

## Overcoming Your Grant Writing Fears - Thirteen Needless Worries

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When I was a neophyte to the world of grants, I was terrified to confront the first, blank page of each new grant application. What would I write? Would I find the “right” words? Would my proposal be compelling and persuasive enough to win a grant award? And if not, would I be considered a failure and lose my colleagues’ respect — or worse my job?

Several months ago, I was reminded of my long buried fears and insecurities when the CharityChannel listserv hosted a discussion regarding the different types of fears that keep new and experienced proposal writers awake at night and shaking during the day.

I would like to help my fearful colleagues (both new and experienced) to cast aside the fears that many seem to share.

### **Fear #1 - I'll look stupid in front of my colleagues when I don't get the grant award.**

First and foremost, every single grant writer has submitted more than their own share of unsuccessful applications! None of us has been immune to the sting of a rejection notice. So on a personal level, I promise each and every one of my colleagues that I will never think that a losing proposal is evidence of their stupidity. In fact, I believe that my personal success is due in part to my persistence and ability to learn from the mistakes that I make.

**Fear #2 – I never know which is more important, the need statement or the program description.** Relax. They are equally important. The fact is that without a compelling need statement, no funding agency is going to financially support even the best of program concepts. And the reverse is true for the most innovative and effective program plan will not garner an award if there is no credible evidence presented in support of it.

**Fear #3 – If they don't fully fund my proposal, I will not be able to implement my program.** If the proposal development team has prepared the grant application with care and forethought, this won't happen. In my opinion, there should always be some sub-component of a proposed project that is an enhancement that is not absolutely necessary if funding levels are reduced and additional funds are not available from another source. For example, the number of field trips could be cut for a senior socialization program.

If such planning did not take place, you could find yourself in the position of needing to reject a grant award (and subsequently angering your funding source). Thus, the proposal team should always have a contingency plan that addresses how the program will be implemented if partial funding is awarded.

**Fear #4 – My proposal isn't competitive because I don't have matching funds.** Let me assure you that every program has some matching funds if it is part of your agency's overall strategic plan and mission. New program services are typically enhancements that build upon an already existing program. You will simply need to show your new enhancement's budget as a component of the larger program that it is designed to build upon. For example, a new tutoring program for elementary students can be considered a complementary component of an afterschool childcare program --- thus allowing one to show childcare program expenses as matching funds in support of the tutoring component.

Note that even when a funding source doesn't require a cash match or a particular level of in-kind donations, the proposal should include a discussion of the institutional support being offered by the applicant agency (i.e. supervisory expenses, facilities, clerical support, use of office equipment such as computers and copy machines, etc.). This strengthens your proposal by telling potential funders that they will not be the only one providing fiscal resources in support of your program's services.

**Fear #5 – My co-workers won't provide me the information that I need to write the proposal.** Getting needed info from other agency personnel can be difficult at times. I have learned that usually my co-workers are more cooperative if they feel that their input (whether it is data or program ideas) is valued and meaningful in the development of the proposal. So be sure to tell them that their input is vital to the submission of a winning proposal. Compliment them for their efforts. Show them your appreciation. I have found that nothing says thank you like chocolate! Thus, there is always a candy dish in my reception area.

**Fear #6 – I'm always feeling overwhelmed by the process and I can't get over this feeling.** At times, proposal writing can be overwhelming...but only if you aren't working through the process one step at a time. (1) Tackle the process in manageable steps and it won't seem so overwhelming (i.e. writing the outline, securing baseline data, documenting community need, developing the program plan, securing support letters, planning for the evaluation, etc.). (2) Create a timeline that includes each step and that lists the person responsible for assisting you. (3) Make assignments to your colleagues providing them a reasonable amount of time to get you the needed information. (4) Remember that nothing is "written in stone" and that changes to your initial draft are inevitable. With just a few simple key strokes on a computer, anything (or everything) can be modified in a matter of a few minutes...so relax and relish the fact that you are getting a chance to "win" a new grant award for your agency. And remember the words of Thomas Edison: "I've never failed once. I just learned that it is a 2,000 step process."

**Fear #7 – I'm afraid of a blank piece of paper. Fine--don't use a blank piece of paper.** It may sound trite but I'm seriously hindered by a totally blank piece of paper too. Thus, when the process seems overwhelming or complex, I start with two things:

(1) *A program logic chart* – With a "fill-in the blank" form, I'm not stuck looking at a blank piece of paper. I begin my work with neat little boxes and fill-in the blank measurable outcomes; and, I seldom do this alone. Usually, I complete the logic chart in collaboration with project staff and administrators (since they are key in the program planning phase).

(2) *A proposal outline* – I never start writing until after I have created an outline based on the funder's requirements and their scoring criteria. I create the outline by inserting section titles in black type face. Then I list each type of information that is required in each section (or question to be answered) in red type face. As the program development team and I insert the needed information and text, I delete the related red text. By the time that I have completed my grant proposal, all that remains is black text. (Note: If I'm writing a general proposal with no set outline requirements, I use a standard format that I have created just for this purpose.)

**Fear #8 – There is never enough time to write a winning proposal when the RFP is only released 30 to 45 days prior to the deadline.** While this is commonly true (especially with federal grant programs), one always has time to plan ahead. Since nearly all RFPs are released on a recurring schedule, I begin writing my grant applications based on the last RFP published by the funding agency (since typically there are not major changes in program requirements or format). Then when the RFP is finally published, I simply review the new information and make

the needed adjustments to my draft document. This allows my agency ample time to plan, develop, and collaborate on our program design, collaborative partnerships, and application.

**Fear #9 – I just know that the funder will say “no.”** Starting with a negative attitude about your chances of “winning” the competition is never a good strategy! I’ve been called both “overly optimistic” and “negative” at different points in my career. However, I prefer to think of myself as a “realistic optimist”. In other words, I don’t work hard — I work smart. I assess both the “fit” of our program needs to the funder’s stated interests and the probability of winning an award. If the funder anticipates awarding only one or two grant contracts, I may forego the competition if there are other opportunities to which I can devote my time.

**Fear #10 – The funder doesn’t know me and thus won’t be likely to give my agency money.** If the funder doesn’t know you and your agency yet, there is no better time to introduce yourself than today! Start by sending your newsletter and annual reports to program officers at any of the foundations to which you might submit a grant application in the future. Additionally, you should provide them copies of any newspaper articles that highlight and recognize the outstanding success of your agency’s programs. Sign your name. Enclose your business card...and be sure to attend workshops and meetings where local and national foundation representatives will be in attendance. Within a year, they will know you and your agency.

**Fear #11 – I’m afraid to talk to potential funders.** What? They’re people---just like you and me. But if you are truly feeling intimidated, I have three suggestions:

(1) Ask a trust colleague to go with you when you attend meetings and workshops where funders gather. This will hopefully increase your comfort level.

(2) Ask another grant professional to personally introduce you to some of the funders.

(3) And if you’re simply afraid of the hearing the word “no”, please refer to one of my previous articles, “What Does No Really Mean?” (Grants and Foundation Review, 10-26-2005).

**Fear #12 – If the proposal is funded, I’ll regret it.** The only reason that I can image anyone would regret having a proposal funded is a fear that your organization won’t follow through on the implementation plan after the contract is signed. As the professional grant personnel for your agency, part of your job is to ensure that your organization’s administrators and staff understand and are committed to the stated implementation criteria and contractual obligations contained in the proposal. Of course, you will need to monitor compliance with the stated timeline, projected performance indicators, and reports after the contract is awarded. I believe that by monitoring your program’s overall implementation, you will be able to alleviate 99% of your fears.

**Fear #13 – I’m in this alone... all alone.** Grant writers need not feel that they are alone in their struggle to acquire grant funds for their agencies. There are multiple supports available...many outside their organization. CharityChannel’s listserv is just one example of a low cost venue that provides ongoing support for both new and experienced grant professionals; and, there are countless others.

## **In Conclusion**

Whether you work for a social service agency, youth development organization, or community college, there is a support group for you. With the creation of the Internet, your help is as close as your keyboard and local professional support group.

Personally, I am not afraid of the fears listed above because long ago I found two key support groups — CharityChannel and the [Council for Resource Development](#).

CharityChannel provides me an instance connection to an unbelievable network of talented and sharing grant professionals ready to assist me via the Internet. Its listservs provide me with timely and professional advice and information. [Grants and Foundation Review](#) provides me articles that are meaningful and educational. [Don Griesmann's Grant Opportunities](#) provides me with easy access to lesser known and publicly posted funding opportunities in one convenient location. It is my link to grant professionals from every non-profit sector imaginable.

The Council for Resource Development offers me the opportunity to connect personally and via the Internet with others that share my passion and responsibility for raising funds for our nation's community colleges. It provides me with a wide range of services including training sessions, general workshops, annual regional and national conferences, listservs, research publications, and a network of trained professionals ready (and eager) to assist new comers to their ranks.

Without my support groups, I would never have achieved the degree of success that I have as a grant professional. Having once been the mentee, I am proud to have now joined the ranks of mentors that help new grant professionals over come their fear of proposal writing. So fear not! Help is as near as your keyboard or phone!

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