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How To Be a Grant Writer

Grant writing is a wholly creative and satisfying career. The main task is to write and develop grant proposals. This entails consulting, utilizing needs assessments, and brainstorming workable solutions, as well as cultivating goals and objectives.

by Jenny Fulbright
 PowerHomebiz.com Staff Writer

Skilled grant writers are one of the most in-demand independent contractors today. Prompted by the increasing demand by nonprofit agencies to find new prospective funders (individuals, corporations, foundations, and others), non-profits seeking grants are always on the lookout for people who will help them find grant funding and to assume grant-writing projects.

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Grant writing is a wholly creative and satisfying career. The main task is to write and develop grant proposals. This entails consulting, utilizing needs assessments, and brainstorming workable solutions, as well as cultivating goals and objectives. You will match project needs with available funding and the process normally involves preparing and writing documents for submission, proofreading, submitting to the funding source and follow-up.

Once the grant proposal is submitted, you will be required to keep in contact with grant-making organizations during their review of a submitted grant application in order to be able to supply additional supportive material. In many instances, the grant writer will also manage the process of supplying progress reports when required by a grant-making organization that has funded a project or program.

Getting Started

The organizations that often require the services of a grant writer include non-profits, community-based organizations, universities and colleges, and other institutions that utilizes grant as a funding source.

To get your start as a grant writer, you need to first identify and make a list of potential client organizations in your area. Remember that large organizations employ full-time grant writers, although may seek out contractual grant writers as the need arises. Develop contacts within these organizations and begin to network. In this business, networking is the key.

Many grant writers made their start by developing proposals for charitable organizations. Some even work for free just to familiarize themselves with the process and gain exposure in grant research and writing. As your skills and network develop, you can branch out and offer your services on the Web.

Contact the development offices of some of the non-profit organizations near you (United Way, etc.). Whether they employ grant writers as full-time staff or not, ask to speak to the Development officer to inquire about their needs for grant writers on a consulting basis. There are a number of smaller non-profit organizations that cannot afford full-time employees but hire grant writers on a part-time, or special project, basis.

What It Takes to be a Grant Writer

Grant writers perform an essential role for many charitable institutions, think tanks and non-profits, colleges and universities, and other organizations seeking funds from grants. As grant monies from federal private philanthropic foundations, corporate foundations and individuals become more limited, the demand for highly skilled grant writers increases.

If you want to be a grant writer, you need to possess the following:

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- **Excellent writing skills.** You need not only know how to write, but you need to write extremely well. Your client's success in obtaining the grant hinges in large part on the quality of your written proposal. Whether you are writing for a request of \$1,000 for a community activity or a \$5 million research project, you must be able to clearly communicate how the funds will be effectively used to reach a worthwhile goal. Write, write and write constantly to practice and improve your writing skills.
- **Clear understanding of the project process.** Your role as a grant writer is to convert your clients' ideas and concepts into a workable and concrete program. You will serve as the bridge between the grant applicant and the grant provider, where your role is to put into writing the clients' concepts and transform it into a project that the funding institution will support. Your document must assure the funding institutions that their funds will be put to the best possible uses. You must have also loads of imagination. Part of your work will be to visualize how a \$75,000 project, for example, is going to play out over three-year project duration.
- **Strong research skills.** More than just providing a well-written document, you need to possess strong research skills. Part of the work of the grant writer is the identification and selection of appropriate potential donors. You will research grant-making organizations and analyze them to identify likely funding sources for specific projects and programs. A philanthropic organization focusing on children's education is not likely to approve an application for a tree-planting project. Or an organization that funds medical research projects may not support a diversity project. You will increase the chances of getting the funds if you submit the proposal to the right institution.
- ab • **Discipline and organization.** A grant writer must be able to keep track of grant application deadlines and follow-up on submitted applications. It is also essential to keep track of trends in the field and be aware of changes in the priorities of funding institutions, as well as new funding sources. ab

Income Potential

Fees charged by grant writers range far and wide. Here are the payment modalities commonly accepted by grant writers:

1. By Hourly Rate. The rates charged by grant writers vary, depending on their main clientele, level of experience and success in securing grant approvals. The average per hour rate for a competent grant writer goes around \$50 to \$70. A grant writer charging \$60/hour can therefore earn \$1,200 for a 20-hour assignment. More experienced and capable grant writers can charge rates of \$100/hour or more, while there are less established grant writers who charge \$25-50/hour. The hourly rate and the resultant total fee will be significantly impacted by the relative efficiency of each grant writer.

2. By Project. Some grant writers prefer to charge on a project basis, after a thorough assessment of the full range and scope of the job. Depending on the length and complexity of the grant document, project fees can range anywhere from \$1,000 to \$8,000. You can also choose to offer different rates based on the foundation or corporation; and a higher rate if applicant is seeking state or federal grants.

3. By Commission. Some grant writers are paid based on a certain percentage of funding requested. In this arrangement, the grant writer's compensation is tied to their success in securing the grant, and will be paid anywhere from 1% to 5% of the total grant awarded.

Often used by cash-strapped non-profit organizations with little operational funds, this practice raises a number of ethical questions in the industry. First, grant seekers will have to creatively reflect the grant acquisition services provided by the grant writer in the grant application. Including grant-writing fee in the proposed budget of the grant application presents the risk of jeopardizing the client's chances of securing the grant. Grant funders almost always stipulate that every dollar to be raised for and spend on project be accounted for on a line-item basis. Grants are often requested to offset project costs, and not operational expenses such as grant writing services.

You will also be taking a lot of risks if you tie your compensation with the success of the grant application. If the grant application is rejected, you have basically given your services for free. The success or failure of a grant application is not always contingent on the quality of writing of the grant proposal. Sometimes, grant applications are rejected because of poor timing, poor presentation by the applicant, or for some other reason beyond your control. It will not be fair to you; grant writers should be given fair payment for work done on a grant application, whether the grant funding is secured or not.

Another question with regards to commission basis compensation is how payment will be made to the grant writer if the grant is paid out over a number of months or years. Say for example a grant award of \$500,000 to be paid on a quarterly basis for four years. Will the grant writer be paid their commission as soon as the grant is

approved, regardless of the actual fund disbursement? Or will the payment be made in sync with the grant's payment schedule?

Other Sources of Revenue

In addition to writing grant proposals, you can increase the scope of your grant writing business and broaden your revenue base by offering the following services:

- **Grant Funding Search:** You will search and develop a list of potential funding resources that match your client's missions, goals and activities. For an hourly fee, you can include in this service composition of letters of inquiry.
- **Grant Research:** You can assist organizations with completed project proposals to look for possible funding sources. Your assignment will include a redrafting of the proposal to fit the guidelines of the new funding source.
- **Grant Proposal Review:** You can also review completed proposals prior to the organization's submission to the potential funding source to ensure the proposal's completeness and overall fit with the funding guidelines. Your task will be to proofread, identify weaknesses and revise the proposal accordingly.
- **Grant Proposal Evaluation:** You can also provide a professional evaluation or assessment of the proposal - without doing the rewrites yourself. You can provide a summative and/or formative expression of the proposal's contents.

Resources

- Teaching Yourself to be a Grantwriter http://www.grantproposal.com/starting_inner.html
- Minnesota Council on Foundations Writing a Successful Grant Proposal <http://www.mcf.org/mcf/grant/writing.htm>
- American Association of Grant Professionals <http://www.grantprofessionals.org>
- Non profit Guides <http://www.npguides.org/>
- GrantExperts.com <http://www.grantexperts.com>
- Association of Fund Raising Professionals <http://www.afpnet.org/>
- Foundation Center <http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/learnabout/proposalwriting.html>

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