

2

DIGITAL BEST PRACTICES SERIES

# Developing Successful Electronic Records Grant Projects

**SERI** STATE ELECTRONIC RECORDS INITIATIVE  
Council of State Archivists

Council of State Archivists  
Tools & Resources Subcommittee

MAY  
2021



# About CoSA

Formed in 2002, the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) is a national nonprofit using collaborative research, education, and advocacy to provide leadership that strengthens and supports state and territorial archives in their work to preserve and provide access to government records. Its members comprise the state archivists in the 50 state, 5 territorial and District of Columbia archives. These individuals oversee agencies that hold a legal mandate to document government and protect the rights and history of the American people across our country.

CoSA formed the State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) project in 2011 to address their long-term care and access. SERI provides critical training to the state archival community in electronic records management and preservation. CoSA administers the online Resource Center with open availability to information, resources, and training opportunities. Funded initially with grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, CoSA continues electronic records management and digital preservation education and development of best practices documents for use by allied organizations.

Council of State Archivists  
PO Box 1583  
Frankfort, KY 40602-1583

Voice: 502-229-8222  
Email: [info@statearchivists.org](mailto:info@statearchivists.org)  
[www.statearchivists.org](http://www.statearchivists.org)

May 2021



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

# Contents

- About CoSA** ..... 2
- Introduction** ..... 1
- Understanding Grant Cycles** ..... 3
  - Regular Granting Cycles ..... 3
  - Irregular Granting Cycles ..... 4
  - One-Time or Ad-Hoc Grants ..... 4
- The Grant Process** ..... 5
  - Grants and Grantors ..... 5
  - Creating the Right Projects ..... 6
  - Finding Grant Opportunities ..... 6
- Institutional Preparation** ..... 8
  - Identify Stakeholders ..... 8
  - Identify Collaborators ..... 8
  - Prepare the Organization and Staff ..... 8
- The Grant Application** ..... 10
  - Cover Letter ..... 10
  - Executive Summary ..... 10
  - Statement of Need ..... 10
  - Budgeting ..... 12
  - Organization/Staff information ..... 13
  - Risks and Risk Mitigation Strategies ..... 13
  - Publicity Plan ..... 14
  - Supplementary Documentation and Other Information ..... 14
- Post-Application** ..... 15
- Conclusion** ..... 16
  
- APPENDIX A Sample Grant Application Process** ..... A1
- APPENDIX B Grant Application Checklist** ..... A2

# Introduction

Across the country, archival funding has remained largely stagnant<sup>1</sup> over the last decade, but the growth in volume of public records, demand for digital preservation platforms, robust online access, and other technological innovation has strained the operating budgets of archives and other cultural heritage institutions across the world. Grant funding is necessary to the survival and proper functioning of many hundreds of archives, libraries, and other cultural heritage institutions across the United States. Public institutions at the State and local levels often found among those with the greatest need.

Organizations like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) along with hundreds of smaller State, local, and nonprofit organizations, public and private, give more than \$400 million per year in grant funding to archives, libraries and other cultural heritage institutions in need.<sup>2</sup>

This funding allows essential work to be completed that otherwise might not; it supports research for archival services, organization of information, and the development of best practices and modern standards; it also supports the development of hardware and software solutions, the training to properly use and maintain them, and can provide staff support as well.

The value of archives, especially those in the public sector, is felt more broadly in the long-term than in the short-term.



The effects of mature records management programs, sophisticated modern digital preservation practices, and the methodical implementation of archival standards may not be fully appreciated or understood for decades. Thus, it can be a challenge to quantify the struggle to justify budgets in processes. There is much work to be done, but only so much funding available.

Grants aren't free money; they require substantial investments from the institution in terms of expertise, staff time, and commitment. Grantors evaluate dozens or hundreds of applications each cycle, and there is a limited pool of money to be distributed. In order to be competitive, one must prove not only that the project itself is worthwhile, but that the institution submitting the application is reliable and can manage it effectively. Furthermore, grant programs frequently look for projects that are sustainable and will continue to provide an impact after the grant term ends.

This best practices document, along with several of the most successful programs of the Council of State Archivists, received substantial grant support. The State Electronic Records Initiative (SERI) has, since 2011, been sustained with over 1 million dollars of federal funding (in addition to more than 800,000 dollars of in-kind funding from states). The Program for Electronic Records Training, Tools, and Standards (PERTTS) project ran for two years with funding from an NHPRC grant and eventually became the [CoSA Resource Center](#), which is still maintained and used to this day.

Applying for and receiving a grant award is both a windfall and a responsibility. The acceptance of an award comes with the acceptance of accountability,

<sup>1</sup> See CoSA's bi-yearly State of State Electronic Records reports, found at <https://www.statearchivists.org/programs/state-electronic-records-initiative/>.

<sup>2</sup> The NEH (\$155 million), NHPRC (\$10 million), and IMLS (\$242 million) alone combine for nearly \$400 million (excluding operating expenses) and this number does not include the thousands of smaller granting institutions and programs nationally (all figures 2019 budgets).

and that award creates a relationship between grantor and grantee. Failure to comply with the terms of a grant can result in its cancellation or the revocation of funds, or potentially other legal consequences. Furthermore, failure to complete the agreed-upon requirements in a grant award can damage the institution's reputation and make it much harder to receive grants in the future. Thus, the utmost care must be taken to properly match grants to the right project, for failure to do so can have truly damaging consequences to one's organization.

The purpose of this guide is to educate leadership and staff about the aspects of the granting process an institution should consider and how to construct a grant application that has the highest chances of success. Ultimately, nothing will guarantee a successful application, but careful attention to detail can greatly affect the outcome. Thus, this guide focuses on the necessary preparations leading up to and including the grant application process. The administration of grant-funded projects would certainly require another entire guide; for now, a few sources on the topic for further reading.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup> Here are a few resources from federal agencies regarding grants management: <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/FMGNPO.pdf>; <https://www.epa.gov/grants/grants-management-guidance-non-profit-organizations>; <https://www.ngma.org/about-gmbok-guide>

# Understanding Grant Cycles



Understanding the nature of the grantmaking process is essential to successfully applying for, and ultimately being awarded a grant. Thorough knowledge of grant cycles (and their associated deadlines) allows institutions to set aside time for grant writing well in advance of deadlines, leaving time for review and revisions. Most often, granting institutions offer grant awards on a standard schedule. This schedule typically conforms to a fiscal or calendar year, but some organizations offer grants:

- on a regular basis (usually tied to a fiscal year cycle)
- on an irregular basis (no fixed cycle or timeframe)
- an ad-hoc or one-time basis, typically in response to a time-sensitive social or political issue

Some grantors may have programs which fall into several of the above categories. Large governmental organizations like the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) have regular yearly grant cycles, while other foundations like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation offer grants year-round. Other, smaller institutions may offer grants or have award programs based on specific endowments or bequests, and thus may be one-time awards or may only offer grants every few years, as budget cycles allow.

## Regular Granting Cycles<sup>4</sup>

Government, corporate, and foundation funders with regular granting cycles likely make up the bulk of the funding available to cultural heritage institutions around the country. These grants are usually quite competitive given their nature and scope, though regular grant cycles are indicative of standardization of

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.grants.gov/learn-grants/grants-101/grant-lifecycle.html>

process, which might be required to efficiently process high volumes of applications. A regular granting process has a few phases:

- 1 Pre-Award Phase: Announcement and Applications
- 2 Award Phase: Review and Award
- 3 Post-Award Phase: Grant Work and Reporting

In the Pre-Award Phase, the funder has created some guidelines related to its mission, its budget, and its available resources to develop a grant program. This phase begins with the organization publicly announcing (to its audience) its cycle of grants for the year. This announcement usually comes with two important pieces of information: any themes or other information about the focus of the program this cycle, and any relevant deadlines for applications, in addition to other requirements (especially deviations from normal procedures). This is done to control the flow of applications and decisions. The timeframe between the announcement and submission deadlines can be as long as a year, or could be as short as several months or even less. Between the announcement and the deadline, much of the work of constructing the grant application should be performed. Most importantly, deadlines should always be strictly followed. Most grant programs receive far more applications than they give out awards, and many applications are cut in a first sweep to see if basic application instructions can be followed.

In the Award Phase, following the receipt of applications, the organization will spend some time evaluating all of them; this process will often involve peer review, whereby the application will be distributed to reviewers at similar organizations for their comments. This process can take several months or more, especially for large sums, and may have several rounds of review, comment, and resubmission. Once the decisions have been made, typically the grantees are contacted by the grantor with official notice of the award and, importantly, the terms and conditions of the award. These terms typically mirror those project deliverables (more on this later) outlined in the application, but will also contain scheduling expectations, financial and other reporting



**TIP** Many grants have multiple deadlines built into their process: pre-submissions, submissions, peer review, and more. You'll find them in the instruction packet and/or the award letter. Missing a critical deadline could jeopardize your funding. Be sure to note an award's deadlines on your calendar!

## Standard Grant-writing Workflow



requirements, and any limitations on what and how the granted funds can be spent. An organization should also have policies and procedures on its process for accepting grant awards: including providing notice of intent to the business office, announcing the grant to stakeholders, methods on how grant funds are to be spent, hiring and paying project staff, retention of grant records, and more.

In the Post-Award Phase, the grantee performs the work as described in the grant application and expected in the award. Whether strictly required during the course of the grant, the grantee should carefully track and monitor its progress (and provides updates to the grantor if necessary). When the grant period is complete, the grantee should compile all its documentation into a final report, and eventually close out the grant with its conclusions and a final accounting.

The entire process, from the announcement of the grant to the final reporting can take years. Thus, it is essential to understand that both applying for and accepting grant funds is a large organizational commitment, and not to be taken lightly.

### Irregular Granting Cycles

Organizations with irregular granting cycles typically follow similar procedures as outlined above, with the exception that these might not follow a consistent calendar from fiscal year to fiscal year. Due to financial (such as unpredictable investment/endowment performance or contributions) or organizational (changing leadership, staff, or priorities) constraints, grants may not be offered every year, and both the size of individual awards and the overall size of the award pool may vary greatly from year to year. Most important is to monitor reliable information sources (such as the organization's social media or press feeds) that portend or announce an upcoming grant program. Since turnaround times can be short, closely following the activities of potential grantors can be the only way to even reliably be aware that grants are available.

### One-Time or Ad-Hoc Grants

Most common in 501(c)(3) and other charitable organizations, one-time disbursements of grant awards can provide a lower-key granting process. Many new grant programs begin as one-time projects funded by a large contribution or a change in organizational mission; unfortunately, while many of these do persist and become more regular, the only way to learn of one-time grants is to closely monitor organizations which have done similar things in the past, or to develop a robust social (and organizational collaborator) network that can announce upcoming or recently-announced grants. Data aggregators like [grantwatch.com](http://grantwatch.com) allow the searching of multiple projects and organizations at once. Finally, one-time grants as these are usually for small sums, but can have less competition due to being harder to discover overall.



# The Grant Process

As described in the previous section, the grant process<sup>5</sup> typically falls into three major phases:

- Pre-Award Phase
- Awarding Phase
- Post-Award Phase

## Grants and Grantors

Along with selecting a correctly sized and scoped project, understanding the nature of available or soon-to-be-available grant awards and their granting institutions may be the single most important step of the granting process, and this step can occur as part of long-term institutional budget and administration planning. Fortunately, it's never too late to begin this type of planning, and regular reexamination of administrative priorities can reveal new opportunities to seek funding, as well as new context for past projects that can make grant applications more successful.

### Grantors

Grants are inextricably tied to their granting institution. No grant exists in a vacuum; there is always a distinct and meaningful purpose behind the disbursement of money. Government institutions (like the

 **TIP** One useful method to help prepare an application is to look at the past few years' accepted applications in search of the qualities that the grantor and its reviewers found appealing. However, be sure to review previous applications in the context of the grantor's current mission. Don't fall prey to basing an application off those accepted in vastly different contexts.

Institute of Museum and Library Services, for example) offer their grant programs to legislative mandate; governmental grantors have missions and their programs are drawn directly from legislation. Nonprofit grantors, on the other hand, have specific missions to which they are dedicated and their priorities might change substantially year to year; they also often have more flexibility in their granting programs. Additionally, substantial donations or other unexpected sources of funding can create new opportunities for nonprofits to develop new grant programs. Specifically, large-scale donations can fuel entire programs.

<sup>5</sup> Please see Appendix A for a fully-described granting process.

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Museum and Library Services. <https://www.ims.gov/grants/apply-grant/available-grants>

Understanding the mission and priorities of the grantor is an essential part of not only knowing which grants are appropriate to seek, but also to crafting the grant application in a way that maximizes success. Missions can change over time; most institutions likely re-evaluate and update their missions every few years. Staying abreast of changes in institutional missions can give one's application a leg up over the competition.

### Grant Programs

Furthermore, although missions may not change frequently, organizational priorities (and especially the priorities of specific granting programs) can change. Most grant programs provide documentation that describes its purpose and priority. These priorities change over time as new technology becomes available,

 **TIP** For example, some federal historic preservation grants previously provided money to reformat fragile paper records into digital formats, but in recent years the emphasis on reformatting has shifted to preservation of born-digital records.

as new funding sources are discovered, and as new stakeholders and collaborators come into the fold. This evolution is natural but must be closely monitored. Consider it the perfect opportunity to reach out to a grantor's program staff to gain a better insight about what the grantor is expecting from potential applicants. It's never too early to start building a relationship with program staff!

A clear understanding of programs offered and their award criteria, coupled with a good understanding of one's own institution's needs will tend to produce the best results. However, even taking this approach does not guarantee a successful grant application. Not every project is appropriate for every grant, and one area of frequent failure is with attempts to shoehorn ill-fitting projects into certain grant programs. It may seem attractive to apply for a grant that isn't quite the

 **TIP** When in doubt, reach out to a particular grant's program officer. Part of their role is to promote the grant and encourage quality applicants, so they are usually quite willing to discuss previously successful grants, share advice on completing the application, and answer any questions one might have about the overall process.

right fit, with the hope that perhaps a fringe project might be selected. But the review of grants takes considerable time, and often engages volunteers from peer institutions. Submitting an application and asking a grantor to review it while it is wholly unsuitable for

the award wastes time, and threatens to damage the organization's reputation. We do not recommend, under any circumstances, "reaching" or otherwise speculatively applying for grants. A grant award requires significant commitment, and no one is served by having friction between the grantor and the grantee.

### Creating the Right Projects

Nearly all cultural heritage institutions have backlogs of work to be done. Work might be set aside to perform later for many reasons: current staff, technology, or budget constraints are chief among them. Grants can be a good way to bring in much-needed funding that can support the (temporary) hiring of staff, the application of new techniques, or the support of new technological methods to perform that work. But each project should have a clear vision and demonstrate an obvious need before searching for grants to support it, not to mention finding the right grants to support one's project.

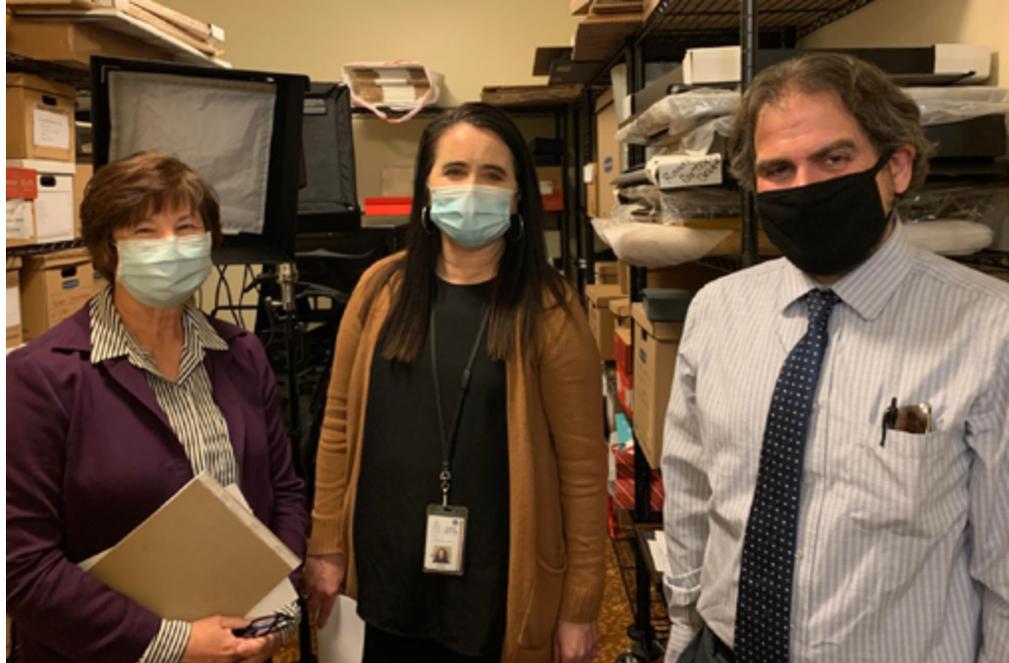
As discussed in the previous subsection, each grantor has a specific mission, and each grant program has a specific purpose; careful research into grantors and available grant opportunities will prepare one's institution



#### **TIP** Some tips for first-time applicants:

- Start small (try smaller grants with narrower scopes).
- Use your networks to find grant opportunities (like-minded and partner organizations might have good leads on upcoming funding).
- Collaborate with partners (try working with someone who's been through this before).
- Model successful grants by similar organizations.

For example, a records-processing project with 1GB of PDF records could be done with 100 hours of processing or with 1000 hours of processing, depending on the actions needed to meet the projects' requirements. Thus, developing a grant project is as much as selecting (and sometimes crafting) the right project as much as it is finding the right granting opportunity.



to match projects to potential funding opportunities. However, projects themselves are essentially arbitrary; requirements are derived from the institution's mission and the requirements of its stakeholders, but there is usually flexibility in how best to accomplish one's goals. Furthermore, consider the mission and focus of available grants; selecting or tailoring a project to appeal to available funding sources can be a legitimate strategy so long as the grant can be supported by the institution. There's risk in taking on a project outside of one's area of expertise. If important events approach, such as anniversaries or milestones, those can provide substantial incentives for why certain projects need to be addressed sooner rather than later. This all encompasses the definition of the need, which will be important during the application process.

Ultimately, a successful grant application will demonstrate considerable common ground between the grantee's project priorities and the grantor's priorities. It's extremely unethical to bend the truth in this regard to create more common ground; however, actually changing one's own requirements (while staying within the organization's mission and strategic plans) to better match their grant opportunities is a better approach. But, exercise caution: changing too much to match grant opportunities is risky because, as previously mentioned, grantor priorities do change over time as well.

### Finding Grant Opportunities

Learning about grant opportunities can be a challenge, but fortunately gone are the days of needing to solicit and learn about grants from dozens of different sources. While still possible, some of the better ways to discover grants are:

#### **Grants.gov**

The federal government previously offered hundreds of grant programs through all of its constituent agencies, but in the early 2000's the Office of Management and Budget created [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov) to serve as a

clearinghouse and e-processing center for Federal granting programs. Today it features more than 1000 grant programs offered by a wide variety of federal agencies for a myriad of purposes.

### **Grant Aggregators**

There are multiple for-profit, membership-based grant aggregators on the web; these services catalog and provide details about thousands of grants that are currently, or were previously available. These sites *can* be a valuable resource; however, many of these sites do not have perfect tools for finding grants which are relevant to one's organization. Furthermore, many of these services are subscription-based or require a fee-to-access.

One example of a mostly-free option is the [Philanthropy News Digest](#), which aggregates US-based philanthropic grant opportunities and presents them in a newsfeed format. In addition, many nonprofits as well as professional and industry organizations include upcoming grants in their newsletters and press releases. Publicly-funded grants are typically widely-publicized by elected officials and the organizations granting them.

### **Social Networks**

One of the best ways to learn about grants is to monitor one's organization's social networks. Firstly, many grantors require, as a condition of their award, that the grantee publicize not only the receipt of the award but any results of the project. This raises the profile of both the grantor and the grantee. Often this publicity is shared through social media, and following peer organizations and learning about the kinds of grant awards they seek and receive can provide a wealth of useful information.

Secondly, grantors want their programs to be well-publicized. The higher the profile of the grant, the more applicants and therefore the higher likelihood that good projects will come out of the program. Thus, grantors have a strong incentive to share their announcements widely, most often through heavy use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Finally, non-technological social networks can be a great source of grant opportunities. Many grantors have booths and provide presentations at professional conferences, and referrals and partnerships from previous grantees. Professional associations often include upcoming funding deadlines in their newsletters. Some elected officials also publish funding opportunities. Local institutions which may not have robust web presences can also be sources of smaller award opportunities.

# Institutional Preparation

In addition to finding grants and selecting projects, one must ensure that the institution is capable of not only applying for the grant, but executing the plan laid out in its application, should it receive the award. This is best accomplished by ensuring that the organization is prepared for the grant well before it receives it, rather than having to scramble and jeopardize the project



**TIP** Take some time to consider your organization's donor-worthiness, such as having an up-to-date strategic plan, financial management controls, a positive track record with donor-funded projects, and the ability to evaluate the cost-benefit of pursuing grant funding.

after the fact. One might begin with [Digital Best Practices Series: Managing Digitization Projects](#).

## Identify Stakeholders

No project exists in a vacuum, and any project for which a grant is

sought should be placed in its proper context. Stakeholders, individuals and institutions for whom the outcome of a particular project matter, should be identified and consulted. The plan of a particular project will flow naturally from its requirements, and those requirements should be sourced from the stakeholders.

Stakeholders could be institutional collaborators, upstream funders or authorities (such as legislatures and other elected officials), or they could be audiences for products (such as the general public or researchers). Their input is essential to comprehending the nature of the work to be done; furthermore, close consultation with stakeholders provides more opportunity for support and collaboration, which can only serve to build the project's foundations more strongly.

Finally, stakeholders always like to see that the institution itself is prepared to handle the demands of the grant. Having a strong strategic plan, a proven track record of project management or financial success, and highly-regarded or otherwise experienced staff are all selling points that demonstrate fitness. What makes an organization attractive to grantors makes it attractive to stakeholders as well.

## Identify Collaborators

In addition to stakeholders, an institution might want to have collaborators. Collaborators are individuals or institutions who will be participating in the work of the project, usually taking on some kind of role. Having collaborators can raise the profile of the project, and

can add much-needed expertise or fill in some gaps in technology or personnel.

Adding collaborators can be risky, though, because with additional parties to the grant that need to be managed there come additional possibilities for failure. Some tips for including collaborators in a successful way include:

- Be clear about expectations and communication at all times; create a written memorandum or letter of agreement that lays out the organization's expectations, as well as what the collaborator can expect of the organization.
- The grantee(s) must direct the progress of the grant (leadership and direction are not to be delegated to those not listed in the grant).
- Have clear processes and understandings around decision-making and workflows.

## Prepare the Organization and Staff

While reviewing grant opportunities, similarly review the institution's staff, including their project management expertise, subject matter expertise, projected assignments and workload, and any other constraints on their time and availability. As part of the grant project, staff will need to transition to active management not only of the project, but of all of the required documentation, communication, and deliverables associated with the grant itself—all of which can take an enormous amount of work.

Selecting staff to participate in grant projects is not easy. Here are some things to consider:

- Obtain or update resumes or CVs for staff who might participate in the project; often grant applications will ask for these documents (and learning about previously unknown skill-sets or expertise can be beneficial for the organization).

---

## Principal Investigator

Many grants will require the designation of a Principal Investigator, or PI, who's the primary point-of-contact as well as the party accountable for the work. Consider who might be the best-positioned member of the organization for this role; it requires administrative skill in addition to subject-matter expertise, project management, and potentially managerial skills. Finally, this role can require a significant time investment, so ensure that the staff member in this role has adequate time and resources to perform it well.



- Designate a single staff member to direct the project. Creating accountability and a clear leadership structure will serve the project well in the future. Many grants require the designation of a Principal Investigator—see the sidebar for more.
- Invest in training (project management seminars or workshops) for leaders and staff
- Plan for staff working on grant-funded projects to have reduced workloads for regular duties; staff that are stretched too thinly can threaten the efficacy of the grant and impact staff morale.

- Train staff on the procedures necessary to comply with the grant's requirements, should the grant be awarded. Oftentimes, strict time and budget tracking will be necessary to properly track direct and indirect costs.
- Identify knowledgeable contractors/consultants to add to the project if sufficient institution staff are not available.
- Assign staff with the authority and expertise to manage vendor relationships, if they are necessary or anticipated.

Beyond preparing staff, the organization itself must be prepared for the application process and the eventual awarding of the grant (if fortunate enough to be accepted). Many organizations, especially those in the public sector, have specific internal requirements for both the application for grants and for the acceptance thereof. For example, a state government may need acceptance or sign off from the Governor's Office to accept grant money from another entity.

# The Grant Application

When it comes to applying for grants, nothing is more important than the application itself. From adherence to the basic requirements of the application process, to clearly and concisely communicating a substantial amount of information in a limited space, it is the linchpin upon which the entire project rests. Unfortunately, not every grant application is the same, and many have specific requirements with regard to formatting, content, and deadlines. Some elements of grant applications are fairly standard, and have only small variations. Here we will go over some of the most common parts of a grant application and provide some guidelines for maximizing one's success. Remember, a good grant application is like a good job application; it needs to be specifically tailored toward the program and institution for best results.

As part of the announcement of the grant opportunity, the grantor will typically post relevant information about the application, including any required materials and any relevant deadlines. There is no single best way to approach the application other than to read it carefully and understand it thoroughly. An application is both a project proposal and a demonstration of organizational fitness and project management skills, all while being reasonable and grounded in both scope and expectations. It's not easy!

## Cover Letter

The cover letter is one piece that is common to almost every grant application. Typically taking the form of a

 **TIP** The Cover Letter sets the tone for the entire application and places it in its organizational context, so it should be written formally and professionally as it begins the application process between the grantor and the grantee.

short, narrative letter, it should be authored by (or at the least signed off by) the appropriate officer in the grantee's institution. Considering that a grant application and award are a form of legal

agreement, selecting an officer who can represent the organization in this regard is essential. This will often end up being the same person who serves as the principal investigator.

The cover letter itself typically will only be a page (and do try to confine it to a single page when possible), and will mostly serve to introduce the organization and introduce the application itself. Beyond introductions, it should have a very short (one paragraph) description of the need and the project, written in the broadest terms.

## Executive Summary

The executive summary is a short (also typically one-page) summary of the project, generally including brief information about the organization, the need, the proposed solution, and the amount of funding necessary (or requested). Its purpose is to provide reviewers and other stakeholders with a succinct project overview that prepares the reader for the application ahead, and places the various components of the application in context. It will often be the first document that a reviewer will read, so it's important to write a strong summary.

 **TIP** Try to keep the executive summary to one page. Most of this material will be covered again in greater detail later, so don't sweat the small stuff. The goal is to capture attention in a polished and professional manner.

Thus, the executive summary highlights at a high-level all of the major points of the project. It is a one-pager that could be shared with a larger audience, and therefore should be written without too much in the way of jargon and technical language, instead focusing on the major organizational aspects of the project. It should include broad strokes about the purpose, methodology, and deliverables of the project.

## Statement of Need

Similar to some of the information contained in the Cover Letter and Executive Summary, the Statement of Need typically introduces the problem that the grant award will help address. It is not crucial to explain in endless depth the nature of the problem, but reviewers should be able to fully understand the context of the project in terms of the organization's history and its current context.

A Statement of Need can vary in length, depending on the amount of research that has been put into the topic. Some grant applications will follow other work that has already been completed, perhaps by the same organization or by others; referencing

 **TIP** Weaker articulation of goals for a digitization project:

- "Scan all documents by the end of the project"
- "Ensure minimal errors in reformatting process"
- "All digitized documents will be available online"
- Stronger articulation of goals:
  - "Digitize 10,000 documents per month"
  - "Ensure less than 1% error rate in digitized documents"
  - "100,000 digital records will be ingested into the digital repository in Phase 3 of the project, and made available for online access by January 1, 2021"

previous work (especially previous grant work in the same realm) can help place the application and the project in its proper context (which will go a long way to help reviewers understand the nature of the problem). Other applications will require more extensive statements to document their context if this is the first attempt at seeking grant funding.

It is essential to clearly articulate the Statement of Need. If reviewers cannot understand the organizational need and specifically the need for grant funding, it's going to be difficult to secure a grant award. A clearly demonstrated need will likely have the following elements:

- Description of the problem
- Supporting data (either qualitative or quantitative)
- Projection of future problem(s) if the need is not met
- Benefits of addressing the problem (both for the institution and its designated community)

Furthermore, it is not enough to merely state and describe a problem; it is imperative that the Statement of Need explain *why* a particular situation presents a problem. The ideal statement will logically guide the reviewers through the problem and supporting information such that, by the conclusion of the document, the reviewer will agree that a problem exists and will be eager to learn of the proposed solution.

 **TIP** Be realistic about needs. It can be very off-putting to reviewers to present problems as more dire than they are; one must consider context, as always, especially as it pertains to the other applications that might be under review. Don't oversell a problem; the reviewer should agree that it's an issue but should never think "then why hasn't it been addressed yet?".

information such that, by the conclusion of the document, the reviewer will agree that a problem exists and will be eager to learn of the proposed solution.

### Project Plan/ Scope of Work

The Project Plan, sometimes called the Scope of

Work, is the place for the detailed plan for the project. This section should include, at a minimum, the following information:

- Nature and quantity of work to be performed, in detail.
- Proposed plan for who (staff, subject-matter consultants/contractors, vendors, etc.) will perform this work.
- Timeframe for phases of the project.
- Deliverables (that should match the expectations of the grant program).

- Potential risks and risk mitigation efforts.
- Any contributions from collaborators or other stakeholders.
- Any constraints that would hinder or otherwise negatively affect the project.

While there is no formula for the best way to present this information, some general grant-writing advice can be helpful. Be clear about the nature and scope of the work and who will perform it. Include specific details as much as possible, but maintain flexibility and, especially, don't overcommit. The application is ultimately a proposal, and if it is accepted there will be expectations on the amount and nature of work to be performed.<sup>7</sup> Demonstrate to reviewers that the organization has a deep and thorough understanding of the matter at hand; appearing unprepared or lacking knowledge at this point could prove fatal to the application's chances. Application drafters should avoid using unnecessary technical language or jargon unless the nature of the grant opportunity demands it.

 **TIP** Ask knowledgeable colleagues (even at other institutions) to read your Statement of Need and Project Plan. A diversity of viewers can more easily discover and point out content gaps, confusing language, and grammatical errors.

When planning timeframes, avoid being overly optimistic about timetables; delays happen even to the most exhaustively-planned projects. Ensure that stated timeframes match the expectations of the grant award.

Many grant programs require that funds will be expended in the same fiscal year that they are awarded (and many programs, for this reason, disburse award funds periodically instead of as a lump sum). Structuring the work of the project to match the anticipated award disbursement schedule is essential.

 **TIP** The organization should be confident, after projecting budget, staff, and stakeholder requirements that it can be successful at meeting the parameters of the grant. If the numbers don't work, there's no shame in postponing the application into the future, or scaling the project down to the resources the organization can provide. If that's not an option, waiting for a time when resources may be more available is a responsible alternative. A grant award should never be a burden on the organization.

Be clear about the deliverables of the project and how they will be distributed; again, expectations set during the application process should be met during the course of the project.

<sup>7</sup> Note: Some grantors will not take well to grantees attempting to significantly change their scope of work after the award is announced.

Deliverables (or goals) should be specific, measurable, and time-bound whenever possible. Reviewers will shy away from projects whose success or failure will be difficult or impossible to measure, or who have deliverables that are intangible.

Visual aids such as calendars and timelines can go a long way to summarizing the project steps and associated deliverables; these aid reviewers in understanding the process and can make the project more attractive.

Finally, be realistic about the risks to the project, especially as it pertains to staffing and funding sources. Threats to the project's success can come from internal or external sources and while they are not always completely preventable, common sense steps and good forethought can reduce or otherwise mitigate most risks before they can become too damaging.

Additional sections follow about specific information that may be contained within the Project Plan, but may be broken out into dedicated areas.

### Budgeting

Projecting a budget for the grant application can be an extremely complicated and difficult process, as it requires projecting finances, staff time, supplies and equipment needs, and other factors potentially multiple years into the future. Costs associated with grants typically fall into two categories: direct costs and indirect costs.

Direct costs are those expenses directly related to the scope of the award. These usually include subject-matter consultants/contractors, services and supplies, subcontracting or paying vendors for services, travel,

 **TIP** Be as precise as possible, and never estimate when actual values are available. Understand that budget projections are just that, projections. They don't have to be perfect, but they should be as accurate as possible. Be systematic and thoughtful about calculating projections and never make arbitrary estimations. Significant under- or over-projection of costs will reflect poorly on one's institution and may damage future grant opportunities.

and other costs that would not be incurred if not for the grant. Direct costs are most often paid for by grant funds, but grantees may be expected to make financial contributions to cover direct costs.

Indirect costs are those costs which might commonly be referred to

as "overhead"; not directly supporting the grant but supporting the aspects of the organization (such as space, staff benefits, etc.) that contribute to the grant



work. Staff salaries and benefits, facilities use/utilities, insurance, amortization of assets, and similar expenses are all indirect costs. Indirect costs are often ineligible to be covered by grant funds as most grantors want to ensure that their funds are used to support projects that wouldn't happen otherwise, not cover existing overhead for grantees.

The dividing line between direct and indirect costs can be one of the trickier aspects of the grant application. A staff member assigned full time to the project probably can have all expenses budgeted as direct costs, but a staff member assigned part-time can only have a percentage or perhaps none of their salary and benefits covered. It is very important to avoid erroneously listing indirect costs as direct costs; grantors are wary of applications which present work that is going to be performed anyway as requiring grant support. Uncertainty in this area can doom an application.

For many grant programs, there is an expectation that the award will fund a project but that the costs of the project will be split (in some fashion) between the grantor and the grantee. This is most often referred to as **cost sharing** or **cost matching**. During the budgeting process as outlined in the application, the grantor will expect to see detailed (projected) accounting of how the grantee will contribute their own funds (either through direct funding or by paying indirect costs). Typically, a granting organization will outline specifically what activities or costs can be included in cost sharing. Whether they do or not, be sure to account for these activities in the regular documenting of grant activities to be sure that the institution is not short-changing itself in the budget process.

Projections can be difficult to make, but fortunately there are resources available to assist. Indirect cost calculators can help reduce the mathematical calculations to easy formulas. A major part of any review is going to be financial analysis, with the goal of ensuring that the costs add up and funds are utilized correctly. Cost overruns (or under-projections) happen. Small overruns will likely need to be covered by the recipient; large cost overruns that could threaten the completion of the project are more dire and could jeopardize



Georgetown Slavery Archive Editing Workshop. Photo by Avery Jensen. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgetown\\_Slavery\\_Archive\\_Editing\\_Workshop\\_0076.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgetown_Slavery_Archive_Editing_Workshop_0076.jpg)

the grant funds (as no grantor wants to put money into a project that will not be complete). The best course of action is always to communicate any changes with the grantor.

### Organization/Staff information

As addressed previously, most grantors desire to know a good deal about a potential grantee; institutions wish to know, after all, whether their funds are going to be spent well. While there is no guaranteed formula to presenting one's organizational information, two things should always be highlighted: previous (successful) grant projects, and the experience of the staff in project management. Most grants fall apart not due to the subject matter, but instead due to poor management or mitigation of risks.

A solid demonstration of previous grant success, or in the absence of grant success, previous project management success is a strong foundation upon which to build an application. Grantors want to mitigate their risk as well, and want to work with reliable institutions who are likely to meet the goals of their projects.

Staff qualifications cannot be overlooked. A project that is understaffed is going to have major obstacles to being funded while a proposal that is fleshed out with project roles and profiles of the staff or consultants/contractors who will take on those roles is far more robust. Resumes or curricula-vitae should be provided when available, and should highlight the knowledge and skills most relevant to the project described in the application. It's perfectly acceptable to hire staff or consultants/contractors specifically

for one's project (as long as such things are permitted by the terms of the grant), but where those roles are currently unfilled the grant application should go into detail about the qualifications of who will be hired to complete the tasks.

### Risks and Risk Mitigation Strategies

Understanding project risks or developing risk mitigation strategies, once something that only the largest grant programs would require, is an important part of the grant application. Prospective grantees should demonstrate not only a thorough understanding of the potential risks of the project, but a sensible approach to managing and mitigating any risks that do arise. These risks include known risks (ones that are present during the application process) and unforeseen ones that might crop up after the award is made.

Risks can come at any point in the project process, and can come from any source. Cost overruns, staff vacancies, changes in institutional priorities, dependency on vendors and collaborators, and other factors can all negatively impact a grant project. It is essential to honestly assess and articulate what the most probable risks are; grantors will want to see a thorough understanding of the work to be done and glossing over the risks can be a red-flag.

As important as addressing the risks is developing contingency plans to deal with risks. All project managers understand that no project goes exactly according to plan, and thus intelligent methods to mitigate risks signal an organizational maturity that is appealing to grantors.

## Publicity Plan

Some awards will require widespread publicizing of the results. This not only brings much-needed attention to the grantor but also helps demonstrate what a successful project might look like. Publicity plans do not need to be especially detailed, but should be comprehensive and should account for the audience of not only the grantee's institution but also the grantor's audience as well. For philanthropic organizations especially, who live and die with charitable contributions, publicity of the successful projects funded by those contributions helps to sustain the grant program. Good publicity helps the grantee as well, demonstrating that it not only can responsibly handle managing a grant-funded project but also that it can accomplish much-needed work by seeking grants to support itself.

## Supplementary Documentation and Other Information

Depending on the grant program, other supplementary information may be required. Some common additional information might be:

- Federal DUNS number: When applying for a Federal grant, every applicant must have a DUNS (Data Universal Numbering System) ID to uniquely identify the institution.
- IRS Tax Determination Letter for those grantees that are 501(c) organizations.
- Resumes of key project personnel.
- Letters of support from collaborators and stakeholders.
- Job descriptions or announcements for staff, if hiring someone new for the project.
- Additional financial or legal disclosures as may be required (e.g. proof of good standing).

# Post-Application

After the application is complete and submitted on time, all that's left to do is wait... or is it? Typically, applications will move to a review process, and during this time often the applications will be forwarded to a review committee for either preliminary or final review. A preliminary review of applications typically will result in two outcomes: rejection, or the chance to revise and otherwise update the application or provide clarifications in response to reviewers' questions and comments.

Applications can be rejected for many reasons, but the most common are:

- **Insufficient information**—the reviewers were unable to comprehend the project, its goals, or the need
- **Failure to follow instructions**—probably the most common issue, procedural errors like missing supplementary materials, failure to comply with deadlines, and other administrative issues can sink an application
- **Poorly scoped**—Projects that feel artificial or with vastly over-reaching scopes can be rejected out of hand
- **Improper budgeting**—an incomplete or poorly constructed budget may lead to rejection
- **Poor planning**—experienced grant officers evaluate the organizational read

However, rejection does not need to be the end of the story. Most grants are offered in cycles, meaning that the same awards (if slightly different) may be offered again the following year. Furthermore, many reviewers of grants are instructed to provide constructive criticism and outline the areas of deficiency in the application, with the hope that the applicant will correct any issues and possibly re-apply in the future. Especially as it comes to applications rejected for structural or risk reasons, mitigation of these “concern factors”

and applying in a subsequent cycle can make one's project more attractive. If you've cultivated a solid relationship with your program officer, you might be able to receive more nuanced insights and greater support for a resubmittal.



**TIP** Don't submit the exact same application multiple times! There are always areas to improve the application and the project, and reviewers will notice from year to year when applications are unchanged.

If one does decide to reapply, it is strongly encouraged to follow the advice and comments

of the reviewers and program officers, as they will provide the most relevant advice to securing a grant in the future. If comments and advice are not offered, it usually will not hurt future chances to ask the reviewers or grantors for pointers, or reasons why the current application was rejected.

Sometimes, though, solid proposals get rejected. Limited funds restrict the number of applications that can be awarded and grantors must choose which applications are awarded.



# Conclusion

Applying for grants is a challenging process, but hopefully this guide will allow approaching such a challenge with confidence. Tackling grant applications doesn't require advanced training, but it is a unique niche insofar as it combines project management, planning, and most of all, articulating all of the above in a clear, convincing fashion.

The application should always be constructed (if possible) by those on staff with the most expertise, the most knowledge about the project (and its context), and the strongest writing skills. Ultimately, the application can never fully express the amount of work that will go into receiving and managing a grant, just as an application for employment can never fully convey the skills and background of a candidate. But applications are made or broken on such details, so careful attention paid here will lead to more success in the future.



Finally, many successful applicants were at one time rejected applicants. If a project is worth planning a grant for, be persistent. Many successful grant projects were funded after multiple rounds of applications and revisions based on notes. Be professional, be curious, be thorough, ask questions, and success will come.

# Sample Grant Application Process

- 1 Institutional Preparation (2-6 months, depending on size and complexity of the project, and funder requirements)**
  - a** Research available grantors and award opportunities
  - b** Select or develop the right projects to match opportunities
  - c** Organization
    - i** Stake out requirements and expectations with stakeholders and collaborators
    - ii** Determine staff skills, availability, and costs
    - iii** Assign and plan for project management
- 2 Application Preparation (1-2 months, depending on length and reviewers)**
  - iv** Review grant proposal requirements
  - v** Calculate the amount of staff time required to complete the project.
  - vi** Calculate the costs of staff, overhead, materials, and vendor expenses
  - vii** Crafting the proposal
    - 1** Cover Letter
    - 2** Executive Summary
    - 3** Statement of Need
    - 4** Project Plan or Scope of Work
    - 5** Budget Plans and Cost-Sharing
    - 6** Organizational Information
    - 7** Risk Identification and Mitigation
    - 8** Publicity Plan
  - d** Solicit supplementary documentation
    - viii** Letters of support
    - ix** Prepare resumes for participating staff
    - x** Craft job descriptions (if seeking to hire new staff)
  - e** Preparing draft proposal for feedback (if applicable)
- 3 (Peer) Review**
  - f** Receive responses from (possibly early) reviewers
  - g** Address deficiencies in application materials
  - h** Provide additional information as required
- 4 Application Submission**
  - i** Peer Review: Receive responses
  - j** (Potential) Opportunities for review and resubmission
- 5 Award**
  - k** Review and Update Application Procedures
  - l** What worked / what didn't work

# Grant Application Checklist

- Grant opportunities researched thoroughly

---

- Contact made with grants officer, additional recommendations followed

---

- Previous successful grant awards studied as potential models

---

- Application follows exactly the instructions or requirements of the grant opportunity

---

- Application addresses the mission of the grant opportunity

---

- Need is clearly established with supporting documentation

---

- Demonstrate how project is achievable, necessary, and innovative

---

- Demonstrate organizational fitness, competency, and past successful grant production

---

- Collaborators and stakeholders have provided letters of support or commitment

---

- Application reviewed for typos, grammatical errors, punctuation, and other details

---

- Detailed Project Plan drafted and reviewed (potentially by peers as well)

---

- Appropriate time assigned for project management

---

- Qualified staff have been given time to work on the project

---

- Grant project budget does not vastly exceed award amount

---

- Administration, in-kind time contributions, communications, and other work included in staff time/cost calculations

---

- Staff salaries/benefits, institutional overhead, supplies and other materials, and vendor expenses included in cost calculations

---

- Organization has the resources available to match cost-sharing requirements

---

- Peer review (and other review) comments addressed

---

- Verify application has been submitted

---

- Resubmit (if invited), or refine for next granting cycle

---