FREE GUIDE

Documentary Grant Proposal Guide (Free PDF)

The usual parts of a documentary funding application explained in plain terms, with a fill-in project one-sheet, a budget top sheet and an application tracker.

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> This guide sets out the parts that documentary and media funding applications commonly ask for, with a one-sheet, a budget top sheet and a tracker to fill in. Funders use different names, lengths and formats, so each funder's own current instructions come first.

Where documentary funding comes from

These are categories, not recommendations. Read each funder's guidelines on its own site.

Category	What to check first
Public arts and humanities agencies (federal, state, local)	Whether individuals can apply or only organizations, and which project stages are funded
Private foundations with a media or issue focus	Whether the film's subject matches a stated priority, and whether they accept unsolicited requests
Film funds and labs run by nonprofits	Stage of the project, eligibility, and what the fund expects in return
Public media and broadcasters	Rights, delivery requirements and editorial standards
Issue-based funders (health, environment, justice and others)	Whether they fund media at all, and how they expect the film to be used
Individual donors and crowdfunding	Whether gifts need to go through a fiscal sponsor to be tax-deductible

The usual parts of an application

Part	What it is	Common weakness
Logline	One or two sentences: who or what the film follows, and what is at stake	Describes a topic, not a story
Synopsis	A short summary of the story from start to finish	Hides the ending or the central question
Treatment	How the film will unfold on screen, scene by scene or act by act	Reads like an essay about the issue
Artistic approach	Style, structure, visual and sound choices, and why they suit the story	Lists equipment instead of choices
Access and ethics	Your relationship with participants, consent and how you will handle risk to them	Assumes access that is not confirmed
Team	Key people, their roles and relevant past work	Credits with no link to this project

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Part	What it is	Common weakness
Audience and distribution plan	Who the film is for and how it will reach them	"Everyone" as the audience
Budget and financing plan	What the film costs, what is raised, and where the rest will come from	Totals that do not match the narrative
Work sample	Footage from this project or past work, with a short note on what the viewer is seeing	No context, or the best material comes too late
Timeline	Stages with dates: development, production, post-production, release	No link between the ask and a stage

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Fiscal sponsorship for filmmakers

Many funders give only to tax-exempt organizations. A filmmaker who is an individual, or a company that is not tax-exempt, often applies through a fiscal sponsor: a nonprofit that agrees to receive and manage the grant for the project.

- The sponsor usually keeps a share of the funds as a fee. Get the fee and services in writing
- The sponsor is legally responsible for the money, so expect it to review your application and budget
- Ask who holds the rights to the film. In most arrangements the filmmaker should keep them, but read the agreement
- Allow time. A sponsor may need to approve an application before you submit
- Check each funder's rules. Some accept sponsored projects and some do not

- [ ] We have a signed fiscal sponsorship agreement, or do not need one
- [ ] The sponsor's fee is in our budget
- [ ] The funder accepts fiscally sponsored projects

Project one-sheet

Keep answers short. This becomes the source for every application.

Working title:

Length and format (feature, short, series):

Current stage (development, production, post-production):

Logline:

Synopsis in five sentences:

Why this story, and why now:

Why you are the right team to tell it:

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Access confirmed so far (people, places, archives):

Artistic approach in three sentences:

Primary audience:

How the film will reach that audience:

Director:

Producer:

Other key team members and roles:

Fiscal sponsor, if any:

Total budget:

Raised to date:

Amount of this request and what it pays for:

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Budget top sheet

A top sheet summarizes the detailed budget by category. Use the funder's categories if it provides them.

Category	Total cost	Raised or in kind	This request	Still to raise
Development and research				
Producing and directing team				
Production crew				
Equipment and production costs				
Travel and location costs				
Archival footage, music and rights				
Editing and post-production				
Sound, color and finishing				
Legal, insurance and accounting				
Outreach and distribution				
Fiscal sponsor fee and administration				
Contingency				
Total				

Financing plan

Source	Amount	Status (secured, pending, planned)	Decision expected

Timeline

Stage	Start	End	Main milestone
Development			
Production			
Post-production			
Release and outreach			

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Application tracker

Funder or category	Stage funded	Deadline	Materials required	Sample length limit	Submitted	Result	Follow-up

Before you submit

- [ ] Logline, synopsis and treatment tell the same story
- [ ] Every length, format and file limit in the instructions is met
- [ ] The work sample plays from the link, and any password is included
- [ ] The budget total matches the figure in the narrative and the form
- [ ] The request is tied to a stage and a set of costs
- [ ] Participants' consent and safety have been considered and described
- [ ] Rights to archival material and music are budgeted or cleared

> **Want help with this?** The Complete Grant Architect is a free 16-week grant writing course, and you can hire a grant writer for your next proposal. Both are at subthesis.com.

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