A PROPOSAL WRITING SHORT COURSE

Introduction

The subject of this short course is proposal writing. But the proposal does not stand alone. It must be part of a process of planning and of research on, outreach to, and cultivation of potential foundation and corporate donors.

This process is grounded in the conviction that a partnership should develop between the nonprofit and the donor. When you spend a great deal of your time seeking money, it is hard to remember that it can also be difficult to give money away. In fact, the dollars contributed by a foundation or corporation have no value until they are attached to solid programs in the nonprofit sector.

This truly is an ideal partnership. The non-profits have the ideas and the capacity to solve problems, but no dollars with which to implement them. The foundations and corporations have the financial resources but not the other resources needed to create programs. Bring the two together effectively, and the result is a dynamic collaboration.

You need to follow a step-by-step process in the search for private dollars. It takes time and persistence to succeed. After you have written a proposal, it could take as long as a year to obtain the funds needed to carry it out. And even a perfectly written proposal submitted to the right prospect may be rejected.

Raising funds is an investment in the future. Your aim should be to build a network of foundation and corporate funders, many of which give small gifts on a fairly steady basis and a few of which give large, periodic grants. By doggedly pursuing the various steps of the process, each year you can retain most of your regular supporters and strike a balance with the comings and goings of larger donors.

The recommended process is not a formula to be rigidly adhered to. It is a suggested approach that can be adapted to fit the needs of any nonprofit and the peculiarities of each situation. Fundraising is an art as well as a science. You must bring your own creativity to it and remain flexible.

Gathering Background Information

The first thing you will need to do in writing the master proposal is to gather the documentation for it. You will require background documentation in three areas: concept, program, and finance.

If all of this information is not readily available to you, determine who will help you gather each type of information. If you are part of a small nonprofit with no staff, a knowledgeable board member will be the logical choice. If you are in a larger agency, there should be program and financial support staff who can help you. Once you know with whom to talk, identify the questions to ask. This data-gathering process makes the actual writing much easier. And by focusing again on mission and available resources, it also helps key people within your agency seriously consider the project's value.

Concept

It is important that you have a good sense of how the project fits into the philosophy and mission of your agency. The need that the proposal is addressing must also be documented. These concepts must be well articulated in the

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proposal. Funders want to know that a project reinforces the overall direction of an organization, and they may need to be convinced that the case for the project is compelling. You should collect background data on your organization and on the need to be addressed so that your arguments are well documented.

Program

Here is a checklist of the program information you require:

- The nature of the project and how it will be conducted;
- The timetable for the project;
- The anticipated outcomes and how best to evaluate the results; and
- Staffing needs, including deployment of existing staff and new hires.

Financials

You will not be able to pin down all the expenses associated with the project until the program details and timing have been worked out. Thus, the main financial data gathering takes place after the narrative part of the master proposal has been written. However, at this stage you do need to sketch out the broad outlines of the budget to be sure that the costs are in reasonable proportion to the outcomes you anticipate. If it appears that the costs will be prohibitive, even with a foundation grant, you should then scale back your plans or adjust them to remove the least cost-effective expenditures.

Components of a Proposal

Executive Summary	An umbrella statement of your case and summary of the entire proposal.	1 page
Statement of Need	Why this project is necessary.	2 pages
Project Description	Nuts and bolts of how the project will be implemented.	3 pages
Budget	Financial description of the project plus explanatory notes.	1 page
Organization Information	History and governing structure of the nonprofit; its primary activities, audience and services.	1 page
Conclusion	Summary of the proposal's main points.	2 paragraphs

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The Executive Summary

This first page of the proposal is the most important section of the entire document. Here you will provide the reader with a snapshot of what is to follow. Specifically, it summarizes all of the key information and is a sales document designed to convince the reader that this project should be considered for support. Be certain to include the following:

Problem — A brief statement of the problem or need your agency has recognized and is prepared to address (one or two paragraphs).

Solution — A short description of the project, including what will take place and how many people will benefit from the program, how and where it will operate, for how long, and who will staff it (one or two paragraphs).

Funding requirements — An explanation of the amount of grant money required for the project and what your plans are for funding it in the future (one paragraph).

Organization and its expertise — A brief statement of the name, history, purpose, and activities of your agency, emphasizing its capacity to carry out this proposal (one paragraph).

The Statement of Need

If the funder reads beyond the executive summary, you have successfully piqued his or her interest. Your next task is to build on this initial interest in your project by enabling the funder to understand the problem that the project will remedy.

The statement of need will enable the reader to learn more about the issues. It presents the facts and evidence that support the need for the project and establishes that your nonprofit understands the problems and therefore can reasonably address them. The information used to support the case can come from authorities in the field, as well as from your agency's own experience.

You want the need section to be succinct, yet persuasive. Like a good debater, you must assemble all the arguments. Then present them in a logical sequence that will readily convince the reader of their importance. As you marshal your arguments, consider the following six points.

1. **Decide which facts or statistics best support the project.**

   Be sure the data you present are accurate. There are few things more embarrassing than to have the funder tell you that your information is out of date or incorrect. Information that is too generic or broad will not help you develop a winning argument for your project. Information that does not relate to your organization or the project you are presenting will cause the funder to question the entire proposal. There also should be a balance between the information presented and the scale of the program.

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2. Give the reader hope.

The picture you paint should not be so grim that the solution appears hopeless. The funder will wonder if this investment in a grant would be worth it. Here's an example of a solid statement of need: Impaired driving kills, but statistics prove that increased enforcement and education reduces the likelihood of death. Hence, a program to encourage prevention of impaired driving will reduce the risk of death. Avoid overstatement and overly emotional appeals.

3. Decide if you want to put your project forward as a model.

This could expand the base of potential funders, but serving as a model works only for certain types of projects. Don't try to make this argument if it doesn't really fit. Funders may well expect your agency to follow through with a replication plan if you present your project as a model. If the decision about a model is affirmative, you should document how the problem you are addressing occurs in other communities. Be sure to explain how your solution could be a solution for others as well.

4. Determine whether it is reasonable to portray the need as acute.

You are asking the funder to pay more attention to your proposal because either the problem you address is worse than others or the solution you propose makes more sense than others. Here is an example of a balanced but weighty statement: "Drug abuse is a national problem. Each day, children all over the country die from drug overdose. In the South Bronx the problem is worse. More children die here than any place else. It is an epidemic. Hence, our drug prevention program is needed more in the South Bronx than in any other part of the city."

5. Decide whether you can demonstrate that your program addresses the need differently or better than other projects that preceded it.

It is often difficult to describe the need for your project without being critical of the competition. But you must be careful not to do so. Being critical of other non-profits will not be well received by the funder. It may cause the funder to look more carefully at your own project to see why you felt you had to build your case by demeaning others. The funder may have invested in these other projects or may begin to consider them, now that you have brought them to their attention.

If possible, you should make it clear that you are cognizant of, and on good terms with, others doing work in your field. Keep in mind that today's funders are very interested in collaboration. They may even ask why you are not collaborating with those you view as key competitors. So at the least you need to describe how your work complements, but does not duplicate, the work of others.

6. Avoid circular reasoning.

In circular reasoning, you present the absence of your solution as the actual problem. Then your solution is offered as the way to solve the problem. For example, the circular reasoning for promoting alcohol- and drug-free activities for youth might go like this: "One of the reasons youth drink is because they cite a lack of things to do. Sponsoring alcohol- and drug-free dances, parties or films would help to solve that problem." A more persuasive case would refer to statements from young people who are committed to help with the planning of the activities.

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The statement might also refer to any survey data that cites a lack of recreation or entertainment options as a reason why youth drink alcohol.

The statement of need does not have to be long and involved. Short, concise information captures the reader's attention.

The Project Description

This section of your proposal should have four subsections: objectives, methods, staffing/administration, and evaluation. Together, objectives and methods dictate staffing and administrative requirements. They then become the focus of the evaluation to assess the results of the project. Taken together, the four subsections present an interlocking picture of the total project.

Objectives

Objectives are the measurable outcomes of the program. They define your methods. Your objectives must be tangible, specific, concrete, measurable, and achievable in a specified time period. Grantseekers often confuse objectives with goals, which are conceptual and more abstract. For the purpose of illustration, here is the goal of a project with a subsidiary objective:

Goal: Our after-school program will help children read better.

Objective: Our after-school remedial education program will assist fifty children in improving their reading scores by one grade level as demonstrated on standardized reading tests administered after participating in the program for six months.

The goal in this case is abstract: improving reading, while the objective is much more specific. It is achievable in the short term (six months) and measurable (improving fifty children's reading scores by one grade level). With competition for dollars so great, well-articulated objectives are increasingly critical to a proposal's success.

Using a different example, there are at least four types of objectives:

1. **Behavioral** — A human action is anticipated.

   Example: Fifty of the seventy children participating will learn to swim.

2. **Performance** — A specific time frame within which a behavior will occur, at an expected proficiency level, is expected.

   Example: Fifty of the seventy children will learn to swim within six months and will pass a basic swimming proficiency test administered by a Red Cross-certified lifeguard.

3. **Process** — The manner in which something occurs is an end in itself.

   Example: We will document the teaching methods utilized, identifying those with the greatest success.

4. **Product** — A tangible item results.

   Example: A manual will be created to be used in teaching swimming to this age and proficiency group in the future.

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In any given proposal, you will find yourself setting forth one or more of these types of objectives, depending on the nature of your project. Be certain to present the objectives very clearly. Make sure that they do not become lost in verbage and that they stand out on the page. You might, for example, use numbers, bullets, or indentations to denote the objectives in the text. Above all, be realistic in setting objectives. Don't promise what you can't deliver. Remember, the funder will want to be told in the final report that the project actually accomplished these objectives.

Methods

By means of the objectives, you have explained to the funder what will be achieved by the project. The methods section describes the specific activities that will take place to achieve the objectives. It might be helpful to divide our discussion of methods into the following: how, when, and why.

■ *How:* This is the detailed description of what will occur from the time the project begins until it is completed. Your methods should match the previously stated objectives.

■ *When:* The methods section should present the order and timing for the tasks. It might make sense to provide a timetable so that the reader does not have to map out the sequencing on his own. The timetable tells the reader "when" and provides another summary of the project that supports the rest of the methods section.

■ *Why:* You may need to defend your chosen methods, especially if they are new or unorthodox. Why will the planned work lead to the outcomes you anticipate? You can answer this question in a number of ways, including using expert testimony and examples of other projects that work.

The methods section enables the reader to visualize the implementation of the project. It should convince the reader that your agency knows what it is doing, thereby establishing its credibility.

Staffing/Administration

In describing the methods, you will have mentioned staffing for the project. You now need to devote a few sentences to discussing the number of staff, their qualifications, and specific assignments. Details about individual staff members involved in the project can be included either as part of this section or in the appendix, depending on the length and importance of this information.

"Staffing" may refer to volunteers or to consultants, as well as to paid staff. Most proposal writers do not develop staffing sections for projects that are primarily volunteer run. Describing tasks that volunteers will undertake, however, can be most helpful to the proposal reader. Such information underscores the value added by the volunteers as well as the cost-effectiveness of the project.

For a project with paid staff, be certain to describe which staff will work full time and which will work part time on the project. Identify staff already employed by your nonprofit and those to be recruited specifically for the project. How will you free up the time of an already fully deployed individual?

Salary and project costs are affected by the qualifications of the staff. Delineate the practical experience you require for key staff, as well as level of expertise and educational background. If an individual has already been selected to direct the program, summarize his or her credentials and include a brief biographical sketch in the appendix. A strong project director can help influence a grant decision.

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Describe for the reader your plans for administering the project. This is especially important in a large operation, if more than one agency is collaborating on the project, or if you are using a fiscal agent. It needs to be crystal clear who is responsible for financial management, project outcomes, and reporting.

Evaluation

An evaluation plan should not be left for consideration as your project is winding down; instead, it should be built into the project. Including an evaluation plan in your proposal indicates that you take your objectives seriously and want to know how well you have achieved them. Evaluation is also a sound management tool. Like strategic planning, it helps a nonprofit refine and improve its program. An evaluation can often be the best means for others to learn from your experience.

There are two types of formal evaluation. One measures the product; the other analyzes the process. Either or both might be appropriate to your project. The approach you choose will depend on the nature of the project and its objectives. For either type, you will need to describe the manner in which evaluation information will be collected and how the data will be analyzed. You should present your plan for how the evaluation and its results will be reported and the audience to which it will be directed. For example, it might be used internally or be shared with the funder, or it might deserve a wider audience. Your funder might even have an opinion about the scope of this dissemination

The Budget

The budget for your proposal may be as simple as a one-page statement of projected expenses. Or your proposal may require a more complex presentation, perhaps including a page on projected support and revenue and notes explaining various items of expense or of revenue.

Expense Budget

As you prepare to assemble the budget, go back through the proposal narrative and make a list of all personnel and non-personnel items related to the operation of the project. Be sure that you list not only new costs that will be incurred if the project is funded but also any ongoing expenses for items that will be allocated to the project. Then get the relevant costs from the person in your agency who is responsible for keeping the books. You may need to estimate the proportions of your agency's ongoing expenses that should be charged to the project and any new costs, such as salaries for project personnel not yet hired. Put the costs you have identified next to each item on your list.

Your list of budget items and the calculations you have done to arrive at a dollar figure for each item should be summarized on worksheets. You should keep these to remind yourself how the numbers were developed. These worksheets can be useful as you continue to develop the proposal and discuss it with funders; they are also a valuable tool for monitoring the project once it is under way and for reporting after completion of the grant. A portion of a worksheet for a year-long project might look like the following:

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Item	Description	Cost
Executive director	Supervision	10% of salary = $10,000 25% benefits = $ 2,500
Project director	Full time	11 months at $35,000 = $32,083 25% benefits = $ 8,025
Tutors	12 working 10 hours per week for three months	12 x 10 x 13 x $ 4.50 = $ 7,020
Office space	Requires 25% of current space	25% x $20,000 = $ 5,000
Overhead	20% of project cost	20% x $64,628 = $12,926

With your worksheets in hand, you are ready to prepare the expense budget. For most projects, costs should be grouped into subcategories, selected to reflect the critical areas of expense. All significant costs should be broken out within the subcategories, but small ones can be combined on one line. You might divide your expense budget into personnel and non-personnel costs; your personnel subcategories might include salaries, benefits, and consultants.

Subcategories under non-personnel costs might include travel, equipment, and printing, for example, with a dollar figure attached to each line.

Budget Narrative

A narrative portion of the budget is used to explain any unusual line items in the budget and is not always needed. If costs are straightforward and the numbers tell the story clearly, explanations are redundant. If you decide a budget narrative is needed, you can structure it in one of two ways. You can create "Notes to the Budget," with footnote-style numbers on the line items in the budget keyed to numbered explanations. If really extensive or more general explanation is required, you can structure the budget narrative as just that—straight text. Remember though, the basic narrative about the project and your organization belong elsewhere in the proposal, not in the budget narrative.

Organizational Information and Conclusion

Organizational Information

Normally a resume of your nonprofit organization should come at the end of your proposal. Your natural inclination may be to put this information up front in the document. But it is usually better to sell the need for your project and then your agency's ability to carry it out.

It is not necessary to overwhelm the reader with facts about your organization. This information can be conveyed easily by attaching a brochure or other prepared statement. In two pages or less, tell the reader when your nonprofit came into existence; state its mission, being certain to demonstrate how the subject of the proposal fits within or extends that mission; and describe the organization's structure, programs, and special expertise.

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Discuss the size of the board, how board members are recruited, and their level of participation. Give the reader a feel for the makeup of the board. (You should include the full board list in an appendix.) If your agency is composed of volunteers or has an active volunteer group, describe the function that the volunteers fill. Provide details on the staff, including the numbers of full and part-time staff, and their levels of expertise.

Describe the kinds of activities in which your staff engage. Explain briefly the assistance you provide. Describe the audience you serve, any special or unusual needs they face, and why they rely on your agency. Cite the number of people who are reached through your programs. Tying all of the information about your nonprofit together, cite your agency's expertise, especially as it relates to the subject of your proposal.

Conclusion

Every proposal should have a concluding paragraph or two. This is a good place to call attention to the future, after the grant is completed. If appropriate, you should outline some of the follow-up activities that might be undertaken to begin to prepare your funders for your next request. Alternatively, you should state how the project might carry on without further grant support.

This section is also the place to make a final appeal for your project. Briefly reiterate what your nonprofit wants to do and why it is important. Underscore why your agency needs funding to accomplish it. Don't be afraid at this stage to use a bit of emotion to solidify your case

What Happens Next?

Submitting your proposal is nowhere near the end of your involvement in the grantmaking process. Grant review procedures vary widely, and the decision-making process can take anywhere from a few weeks to six months. During the review process, the funder may ask for additional information either directly from you or from outside consultants or professional references. Invariably, this is a difficult time for the grantseeker. You need to be patient but persistent. Some grantmakers outline their review procedures in annual reports or application guidelines. If you are unclear about the process, don't hesitate to ask.

If your hard work results in a grant, take a few moments to acknowledge the funder's support with a letter of thanks. You also need to find out whether the funder has specific forms, procedures, and deadlines for reporting the progress of your project. Clarifying your responsibilities as a grantee at the outset, particularly with respect to financial reporting, will prevent misunderstandings and more serious problems later.

Nor is rejection necessarily the end of the process. If you're unsure why your proposal was rejected, ask. Did the funder need additional information? Would they be interested in considering the proposal at a future date? Now might also be the time to begin cultivation of a prospective funder. Put them on your mailing list so that they can become further acquainted with your organization. Remember, there's always next year.

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This short course in proposal writing was excerpted from The Foundation Center's Center's Guide to Proposal Writing (New York: The Foundation Center, 1993), by Jane C. Geever and Patricia McNeill, fundraising consultants with extensive experience in the field. The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing and other resources on the subject are available for free use in Foundation Center libraries and Cooperating Collections.

Additional Readings

Burns, Michael E. Proposal Writer's Guide. New Haven, CT: Development & Technical Assistance Center.

Coley, Soraya M., and Cynthia Scheinberg. Proposal Writing. Newburg Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Gooch, Judith Mirick. Writing Winning Proposals. Washington, D.C.: Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

Hall, Mary. Getting Funded: A Complete Guide to Proposal Writing. 3rd ed. Portland, OR: Continuing Education Publications.

Kiritz, Norton J. Program Planning and Proposal Writing. Expanded version. Los Angeles, CA: The Grantsmanship Center.