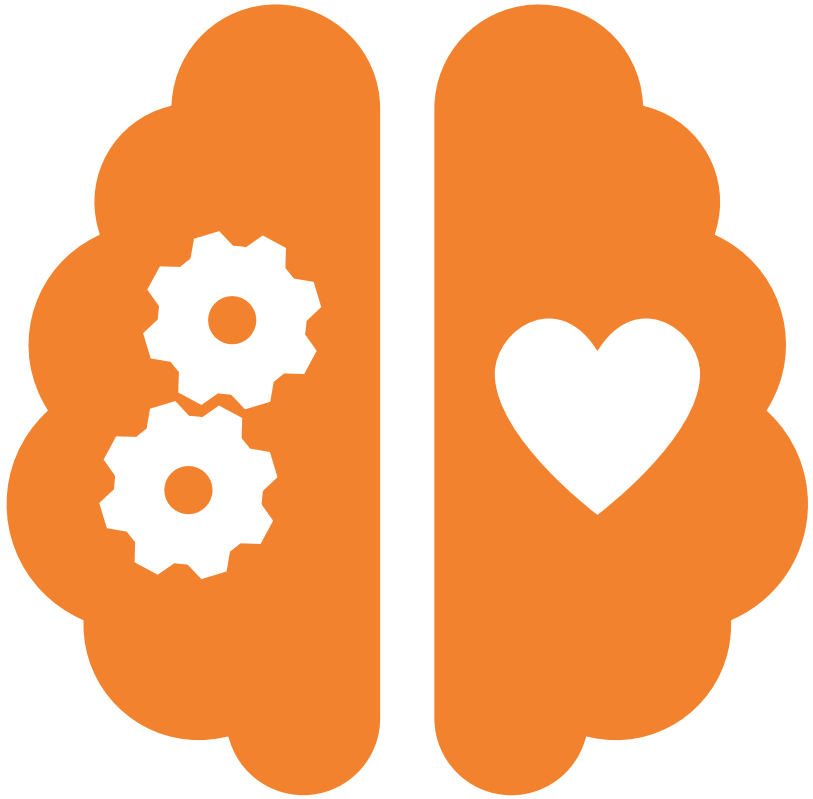
Incorporate Stories (more on this in a bit)

A Strong Proposal is Persuasive

Appeal to both logic and emotion:

LOGIC

Build a strong, fact-based case using clear data that conveys the urgency of the need, your plan to address it, and your qualifications to do so



EMOTION

Highlight real people who have been transformed because of your organization's work and show how funding from the proposal will continue to change more lives

A Strong Proposal is Persuasive

Show How An Impact 100 Grant Would be Transformative

- How will you make a lasting difference?
- How will your project address systemic issues?
- How will it be sustainable?
- What is the IMPACT?

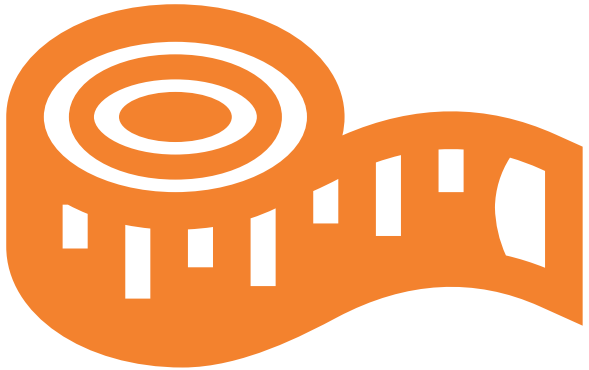
A Strong Proposal is Tailored

Explicitly connect the proposal to the funder's mission and interests

- State how your work will advance the funder's mission

Repeat or reflect language from the funder's own materials

Use an appropriate tone and approach for the funder



A Strong Proposal Addresses DEI

Grant makers are increasingly interested in funding organizations that advance diversity, equity, and inclusion

- Include how the community you serve is involved in your work
- Include how your organization embraces diversity internally
- Be cognizant of the language you're using to talk about groups you serve

A Strong Proposal Recognizes The Service Ecosystem

Many grant makers want to know that the work they are funding complements the work of others without duplicating it

- Convey what your place is within the overall service ecosystem and how your work differs from others
- Discuss any client pipeline from other organizations or exit to other organizations
- Name partners who provide co-located or co-operative services and their role in your organization's work

Using Compelling Stories

First: Giving Data its Due

Grant funders expect solid data

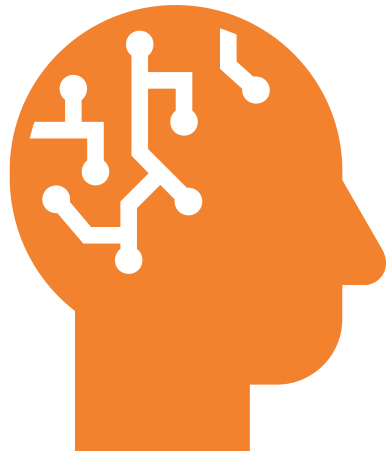
- *The plural of "story" is not "data"*

Data Shows Need and Results

- What population do you serve?
- What does your work do?
- What are the outcomes for those you serve?
- How many people does it impact?
- How do you know if you are being successful?

Why Data Fails

A paradox of the human mind: our compassion and desire to help people diminishes as the number of people affected grows larger



Where Data Fails

The death of one man: that is a catastrophe. One hundred thousand deaths: that is a statistic!

— German journalist Kurt Tucholsky, quoting a fictional French WWI diplomat

Stories to Make Data Come Alive

A reality we live with is that grant makers want data to feed their metrics, but they also need stories to feed their hearts

- Grant makers are institutional funders, but they are also made up of individual people
- A strong story can provide an arc to follow that keeps interest and shows your data in context

Tell Clients' Stories

Tell a story in your narrative

- Frame with a client's journey that illustrates the steps of your program and the change it creates
- Include a story that demonstrates your impact

Tell Your Organization's Story

Your mission

Your history

- Demonstrate that you have experience
- Highlight where your past work has also advanced the funder's mission

Your major programs

- A bullet/sentence or two about each

Elements of a Good Story

- Simple
- Credible
- Surprising/Unexpected
- Relatable
- Emotionally Impactful

Grab the Reader's Attention

Lead grant proposals with a relatable story to demonstrate the need for your program

- Show a dramatic or surprising example of the need for your work
- Connect the story to broader need
- Connect the story to your work

Example 1: Showing the Need

Every morning, Monique's alarm wakes her with its shrill beep at 6 AM. In the hour before her three kids wake up, she finishes any homework assignments from the full load of classes she is taking at [College Name] and gets ready for her busy day.

On her schedule: working a four-hour shift at her part-time job and attending her Anatomy and Physiology class at [College Name] , a required course for the nursing degree she is pursing.

As a single parent, Monique will also shepherd her children through the day, getting them to and from school, supervising their homework, preparing their dinner, and spending quality time with them before tucking them in at night.

Example 1: Connecting to Work

On good days, everything works well. On more challenging days – those with a sick child, a car problem, or an issue that keeps her late at her job – Monique struggles to make it all work.

There are a growing number of women like Monique – single "student-parents" who are juggling their college dreams with the demands of children.

More than 25% of the students at [College] are single student-parents. Hundreds of our students face challenges like Monique, and the [College] Parent Resource Center helps them overcome these challenges by offering specialized academic counseling, access to wraparound services, and. . .

Tell About a Client's Journey

A client's journey can be a story arc that describes your work

- What was the person's life like before they came to you?
- What made them come to you?
- What services did they use/how did they use them?
- What change did you create in their life?
- What is their life like after leaving your program?

Example 2: Showing the Need

Five-year-old Grant was having a tough time at school. Although just a kindergartener, he had been acting so aggressively in class that his teacher feared he might hurt another student. One day, after being sent to the office, he began flipping over chairs and pulling things off the walls. Clearly, he was in need of support.

Fortunately, [organization] was there to leap into action. [Organization's] School-Based Services program embeds mental health staff at schools throughout the city and provides crucial services to children and families.

Example 2: Organization's Work

In Grant's case, [Organization's] School Coordinator—the first point of contact for School-Based Services—quickly became involved. School Coordinator Chelsey, already on-site at the school and trusted by school staff, was invited to come to the office and work with Grant. First, she knelt to speak to Grant on his level.

At first, he tried picking up objects to throw, but Chelsey calmly removed each one from his small hand and asked him to breathe deeply with her. Chelsey then began a discussion with Grant, steering him toward a more productive way of communicating.

Chelsey has continued to work hand-in-hand with school staff to improve Grant's situation. They reassessed his daily schedule and approached his education more holistically.

Example 2: The Result

Now, Grant has learned to catch himself when he starts to lose his temper—and he's better at keeping his cool. He is still working at moderating his behavior, but he's more focused in class and, in turn, his classmates are better able to learn.

This story is just one of hundreds that play out each year in our community's schools.

Questions?

GRANTS Plus 15

www.grantsplus.com

info@grantsplus.com

Connect with me on LinkedIn!

@ Helene Herbert