

Writing a Successful Grant Proposal

By Barbara Davis

A funder's guidelines will tell you what to include in a grant proposal for its organization. Most funders want the same information, even if they use different words or ask questions in a different order.

Some funders prefer that you fill out their own application forms or cover sheets. If the funder uses an application form, be sure to get a copy and follow the instructions. You may also use the Minnesota Common Grant Application Form if the funder you are approaching accepts it. To download the form and view a list of funders that accept it, visit the Council's Web site at www.mcf.org (select "Grantseeking in Minnesota"). Copies of the form are also available from The Foundation Center Cooperating Collections in Brainerd (218/829-5574), Duluth (218/723-3802), Marshall (507/537-6176), Minneapolis (612/630-6300), Rochester (507/285-8002) and St. Paul (651/266-7000).

The following outline should meet the needs of most funders, or guide you when approaching a funder with no written guidelines. The outline is for a project proposal, and is most appropriate for a project that is trying to correct a problem, such as water pollution, school truancy or ignorance about how HIV/AIDS is transmitted. (See page 4 for guidance on other types of proposals.) The grant proposal as a whole, not including supplementary materials, should usually be five pages or less.

At the beginning of your proposal, or on a cover sheet, write a two- or three-sentence summary of the proposal. This summary helps the reader follow your argument in the proposal itself. For example:

\$50,000 \$5,000

In two or three paragraphs, tell the funder about your organization and why it can be trusted to use funds effectively. Briefly summarize your organization's history. State your mission, whom you serve and your track record of achievement. Clearly describe, or at least list, your programs. If your programs are many or complex, consider adding an organization chart or other attachments that explain them. Describe your budget size, where you are located and who runs the organization and does the work. Add other details that build

the credibility of your group. If other groups in your region work on the same issues, explain how they are different and how you collaborate with them, if you do.

Even if you have received funds from this grantmaker before, your introduction should be complete. Funders sometimes hire outside reviewers who may not be familiar with your organization.

This is where you convince the funder that the issue you want to tackle is important and show that your organization is an expert on the issue. Here are some tips:

- Don't assume the funder knows much about your subject area. Most grantmaking staff people are generalists. They will probably know about topics like Shakespeare, water pollution and HIV/AIDS, but you should not assume that they are familiar with taconite disposal methods or Kaposi's sarcoma. If your topic is complex, you might add an informative article or suggest some background reading.
- Why is this situation important? To whom did your organization talk, or what research did you do, to learn about the issue and decide how to tackle it?
- Describe the situation in both factual and human interest terms, if possible. Providing good data demonstrates that your organization is expert in the field. If there are no good data on your issue, consider doing your own research study, even if it is simple.
- Describe your issue in as local a context as possible. If you want to educate people in your county about HIV/AIDS, tell the funder about the epidemic in your county — not in the United States as a whole.
- Describe a problem that is about the same size as your solution. Don't draw a dark picture of nuclear war, teen suicide and lethal air pollution if you are planning a modest neighborhood arts program for children.
- Don't describe the problem as the absence of your project. "We don't have enough beds in our battered women's shelter" is not the problem. The problem is increased levels of domestic violence. More shelter beds is a

Explain what your organization plans to do about the problem. What are your overall goals? You might say:

Then go on to give details, including:

- Some projects have two audiences: the musicians in the community band, the kids doing summer clean-up in the parks) and the music lovers in the audience, the people who use the parks). If so, describe both. How will you ensure that people actually participate in the program?
- Describe the activities. Tell the funder about the project's "output," or how many "units of service" you intend to deliver over a specific time period: how many hours of nutrition counseling to how many pregnant women; how many HIV/AIDS hot-line calls answered by how many volunteers. Be sure you don't promise an unrealistic level of service.
- If you have already done research, secured the commitment of participants or done other initial work, describe it so the funder can see that you are well-prepared.
- (Attach résumés of key people.) Some funders ask for the name of a person most responsible for the project, whether volunteer or paid. Demonstrate that the staff or volunteers have the expertise to do a good job.
- Some funders ask for the start and end dates. In general, a project can be said to start when you start spending money on it. If the project is long, consider including a timeline.
-

to show in-kind for these reasons, you can either show it in the budget, as above, or simply add a footnote to the bottom of the budget, like this:

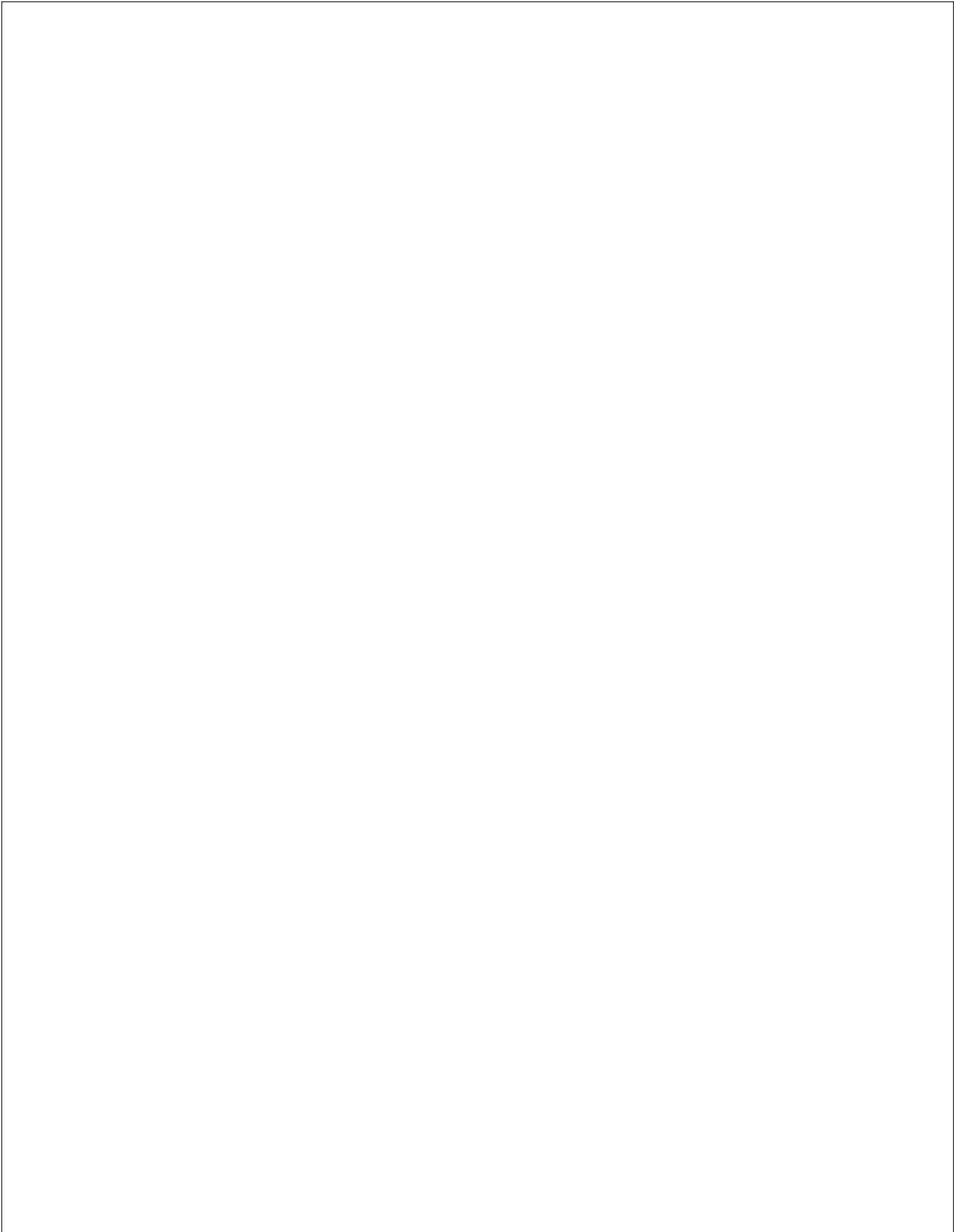
\$3,000

3. If you are applying for a matching grant, the in-kind income may sometimes be used as part of the match. If you want to use in-kind contributions as part of your match, then you must put a dollar value on them and put them in the budget. Funders who provide matching grants may have policies on how much in-kind you can use in your match and how it must be documented.


Funders may ask for a variety of materials along with the proposal itself. Almost all funders want at least the following:

- If your group is not tax exempt, you may need to apply through a fiscal agent, or fiscal sponsor. In that case, send a copy of your fiscal agent's IRS letter. If you are part of a government agency, usually a cover letter on your letterhead will be sufficient to show that your group is eligible for grants.
- such as "CPA," "marketing director, Acme Widget" or "parent volunteer."
- including a statement of income and expenses and a balance sheet showing assets and liabilities at the end of the year. Some funders ask for an audited statement. If you are too small to be audited, call to ask whether an audited statement is mandatory or just preferred.
- If you are well along in the fiscal year, also show actual year-to-date income and expenses next to the budget projections.
- if you are within three or four months of the new year.


Some applicants are small parts of very large institutions, such as a department at the University of Minnesota or an after-school program in the Minneapolis Public Schools. In such cases, you may be better off submitting supplementary materials only for your the Minneapolis Pubst518 Tw[(sucheria2(udg)19.G Tfmak aff)uditter of



in reporting to different grantmakers about work it has accomplished with their grants, reducing the amount of time the grantee must spend rearranging basic information to fit funders' varying reporting requirements. To download the form and view a list of funders that accept it, visit the Council's Web site at www.mcf.org (select "Grantseeking in Minnesota").



MCF's Minnesota Grantmakers Online can save you time and money in your grantseeking efforts by giving you instant 24/7 access to the Web's largest online database of Minnesota grantmakers and grants. For a guided tour and to subscribe online, go to www.mcf.org /



MCF's Web site offers many useful grantseeking resources free of charge, including:

- Grantseeking Basics.
- Minnesota Grantmaker Deadlines Calendar.
- Minnesota Common Grant Application Form.
- Minnesota Common Report Form.

To access these resources and many others, go to www.mcf.org (select "Grantseeking in Minnesota").



MCF's free weekly e-mail newsletter delivers the latest Minnesota grantmaking news right to your desktop, including recent grants of note, upcoming grant deadlines, new resources and tools, new job openings and much more. To sign up for your free subscription, go to www.mcf.org (select the "Free E-mail Alerts" icon).