



Grant Application First Aid Kit
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3 fatal flaws to avoid in a grant application

Grant applications are a pain. The time spent collecting information, the countless meetings with topic experts and budget people, and the seemingly unending minutiae you have to deal with to complete an application can give even the most experienced grant writer a migraine.

Everyone is counting on you to get them the equipment they need — you'd better not let them down! — and you want to ensure your application has a fighting chance of getting funded, so you have to avoid errors big and small.

Flaws in an otherwise stellar grant application will send you to the funder's trash can in an instant. To make sure you aren't headed toward the circular file before you've been given a chance, here are three fatal flaws that you absolutely must avoid.

1. Don't Miss the Deadline

This may seem like a no-brainer, but the fact is it happens, even to veteran grant professionals. Time is always your worst enemy, but the fact is you already know what the deadline is when you review the solicitation. This information is not hidden and it's not meant to trip you up.

Most applications are submitted online, so you have very little chance to submit an application after the deadline. Even if you are able to get the application through the system, everything is time-stamped, so if your application is even a few seconds after the deadline you will be disqualified. Is the time listed eastern, pacific, or something else? Make sure you know.

If you are mailing in an application, understand whether the deadline refers to it being postmarked by that date or received in their office by the close of business (or earlier) on that date. That's a big difference and anything received after the deadline will be immediately discarded.

You should plan to have everything ready for submission at least 2 days prior to the deadline. That will at least give you some wiggle room when a last minute issue arises. And, believe me, there will be last minute issues.

2. Don't Ignore the Details

Grant solicitations contain everything you need to know to decide whether you want to pursue the opportunity, including what the funder is expecting the project to accomplish. It also lists what will and, most importantly, will not be funded.

Submitting an application that doesn't meet these very specific criteria will not only doom the application, it will give the funder a bad feeling about you. If the solicitation says it will not pay overtime, don't ask for it. If it is expecting you to connect with community partners, make sure they are all on board and ready to work with you. If the performance measures include specific tasks your officers are expected to accomplish, show when and how that will happen.

No one wants to waste a funder's time with a project that doesn't fit, and you certainly shouldn't be wasting yours applying for a grant that will not meet your needs.

3. Don't Mess Up the Budget

Create your budget very early in the application process. The reality is that most people save it for last. It's important to at least start the budget at the beginning, and to keep a clear eye on it as the application progresses. It is especially important that each item listed in the budget is also accounted for in the project narrative, with very specific details on how and why it is vital to the overall project.

Another issue with budget is the actual cost of things. The people reviewing your application are experts in the field, and they have a very good idea of what items cost. Don't unrealistically pad your budget in hopes of getting additional funds for something else. When you do that, it appears that you are only interested in getting the money, not in solving the problem.

Conversely, underestimating your budget will mean you have underfunded your project. You can't go back to the funder and request more money, so your agency will absorb those additional costs. That is a very bad thing, but totally preventable. Get an up-to-date quote from a reliable vendor, but don't count on any offers of discounts or incentives promised by the vendor when filling out the application budget. Things change between the time you submit an application and receive the award, and you don't want to run the risk of shortchanging your project.

What Do You Do? Your Best!

Let's say you've avoided these fatal flaws. How can you ensure your application is perfect? And by "perfect" I don't mean to imply it will definitely get funded. That's up to the funder and their very complex set of criteria for rating applications.

But you can submit an application that stands a much better chance of being funded if you follow one simple rule: do your best.

Know what your agency needs and why, you found a suitable grant opportunity for your project, you followed the guidelines in the solicitation to the letter, and you have made sure that your application is complete, specific and accurate. It really is that easy!