

Grant Writing 102: The Nuts and Bolts of Federal Grants (by Tom Kuhn)

In Grant Writing 101 we discussed general concepts of researching and writing grants within a non-profit academic setting. We delineated the major types of grants (federal, state and private) and discussed five major steps required to guarantee a successful grant development and proposal submission strategy. It is important to point out that the previous lesson is designed to introduce the reader to the *general task* of researching grant opportunity, organizing the process, developing a project that fits the RFP (Request for Proposals) and writing a winning grant proposal. This lesson is designed to introduce the reader to the *specific task(s)* required to prepare and submit a grant proposal to a US federal agency.

At the start of this lesson, it is useful to recall the five steps to writing a successful grant proposal discussed in the Grant Writing 101 lesson:

- (1) Read the RFP carefully; get to know the program metrics (categories of activities and limitations); gain an overall understanding of the program requirements and priorities; research the grantor; know the deadline and schedule accordingly;
- (2) Conceptualize the program; collaborate with your partners; decide/listen to what the project participants want to do and take notes to draw from when writing the proposal (step 4); decide on management structure; ground the project in a budget that is appropriate;
- (3) Contact the grantor personnel assigned to the grant and develop a rapport with that person(s); let them know what kind of project you have in mind and how/why you think it fits their grant program; seek answers to technical questions that help you develop your project while demonstrating your insight into their grant program; get them to know who you are and what you are doing in order to increase the odds that they will recognize your project during the selection process;
- (4) Draft the proposal; work to marry the objectives specified by the potential grantee participants with the funding priorities of the grantor; write early and give your team time to scrutinize the grant project the grant; because it is harder to implement a grant than it is to design and sell, make sure your grant is realistic and performance based; make sure you develop a budget that is accurate and sufficient (but within the suggested guidelines); and,
- (5) Edit and rewrite; good writing requires rewriting; the majority of losing proposals are written at the last minute leaving the proposal team little or no time for revision; make sure your final budget is appropriate to your program, as proposed; edit for grammar and syntax (this can be done at the very end and will help you wind down from the writing side of the project).

These points are representative of the most essential steps involved in the overall task of researching and writing grants and can be used as a general template to anticipate and schedule a particular grant writing assignment. This general strategy applies regardless of the particular grant program to which you are applying, including federal agency programs (e.g., US Department of Education, National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, etc.). However, because the particular steps associated with the different federal agencies vary widely in terms of competitiveness and complexity, it is important to work to further delineate the individual tasks required to anticipate, prepare and submit a grant proposal.

Where to begin? Throughout this manual, the reader is prompted to analyze the *task* of grant research and writing as just that, a task. Because experience and familiarity with the specifics as they relate to the professional development and implementation of particular program are required for success, this manual assumes that the grant team includes members with expertise in all of the areas of the project. It cannot be

overstated that the people actually involved in the design and implementation of the proposal and are the single most important project component and the key to project success. This manual, therefore, is designed to help primarily with the task of proposal organization and writing...be it yours or mine or some other grant entrepreneur's job.

Thus we begin at the beginning of the task: the Request for Proposals (RFP). You and your partners have engaged some general discussion regarding your project. You know generally what you want to do and who and what it will take financially to accomplish that task. You have been scanning the Internet looking for opportunity via the federal register and web search engines and *voila!* you've found an RFP to a federal program: The US Department of Projects.

From a quick scan of the RFP, you notice that the US Department of Projects is going to provide up to \$10,000 each to fund 100 projects and that the description matches what you want to do. You and your team talk it over and decide that you would like to pursue this grant. The question becomes: How to get started?

The first step is to become intimately familiar with the RFP. The person in charge of the planning and writing process will need to practically memorize this document because it is absolutely the most essential tool you have to guide you in the proposal development process. Not until you are completely familiar with this document are you ready to consult your team regarding what is technically required to develop and finalize a competitive grant proposal. As is often the case with the strictly regulated federal programs, failure to adhere to the instructions contained in the RFP will often disqualify your proposal altogether. Believe it when you hear that some federal agencies will reject your proposal for as much as 1 point divergence from the specified font size or a budget that is \$1 over the limit.

In order to assist with the development of a grant proposal to a US federal agency and because there is no way to accurately synthesize the myriad of federal proposal formats for our purposes, this lesson begins with an assessment of a fictional RFP. Next, this lesson moves to a comparative analysis of an equally fictional grant proposal. The goal here is to get the reader to make a connection between the logic of the RFP and the task of drafting the grant proposal.

**For the purposes of the Grant Writing 102: Nuts and Bolts of Federal Grants, this document does not lay out the full text of our discussions. For now we will cover this material in the verbal session only. However, I am going continue developing a draft grants manual based on these lessons but with fully developed textual components. That manual will be designed for college faculty and staff as a primer, a guide or a reference document depending on the level of experience of the grant writer. In no way will this manual substitute for the expertise of the project developer(s) who, as the single most important asset(s) in the development of a successful grant project, is absolutely essential to the writing a winning grant (and one that can be successfully implemented). That is, there is no such thing as a grant writer in a vacuum (well, maybe one that Mike Reese would come up with in the LCC chemistry lab, but not in terms of a theoretical vacuum of the kind that would impress Professor Einstein).

In order to present these issues in a timely fashion and because it would be extremely difficult to capture the essence of the RFP and proposal in such a short fashion, I have condensed the RFP and the proposal into two separate one-page outlines. Those outlines are designed to help us frame our discussions and to record the most important components of the grant proposal, as required by the RFP. They are representative, but not inclusive, of the general criteria found in most RFP's...and subsequently the grant proposal.

United States Department of Projects
Fictional Request for Proposal (RFP)

I. Administrative Components

- A. Legislative priorities
 - 1. Legislative authority (from Congress to particular agency): program description, general funding priorities, prohibitions
- B. Eligibility criteria
 - 1. Minimum qualifications: need, program requirements, institutional requirements (secondary or post-secondary, public, private or non-profit, enrollment numbers, special populations (minority, native-serving)), partnerships, degrees offered, most recent funding, federal and state designations, etc.
- C. Threshold requirements
 - 1. Funding allocation (maximum award amount), matching requirements, indirect cost rate, proposal formatting and instructions, contact and submission information, due date, mailing address, etc.

II. Proposal Content and Scoring

- A. Proposal content
 - 1. Required sections
 - a. Summary
 - b. Need
 - c. Project design
 - d. Project budget
 - e. Capabilities (institutional and personnel)
 - f. Management plan (responsibilities, organizational structure)
 - g. Sustainability
 - h. Evaluation
 - i. Literature review
- B. Proposal scoring (ranking on 100 point scale)
 - 1. Scoring instructions (including point allocations) provided to reviewers
 - a. Summary = 0 points
 - b. Need = 10 points
 - c. Project design = 25 points
 - d. Project budget = 20 points
 - e. Capabilities = 15 points
 - f. Management plan = 5 points
 - g. Sustainability = 10 points
 - h. Evaluation = 10 points
 - i. Literature review = 5 points

III. Required Forms and Appendices

- A. External (depending on which agency concerned)
 - 1. Cover page (main application form, can vary with each federal agency)
 - 2. Budget form (second most important, can vary with each federal agency)
 - 3. Appendices (there are a vast number of required federal forms that you will have to submit, with appropriate institutional signatures, with each grant proposal)
- B. Internal (University of Hawai'i)
 - 1. ORS Form 5 (required by UH Office of Research Services (ORS) for all proposals)

United States Department of Projects
Fictional Grant Proposal

I. Introduction

The introduction is where you have the opportunity to demonstrate that your project is appropriate to the program to which you are applying. At the same time, the introduction provides opportunity for you to introduce your project as well as the organizational logic of the proposal to follow. This is not the same thing as a program summary, which is designed to allow a reader or program officer quick access to your project, in that the introduction helps bring the reader into the full proposal (which can sometimes be as long as 100 pages). While you do not want to address all of the administrative components listed in the RFP in the introduction, you will do well to introduce the reader to your project in such a way as it is clear that the project is grounded in the legislative priorities of the program.

II. Proposal Content and Scoring

Without a doubt the content section of the document is by far the most important part of any grant proposal. However, without a solid organizational framework with which to organize to proposal you may find difficulty in creating the document itself (i.e., beginning the writing *task*). After all, how do you know to which areas to emphasize the most in order to help make your case to the readers charged with examining and ranking the proposal? Not to worry: Most, if not all, federal RFP's include both a listing of the sections required as well as the ranking criteria (and number of points assigned to each section) provided to the readers at the time of the proposal evaluations. Given those specifics, it is helpful to plan to provide information in the grant that is appropriate to the scoring system. For instance, if the page limit is 100 pages and the total number of points to be awarded is 100 points, it is often best to dedicate as many pages per section of content as there are points assigned to that section. Thus, if the need section is assigned 10 points and the proposal is allowed 100 pages, you should target a 10-page need section (or fraction thereof for shorter proposals). In most cases, understanding the connections between the required content and the scoring system helps the prospective grant writer to both understand and guide the proposal development process. In our case, the proposal might look something like this (albeit a severely shortened version):

- A. Summary – Provide a summary of the project as requested in the RFP. This will most likely be a short document to be attached just behind the cover page. It usually does not receive a score.
- B. Need – As many projects involve need analysis, make sure you provide data and analysis that satisfies this requirement within the larger context of the proposal.
- C. Project Design – By far the most important section of the proposal, the project design will always take precedent over the other sections. In that regard, the other sections need to tie into the project design in order to demonstrate command of the various components required for successful implementation of the proposed project. If you have extra room in the proposal, you might want to consider using that space for this section.
- D. Project Budget – The new UH President is famous for his maxim that “The budget is the DNA of a project.” This is true and some grant writers, myself included, move into the proposal only after working through the project via the budget. This is an important step if you are concerned about which components of the project to propose under the grant, and which to eliminate. Unfortunately most projects will not fund all of the components you are seeking to support, and oftentimes the team is tasked to make sure that the components that are included for funding are the most important in terms of implementing the project (as well as winning the proposal). This is perhaps the only area where the points/pages guidance does not apply (however, you will want to save some room for the budget narrative where you are required to justify each line item in the budget spreadsheet).

- E. Capabilities – The capabilities of the institution, its partners and individual participants is a key component of a successful grant. Often this component will require good descriptions and explanations of how the project partners intend to implement the grant to excellent effect. Keep this section grounded in the project and speak directly to the capabilities as specifically required.
- F. Management Plan – This section of the proposal, insofar as it is critical to successful implementation of the project, is very important. Although it is typically allocated fewer points in the scoring system, the management plan section helps the grantee and grantor understand where responsibility for the project resides and to what extent the senior administrators are involved. Often a flowchart object is useful for the reader, however, this section should also include some narrative of the linkages between responsibility and capability. The RFP typically asks respondents to include resumes for all people listed in the management section.
- G. Sustainability – Increasingly, this component of the project is a key area of review and an important section in determining who will get the award. Almost all federal agencies are interested in the sustainability (institutionalization) of the project after the grant term (and initial funding) has terminated. In the same way that a business entrepreneur is tasked to demonstrate to investors how the project is profitable after initialization, the potential grantee is tasked to show the federal funding agency how the project will be sustained after the grant period. Oftentimes the federal agency to which you are applying is particularly interested in this point because they are tasked each year to seek additional appropriations from their grantor, the US Congress (which is supposed to be responsible to the US taxpayer who want to see value for their money, especially given the vast amount of funding spent on federal grants). Therefore, any proposal to a federal agency should take special effort to demonstrate how the project implementation will itself help to sustain the critical components of the project for which the funding was awarded in the first place. If you have extra room in the proposal, you might want to consider using that space for this section.
- H. Evaluation – All federal agencies require stringent evaluation and reporting as component of the grant process. In the case of multi-year awards, evaluation that demonstrates that the project is achieving its intended results will be a condition of future funds (in subsequent years). For the most part there are two types of evaluation, formative (in process) and summative (at the end). A combination of the two will usually help the proposal team demonstrate effectively to the grantor that the project management has in place the steps required to effectively monitor the grant throughout all phases of implementation, as well as the ability to make corrections at mid-term. One important note here is to make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with the current evaluation strategies as preferred by the grantor agency. Oftentimes this will require the grant team to meet with and seek input from a qualified researcher or analyst as evaluation is a complex issue that involves a good understanding of this technical process. Typically the best kind of program evaluation involves a combination of quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (intangible outcomes) analysis designed to understand how the project achieved success as well as the quantity and quality of that success.
- I. Literature Review – More often than not, federal agencies will not allow the grantor to put forth unique and innovative solutions to complicated problems without grounding the concepts contained within the grant in the professional literature regarding the topic. The US Department of Education, for instance, will not usually let a particular school implement a concurrent enrollment project without first grounding the project design in the experiences of other schools that have already been down that path. Similarly, the National Science Foundation will not let a grantee simply propose to infuse leading research techniques into a particular science lab without first grounding their project in the past experiences of others. However, the task here is not only to provide reference to other projects that have been implemented before the one you are proposing but to show how your project has learned from and is taking direction from the best practices that came out of other’s experiences.

In this regard, the literature review provides the writer opportunity to show how the specific implementation of this project is connected to and grounded in the experiences of others.

III. Required Forms and Appendices

Congratulations! At this point you are mostly finished with the proposal process. However, while you take time to review, revise and edit your proposal there is still one final step. For our purposes here this step is divided into two parts: (A) External and (B) Internal.

- A. External: For most federal agency grants, there are a number of federal forms that must be submitted along with the full proposal. These forms are designed to ensure compliance with various federal laws and will usually be signed off by UH ORS. In very few instances, such as with conflict of interest statements and other designations (e.g., Native Hawaiian-Serving eligibility), these forms are the responsibility of the principal investigator. The instructions are generally straightforward, however, the forms usually required some time to gather the appropriate information and ensure compliance, especially if it is your first time dealing with them. In all instances, the RFP will provide a checklist of forms required with the proposal.

There are three major forms typically required: (1) Cover Page (application page), (2) Budget Form (with appropriate attachments) and (3) Appendices (each RFP will list the required appendices, including a mix of federal forms and other attachments, as required).

- B. Internal: For all UH grants submitted to any federal agency, the grantee is required to take several steps designed to procure the document through the university system. Thankfully this process is somewhat streamlined and there is only one UH form required to “push the paperwork through the system.” This is the omnipresent ORS Form 5. The first step is to fill out this Form 5 (it is self-explanatory) and then to deliver the entire proposal to your unit Fiscal Officer (or designated representative). This is the first level of review. After FO review and signature, the proposal should be forwarded to your division Dean (Instruction, Student Services, Academic Services) for another round of review. After that, the proposal should be forwarded to your campus provost. The proposal is then forwarded onto your unit’s chancellor’s office for the penultimate review. Finally, the full proposal, with completely documented and signed ORS Form 5 must be submitted to the UH Office of Research Services for final check, coordination and approval. It is important to note that any proposal that does not clear all the stages of this process will be sent back to the principal investigator for appropriate action. Any proposal submitted without the appropriate signatures will be rejected by the university system and receipt of funds will be denied and the project will not be authorized. In order to clear this process in a timely manner, you should make every effort to get the full and completed proposal turned in to your unit FO no later than 10 business days prior to the due date. This 10-day requirement takes into account the 5 business days required by UH ORS to review and authorize the proposal. In addition, the UHCC Chancellor’s office often requires at least 5 business days to perform their review. Therefore, it is critically important to ensure that you complete the proposal well in advance of the grantor due date in order to ensure that you have time to get the required authorizations from the UH system.

These steps are designed to help you break out the task of writing grants to federal agencies. You probably already aware that the federal grant process involves substantial time and energy commitments from many participants and organizations and that the process is not necessarily an easy one. However, the process itself is extremely valuable in that all of the hard work that goes into the process helps the team flush out the components and schedules required for successful implementation of a project for which you are writing a grant. At the very least, the work provides a frame of reference for future project planning and proposal writing.

Happy writing!