A Basic Guide to Successful Grantwriting

for Japanese Studies Librarians

by

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The mysteries of successful grantwriting are vastly overstated. In truth, there are no mysteries. Anyone can be a successful grantwriter following a few simple principles.[1]

First you need to have a good project, and if you do . . .

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1. These guidelines are aimed at writing proposals for specific grant programs sponsored by foundations, professional organizations, universities and inter-institutional consortia, or government agencies. It is important to remember that grantwriting is a different activity from fund-raising, which may rely much more on personal contacts and informal persuasion. The world of grantwriting is an increasingly competitive and professional field, and it is important to approach writing a grant in a very professional manner.

The keys are:

- very careful research about the potential funder(s) and the application process,
- very careful planning of your own project and the proposal to explain it,
- close attention to detail,
- allowing ample time for each phase of developing and writing the proposal

Think of your audience

Think about "who" is writing for "whom." Do not think about it as "You" writing to or seeking funds from "them" Remember that ideally you and the funder share MUTUAL goals

ALWAYS think of the larger framework. How does your project make a meaningful contribution to the goals of your institutions and the funder?

You must be able to explain your project – and demonstrate both the importance of your project and your enthusiasm for it – to potential funders in terms that they understand.

You must fully understand, even love, your project and demonstrate your commitment to it, but the proposal is NOT a personal document; its tone must be objective and neutral.

Your goal is to educate the readers of the proposal, but you must always remember that they may know nothing about the specifics of your own project, regardless of how expert they may be about the larger field. So your task is to communicate clearly, without oversimplifying AND without making assumptions that details of your project are self-evident. You need to make a convincing case that can be read both by people who are have very specialized knowledge of the project's context and by people who may have only general familiarity with the specifics.

For this reason, you need to allow plenty of time to write the proposal, but equally important you need to do as much research as possible about the funder, the application process, and the evaluation procedures for the grant.

Meticulously research potential funders

- Read the grant application guidelines very carefully, over and over, paying close attention to the key words used in the guidelines

- Research the funder's background, connections, and board of directors. Try to figure out any connections you have to the funder and its board. Talk to everyone possible who has a connection to the funder and experience with getting grants from that funder.

- Learn about previous grants the funder has made. Check the annual reports of the funder. If possible, contact previously successful grant applicants to learn about their experiences. If successful grantees are willing, as to see a copy of their successful grant application.

- Enlist influential supporters and spokespeople with connections to the funder or its board members, NOT to lobby the organization, but to learn more about the organization's current priorities.

- Talk to a program officer at the organization to learn more about application procedures and current funding priorities. A program officer cannot tell you how to write a good proposal, but he or she should be able to offer clear guidelines about what the funder is willing to consider, both in terms of project priorities and budget limits. Listen very carefully to the actual words they use.

- Envision you project in their terms and describe your project in terms that relate to their goals, this does NOT mean changing your goals, or in any way mis-representing your project or its goal. It means, envisioning your project in the terms in which they describe their grantmaking strategies. IF you cannot truly envision your project in those terms, you may not have a fit between the goals of your project and their guidelines. (Remember, the purpose of your proposal is to demonstrate both that you have a great project AND that it is a project that fits well with the funder's priorities.)

- Never use a proposal for one foundation or agency for another, without thinking clearly about how your project fits both with the second funder's priorities and with the specific guidelines for their applications. A three page statement, does not serve the same purpose as one of 10 pages, nor for a funder who asks for a 2 page letter summarizing your organization and the project.

- Pay extremely close attention to application deadlines and to the instructions about formatting and assembling application materials. Follow those instructions to the letter.

Be realistic about a funder and their goals. And be equally realistic about whether your project fits their goals.

If you think there is a good fit, then begin the careful planning process . . .

- Begin by setting up a calendar of the application process and then work backwards from the application deadline to establish a time-line for the completion of each step (and preliminary step) in assembling a final proposal

- As you begin planning the proposal, carefully research the project and the justifications for it. Know your project's strengths (and its shortcomings).

- Identify other institutions that might be applying for the same grant, and think about the strengths and weaknesses of your own institution vis-à-vis potential competitors for the same funds. Identify the special strengths, advantages or unique contributions your institution may be able to make, and PLAY to those strengths. (Don't try to trash your rivals for the same grants.)

- Write a short draft of the project statement and circulate it to colleagues and/or interested faculty for comments. Get as much feedback as you can, and especially pay attention to questions from colleagues, faculty, administrators, students, and other library users that reflect issues you need to be able to explain clearly to funders.

- Never rush the writing of the proposal, leave lots of open time at the end for last minute details, missing pieces, unanswered questions.

- Remember to allow time in your calendar for copying, collating, and getting the approval and signatures of anyone else in your institution who needs to approve a proposal before it can be sent.

Framing a Proposal:

- Begin with a clear statement of the project and its goals, articulated clearly in terms that fit the funder's priorities

- Do not assume that readers will know your organization, so provide a succinct background summary

- Don't be afraid to repeat very important points several times in the course of the larger application project (readers do forget). Start with a clear statement of the project goal and be sure that each section of the proposal refers back to that goal in some fashion. (Be especially sure that if you state goal "A" in the introduction, some other section doesn't talk only about goal "X" "Y" or "Z."

The best proposals are written collaboratively:

- It generally works best to have one person in charge of the process, all the details, and the overall writing.

- The product (the proposal) however must be a joint document

- The project coordinator should not be overly proud of the wording because he or she needs to be flexible and to accept advice and criticism.

- Solicit as much feedback as possible. Readers must be encouraged to make suggestions, to point out weaknesses in the argument, and to mention things that may have been left out of the proposal

Be able to explain and justify every aspect of your budget:

- Study the funder's usual levels of funding and types of projects and ask for funding appropriately

- Funders are generally very specific about the kinds of things they will support and those they will not (some will not support salaries, or endowment, or overhead, or "brick and mortar" (i.e., building or construction projects). Be sure that your project fits within the budgetary guidelines of the funder.

- Have clear budget categories in your proposal (and make sure they very clearly correspond to the funder's guidelines).

- Work out the categories and clearly justify them (budget items should correspond to things that have been mentioned and explained in the proposal narrative itself. For example, if you include travel expenses in your budget, the proposal narrative should make it clear why travel is part of the project. The budget should not include any surprises for the reader.)

- Do not use many "miscellaneous" categories

- Do not include large amounts of overhead (but know both the limitations of the funder's willingness to support overhead and your institution's expectations on receiving overhead, and know how to justify or limit one to the other)

- Most funders do not want to support 100% of a project (but some do)

- Think carefully about the amount you are seeking and how it fits with the funders profile of giving

- Think about "cost-sharing" options

- Include "in-kind" contributions, when appropriate.

- Double check all the math in your budget. Make sure everything adds up, multiplies correctly, etc.

The grant writing coordinator must focus both on the details and on the total proposal:

- Pay close attention to all parts of the proposal packet. Be sure you know every piece of what needs to be done and be sure you check every piece when it is done. (Then check again when everything is being assembled.)

- Aim for an overall style or look to the project statement and supporting materials

- Pay great attention to the final "product".

- Pay careful attention to the specifications for the form and style of the grant. Is a particular font size or typeface required or suggested? Are paper margins specified? What kind of paper, number of copies, single or double sided, collated, stapled, or three-hole punched, or not?

- All of the specifications are important and failing to follow those directions can mean that your proposal is not even read.

- Neatness does count! Your proposal packet should be very carefully prepared according to the guidelines, and it should also look nice and professionally put together.

- After all the copying is done, it's best to allow at least a full day for assembly, collating, and double (triple) checking the packet of materials to be submitted:

- Note carefully whether that is a postmark or "in-hand" deadline. Carefully plan the grant writing process.

- Make your proposal goes out on time, with sufficient time to arrive by the deadline. (Double check to make sure it arrives safely.) (Keep a full copy of everything you sent, just in case.)

If you are applying from a large institution:

- Learn the ins and outs of your institution's grant handling procedures

- Do you need permission from some other level of your institution's administration to apply for this or any funding?

- Are there a maximum number of applications accepted per institution by a given funder? (For example, the Japan Foundation accepts a maximum of three per year from major institutions)

- If so, is your project clearly on your institution's list of projects for the current grant round?

- Does a central "sponsored projects" office need to sign off on the proposal draft, budget, and the final institutional coversheet, **and** if so, allow extra time for that process? REMEMBER that, if that office has a formal review process, it may add several weeks to your timetable.

- Be sure to understand issues about calculating overhead expenses and indirect cost recovery rates. For many educational institutions, these rates are set through negotiations with the federal government. You need to know what the applicable rates are for your institution and under what circumstances you are allowed to use a different rate (or not ask for indirect costs at all). You also need to be sure you understand the policies on overhead expenses and indirect costs that a potential funder may operate with. It may become your job to negotiate a compromise between your institution and the funder.
  (quick tip –if you are required to demonstrate cost-sharing in a proposal, you may be able to get your institution to agree to count the indirect cost rates it would ordinarily build into a budget as part of the institution's contribution to the overall project, in effect "waiving" the indirect cost recovery.)

Non-profit status

If you are applying on behalf of an educational or other non-profit institution, you should be familiar with IRS documentation of your organization's tax status, and be prepared to submit such documentation as part of your proposal, if the funder requires certification of tax status.

Don't be intimidated by the process. Keep trying, even if you fail:

If your grant application fails the first time, contact the funder to ask why. Some will share evaluations of your proposal with you and/or meet with you to offer advice. Do not give up just because the first application was not funded. Often there are many more good applications than money available. In those cases, funders like to see applicants trying again. It demonstrates your commitment, and they may regard your second application more favorably in large part because of your ongoing commitment and determination.