FREE GUIDE

Grant Writing 101: A Beginner's Guide (Free PDF)

A short beginner's guide to the full grant process: the eight stages of the grant cycle, what to do in each, key terms and a first-application checklist.

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> Grant writing is a process, not a single document. Most of the work that decides whether a proposal succeeds happens before anyone starts writing. This guide walks through the whole cycle in the order you will meet it.

What a grant is

A grant is money given by a funder to carry out a specific purpose, with no expectation of repayment and with conditions on how it is used and reported. Funders include government agencies, private and community foundations and corporations. Each has its own priorities, rules and process. A grant is not free money: you commit to doing defined work and accounting for it.

The grant cycle in eight stages

Stage	What happens	Main question
1. Readiness	Gather documents, check capacity, define the project	Are we ready to apply?
2. Funder research	Find funders and read their guidelines closely	Who funds this, and do we fit?
3. Outreach	Contact the funder or send a letter of inquiry, if invited	Are they interested?
4. Program design	Build the logic model, objectives and evaluation plan	Does the plan hold together?
5. Proposal writing	Write the need, methods, capacity and summary	Does it answer their criteria?
6. Budget	Cost the activities and justify each line	Does the money match the work?
7. Review and submission	Check compliance, get an outside read, submit early	Is it complete and correct?
8. After the decision	Report, steward the relationship, renew or revise	What did we learn?

Stage by stage

1. Readiness

Before you look for funding, collect what almost every funder asks for: proof of legal status, a board list, financial statements and a clear description of the program. Decide who will manage a grant if you get one.

2. Funder research

Fit matters more than volume. Read each funder's guidelines for who can apply, what they fund, where and how

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much. Look at what they have funded before. Apply where your project matches a stated priority.

3. Outreach

Some funders welcome a conversation or require a short letter of inquiry before a full proposal. Others accept applications only by invitation. Follow what each funder says about contact.

4. Program design

A fundable project has a clear line from the need, to the activities, to the results, to how those results will be measured. Work this out before writing. A logic model puts it on one page.

5. Proposal writing

Write to the funder's headings and scoring criteria, in their order. Use local evidence with sources. Be specific about what you will do, for whom and how often.

6. Budget

Build the budget from the activities. Show how each amount was calculated. Every cost should appear in the narrative, and every activity should have a cost or an existing resource behind it.

7. Review and submission

Check the application against the instructions line by line. Ask someone outside the project to read it. Submit at least two working days early in case of technical problems.

8. After the decision

If funded, read the agreement, track every reporting date and report honestly. If declined, ask for feedback where the funder offers it, and decide whether to revise and try again.

Key terms

Term	Meaning
RFP	Request for proposals: a funder's announcement and instructions
NOFO	Notice of Funding Opportunity: the term federal agencies use
LOI	Letter of inquiry: a short introduction before a full proposal
Direct costs	Costs tied to the project, such as staff time and supplies
Indirect costs	Shared costs such as rent and administration
Match or cost share	Funds or resources the applicant must contribute
Outputs	What the program delivers and can count
Outcomes	The changes that result for people or conditions
Logic model	A one-page picture of inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes

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Five things beginners get wrong

1. Applying to funders whose priorities do not match the project.
2. Describing the organization's need for money in place of the community's need.
3. Promising results that cannot be measured.
4. Writing the budget separately from the narrative, so the two disagree.
5. Starting too late to gather required documents and registrations.

Your first application

- [ ] We have our core documents gathered
- [ ] We have found a funder whose stated priorities match our project
- [ ] We have read the full guidelines and confirmed we are eligible
- [ ] We have a written project description with measurable objectives
- [ ] We have a budget built from the activities
- [ ] We know who will write, who will review and who will submit
- [ ] We have a timeline that ends at least two days before the deadline

Funder:

Deadline:

Person responsible:

> **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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