



## Center for Rural Health

University of North Dakota  
School of Medicine and Health Sciences

### **Center for Rural Health Grant Writing Tips**

The grant writing process can be complex and even intimidating. The following tips are intended to assist you in getting started on your own grant writing experience. The ideas in this document originate from a variety of sources including Center for Rural Health staff observations on the process. No one can guarantee your success; however, if you follow these tips your experience can be more positive. The Center for Rural Health is available to assist you in a number of ways, including rural health data and information, locating possible funding sources, proposal critiques, and other forms of community technical assistance. Please call us at (701) 777-3848 to contact Lynette Dickson or Brad Gibbens.

1. Read grant directions carefully.
  - A. As elementary as this may sound it is critical to read the directions and follow them. Consider making a checklist from the directions to be used as an outline. As you complete each task, check it off the list. People have written grant proposals and forgotten entire sections! If the program guidance (the document from the funder that tells you what they want to see in the proposal) states the order of the grant sections, write the grant accordingly. Do not vary from this because it makes things more difficult for the reviewer. They expect to see certain subjects in a specific order.
2. Grant Proposals should read as if one person wrote the entire document.
  - A. Sometimes more than one person participates in the writing of the document; however, the proposal will read better for the reviewer if someone in the group acts as the editor. This is to ensure some continuity in writing styles.
3. One person should be responsible for coordinating the proposal planning and development.
  - A. This does not have to be the actual proposal writer. Having someone coordinate all the activities ensures that all the steps are accomplished.
4. Help the funding agency understand that funding your proposal will benefit many people.
  - A. For funders, your request is an investment in accomplishing some social good. They expect their funds to be used in a manner that makes life better for others. As a proposal writer, you need to clearly show that there is social benefit to many. If the proposal is funded. For example, if you are asking for financial support to purchase a piece of equipment, you need to help the funder understand how it would help people in your town and the surrounding area. In other words, it is not the health facility that benefits, it is the people who live in the area.

5. Try to expand on the number and type of organizations represented in the proposal.
  - A. Funders will fund a single organization but you strengthen the proposal by having more than just your single group involved. This shows the grant reviewer that your proposal has the potential of greater community impact because you are reaching out to other civic and/or health organizations. The same argument is used in multiple communities working together on a proposal. If your proposal has two or three organizations from two towns working together, it will probably score higher than a similar proposal (equally well written) from a single source in a single community.
  
6. Remember yourself.
  - A. Know your strengths and weaknesses – you might know the problem and solution best, but if you are uncomfortable with budgeting find someone else in the organization or the community to help with this section. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Don't place all the burden on one person. Grant writing requires many skills and talents. Learn to target your skills toward your strengths and augment them with the skills of colleagues.
  
  - B. Know your environment – what is the problem and how will you solve it? Remember, health care is a very complicated subject for lay people to understand. It is likely that the reviewer will not understand the issues found in rural hospitals, clinics, nursing facilities, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) units or public health units so take the time to explain even the most elementary system and/or organizational fact.
  
  - C. Know your own programs.
    - You must be able to explain who you are, what you do, and your organizational mission (try to tie this to the funding source's mission)
    - Who does your organization benefit? (Show the breadth of benefit)
    - What is your organization's history? (How long has your organization been in existence, what are its accomplishments?)
    - How does your organization fit in the local/area health care system?
    - How do you communicate with other groups? (How do you get the word out in the community and area about your programs, services, accomplishments?)
  
7. Remember your audience: The Reviewer
  - A. The grant reviewer typically doesn't know anything about your situation, your community, or even your state. Be prepared to explain basic facts.
    - For example, explain what a particular piece of equipment is and does, explain the impact of weather on access to care ( e.g., what it is like for an elderly couple to need health care when they live 20 miles in the country, in January, when it is 20 degrees below zero), explain road conditions, explain the difficulties associated with having a small medical and nursing staff. It is likely the reviewer will have little or no knowledge of these issues. Use this as an opportunity to explain your situation to the reviewers.. Help them understand your unique circumstances. You may feel you are like any other rural health facility operating in North Dakota and everyone should understand these basic facts *but* don't take it for granted that the reviewers understand. Chances are they don't.

- B. The central goal, in any grant, is to convince the reviewers of the legitimacy of your problem, that you have a viable solution, and that you can execute the solution. What a grant proposal essentially does is sell your problem and solution to the funder. You need to persuade them.
- Use statistics, program data, state and national information and documentation and, in general, support your argument with as many facts as possible.
  - Show how other groups and/or communities are involved.
  - Convey that a number of people benefit from your solution.
  - Demonstrate that your solution is practical, legitimate, and applicable to others like you.
  - Establish that your proposal has specific goals and objectives that can be measured.
  - Most importantly, convey that you have the ability to carry it out and meet the goals/objectives.
8. Remember others – they can help you in your grant development and writing efforts. Talk to others who have written grants. They can share practical advice and tips. Most people like to be asked their opinion so don't worry that you would be "bothering" them. Chances are they will be flattered and glad to answer your questions. What have they learned? Can they critique a draft proposal you are developing?
9. Try to locate people who have been funded by organizations you plan to submit a proposal to. You can ask the funding agency if it is willing and/or able to share this information. Contact your state office of rural health or a health care association. From other funded organizations you want to learn the following: What additional information and tips can they provide on the funding source and the funding process? Can you review the proposal they submitted? Would they do everything the same or what would they do differently?
10. Discuss your ideas and situation with people at the state organizations that can be of assistance such as the Center for Rural Health, Department of Health, or the various state health associations. What do they advise? Do they have background information that can be used in a proposal? Can they critique your proposal?
11. Remember your audience – the reviewers. You must make it easy for the reviewers. They don't have a lot of time to review the document so the easier it is for them to read, follow, and understand the better it is for you. A proposal that flows logically weighs in your favor during the review. Using clear and everyday language to describe the problem and proposed solution, breaking the narrative into smaller parts and subunits, providing clear detail – all facilitate the review process.
12. Follow the guidance closely. The reviewer expects to see the same headings and sections in the same order outlined in the guidance. If you use different headings and place them in a different order it slows the review process and can frustrate the reviewer. Some other applicant has followed guidance closely, followed the rules. In comparison, yours may be given a lesser priority.

13. Be detailed even to the point of being somewhat elementary. The reviewers typically don't know your organization, situation, or working environment. Be careful to clearly define terms, limit the use of acronyms and jargon, use statistics and data to elaborate key points, explain key concepts of your industry. Don't take it for granted that the reviewers will understand what you may consider common rural health knowledge.
  - A. If, for example, you are discussing the development of a new service such as cardiac rehab or a wellness program you need to explain a number of factors that can be persuasive when explained, but troublesome if left open to interpretation: this program is necessary in a rural and remote area because the next available service location is two to three hours away. Distance and time are critical elements in accessing care.
  - B. The supply and availability of physicians, nurses, allied health, and other professionals is fundamental to providing and accessing care. If you have shortages, and most provider organizations do, establish this as a factor to consider. Show how this relates to your situation. Do not assume the reviewer automatically understands your situation.

The reviewers, at a national or federal level, may be an expert in rural health but may not be an expert in rural health in North Dakota. Do not assume they have your level of expertise....it could be a major mistake. The reviewer may have a prestigious position and have a great deal of general expertise or have skills in other aspects of health care. But remember, you are **the** expert on **your** situation; you have the knowledge, the skill, and the ability to articulate your situation and establish your solution. The reviewer will probably have to present the proposal to others in the organization. The easier it is for the reviewers to understand your situation, the easier it is to convey key facts.

14. While being meticulous in your explanations, don't forget to be concise. You can be both. Provide the reviewer with the detail to understand the concept; however, don't overwrite. People have a tendency to dwell on the same point restating it in different words but essentially saying the same thing. Try to minimize this tendency. Review and edit the text to delete redundancy, shorten sentences, and streamline thoughts. If the guidance says the maximum length of the document is 50 pages it is acceptable for it to be less. Reviewers appreciate a shorter, clearly written document. This actually makes it easier to review.
15. As you write, place yourself in the funding source's shoes and ask yourself the same questions a skeptical reader/reviewer might ask:
  - A. Why is this important? (In essence, they wonder, so what.)
  - B. Does the problem and request meet our funding mission? (You may have a legitimate need, but is it a need that pertains to the funding agency.)
  - C. Does it assist a small group of people or does it have a more expansive social mission? (Is it organization-specific or inclusive of the community as a whole?)
  - D. Does the applicant appear to have the ability, skill, time, and technical knowledge (programmatic and administrative) to carry-out the program and do so in the stipulated time?
  - E. What real difference will this project make to the community?

16. Help the reviewer to understand how the proposal...
- A. Impacts people, not just the agency or organization making the application;
  - B. Emphasizes a collaborative process (that there was more than one person or one agency involved);
  - C. Can be replicated by other communities; and
  - D. Can be continued after grant funds are expended.