FREE CHEAT SHEET

Grant Writing Ethics Cheat Sheet (Free PDF)

Plain do and do not rules for ethical grant writing, covering pay, conflicts, accuracy, confidentiality, budgets and AI use, plus a self-check and a policy record.

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> This cheat sheet sets out plain ethical rules for people who write grant proposals, as staff, consultants or volunteers. It is a summary of common professional practice, not legal advice. Your funder's terms, your organization's policies and any professional code you have signed come first.

The rules at a glance

Area	Do	Do not
Pay	Charge or pay a salary, hourly rate or flat fee agreed in advance and owed whatever the result	Take or offer a commission, a finder's fee or a percentage of the award
Conflicts of interest	Disclose any personal, family or financial tie to the funder, a vendor or a partner	Take part in a decision in which you have a stake you have not disclosed
Accuracy	Use real data with a source and year, and describe the organization as it is	Invent or stretch numbers, outcomes, partners, staff credentials or quotes
Letters and signatures	Get each letter and signature from the person named, on their approval	Write or sign in someone's name without their knowledge and consent
Copying	Reuse your own organization's text, and credit other people's work	Copy another applicant's proposal or a client's material for someone else
Confidentiality	Keep client, participant, donor and funder information private and stored safely	Share one client's proposals, budgets or contacts with another
Budgets	Ask for what the work costs, with a calculation for every line	Pad lines, hide costs, or charge the same cost to two funders
Promises	Say plainly that no one can guarantee an award	Promise funding or quote a success rate you cannot support
AI tools	Follow each funder's policy, check every output and disclose use where asked	Paste confidential material into a tool that is not approved, or submit unchecked text
After the award	Spend and report as the award terms require, and report problems early	Use funds for another purpose without the funder's approval

Pay: why percentage-of-award pay is treated as unethical

The Association of Fundraising Professionals Code of Ethical Standards, as published on afpglobal.org, expects members to support fair compensation that may include bonuses or merit pay in line with organizational practices but is never based on a percentage of funds raised, and to decline receiving or paying finder's fees, commissions or compensation based on a percentage of funds raised. Other professional codes of ethics in the grants field take a similar position. Checked November 2026. Programs and rules change, so confirm on the official site.

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The reasons usually given are these.

- The work is done whether or not the grant is awarded, so it should be paid for either way
- Pay tied to the award rewards a larger request, not an honest one
- Grant money is given for the purposes in the approved budget. A fee taken from the award is a cost the funder did not agree to unless it is shown and allowed
- It puts the writer's interest ahead of the organization's and the funder's

If an organization cannot afford a fee, honest options include a smaller scope of work, a payment schedule, training staff to write, or volunteer help.

Conflicts of interest

A conflict exists when a personal interest could affect, or appear to affect, a decision made for the organization. Common cases: a board member's company is a vendor in the budget, a writer serves two applicants to the same competition, or a staff member is related to someone at the funder. The Association of Fundraising Professionals code says members are expected to disclose all potential and actual conflicts of interest, and that disclosure does not imply ethical impropriety. Disclose early, in writing, and step back from the decision where your policy says so.

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Accuracy and fabricated material

- Every figure has a source and a year, or it comes out
- Outcomes are reported as they happened, including results that fell short
- Partners are named only for what they have agreed to do
- Letters of support are written or approved by the signer. Offering a draft is common, but the signer must read, change and approve it
- If you find an error after submitting, tell the funder

Confidentiality

- Treat proposals, budgets, donor lists and participant stories as the organization's property
- Get consent before using a participant's story or image, and remove details that identify people where you can
- Consultants keep each client's material separate and do not reuse one client's text for another

Honest budgets

- The budget asks for the real cost of the work described
- The same cost is not charged in full to more than one funder
- Other funding, match and in-kind support are reported truthfully
- A fee for writing the proposal is not placed in a grant budget unless the funder's rules allow it

AI use and disclosure

Funders differ. Some ask applicants to disclose AI use, some limit it and some say nothing. Read each funder's current policy before you draft.

- Follow the funder's policy and your organization's policy, whichever is stricter
- Do not enter confidential, personal or unpublished information into a tool your organization has not approved
- Check every fact, figure and citation an AI tool produces. You are responsible for all of it
- Disclose AI use when the funder asks, in the form it asks for
- If you review proposals for a funder, follow its rules on AI before using any tool on an application

Self-check before you submit

- [ ] Everyone who worked on this is paid in a way that does not depend on the award
- [ ] Every conflict of interest has been disclosed in writing
- [ ] Every number, outcome and credential is true and has a source
- [ ] Every partner and letter signer has seen and approved what is said in their name
- [ ] No confidential or personal information is included without consent
- [ ] The budget reflects real costs and no cost is charged twice
- [ ] AI use follows the funder's policy and is disclosed where required

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- [ ] I would be comfortable if the funder saw exactly how this proposal was prepared

Our organization's policies

Record where each policy is kept and who to ask.

Policy	Where it is kept	Date approved	Who to ask
Conflict of interest			
Paying grant writers and consultants			
Confidentiality and data handling			
Use of AI tools			
Approving and signing applications			
Reporting a concern			

Professional codes our staff or consultants have signed:

> **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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