

## Proposal Writing Kit

---

### **PHILANTHROPIC VENTURES FOUNDATION**

1222 Preservation Park Way  
Oakland CA 94612

### **BILL SOMERVILLE**

President

## **Proposal Writing Kit – Tips & Techniques**

1. Writing A Proposal: A Conceptual Framework
2. The Letter of Intent
3. Sample Guidelines for Application
4. Proposal Writing Outline
5. Where Proposals Fail
6. Grant Making Criteria



## Proposal Writing Kit

### Writing A Proposal – A Conceptual Framework

By Bill Somerville

In order to be able to write a proposal to a potential funding source, you should understand the frame of reference of the relationship you are proposing. You are asking somebody for money. They are going to ask why.

This brings us to the concept of venture philanthropy in which funders, like venture capitalists, will ask what is the significance and worth of what you are proposing and what is your ability to pull it off? In other words, you are asking someone to invest in your good idea.

Thus the proposal is really a contract in which you are proposing to do something for the funds you are requesting. If you can see a proposal as a contract, things become much simpler in writing it. In addition, the evaluation process is simpler, i.e., did you do what you proposed to do?

In other words, a contract states in clear terms what is to be done. The funding source is going to ask two questions: what is your background to do the project and what is the need for this project? These questions are at the heart of the Guidelines For Application which foundations use.

Remembering the image of a contract and the fact that the funder is concerned about your ability to undertake the project you are proposing, why not anticipate the funders concerns? Why not list reference persons who are professionals familiar with your work? List who they are, their position and telephone number.

Basically a proposal should cover the following points:

- What is the idea, i.e., what do you propose to do?
- What is the need, i.e., why do you want to do it?
- Who is going to do it and what is their background?
- What do you need money for?

Of course, there are other questions about the sponsoring agency, its budget, its tax-exempt status, and approval of the Board of Directors for this project.

## Proposal Writing Kit

In responding to the first four questions, the applicant should fully describe the effort, the methods to be used, and the goals. There should be a full and rich description of the project.

One of the main errors in writing proposals is to make assumptions such as cutting corners by using initials (HUD, R&D, CIP, etc.); using phrases primarily used in your profession; generalizing and not elaborating.

Another mistake applicants make in writing proposals is that, in trying to make a case for the need of the project, they describe in repetitive detail the “problem” and often describe the client group as a problem – a practice that some feel is patronizing.

A word of caution – people are not to be rescued. They are to be served and a basic premise in community development work is that they should be playing a significant part in the project that relates to their lives.

One last word, proposal writers tend to promise too much, to undertake too much at once, to expect too great a result. Be realistic. Indeed, a proposal is a selling instrument in which one person is trying to convince another person. After having read a few thousand proposals, it is clear that some do better than others because they are realistic, sincere and complete.

## Proposal Writing Kit

### THE LETTER OF INTENT

Most funding sources recommend that a grant seeker make the initial contact by letter or telephone. The “letter of intent” should tell the funder who you are, what you are seeking support for, and how much you are requesting.

The letter should be an individual one, addressed to the foundation’s executive director (or appropriate program officer) or the corporation’s contributions officer. Use your organization’s letterhead.

Be concise and clear. The letter should not be longer than a page and a half. Include the following information:

- **WHO YOU ARE:** State what the agency is (always state if you are a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization), who you serve, where you are located, and how long you have been in existence. Keep in mind that you are stating your credibility as an organization to carry out a contract with the funding source.
- **WHAT YOU ARE PROPOSING TO DO:** Briefly describe your project, including the cost, duration, and population served. Emphasize the results, not the means. State why there is a need for the project. Be specific. Tell why the organization is capable of carrying out the proposed idea.
- **WHAT YOU ARE ASKING FOR:** Attach a dollar amount to your request and ask if you might submit a proposal for your project. State whether you will follow up the letter with a phone call. Thank the funder for his/her time and attention.

## Proposal Writing Kit

### SAMPLE GUIDELINES FOR APPLICATION

Applicants may telephone or submit a Letter of Intent briefly describing the project **before** submitting a proposal in order to find out if their ideas are potentially fundable by the foundation.

#### **In applying for grants, the following information should be included:**

1. Summary statement.
2. The specific purpose of the funds requested.
3. The need for the project in the community.
4. Qualifications of key personnel.
5. The amount requested.
6. A detailed copy of how the money would be spent.
7. A detailed copy of the latest annual operating budget reflecting expenditures and receipts and a statement of assets.
8. A statement advising how the grant, if made, can be evaluated with regard to the funds going to the agreed-upon purpose and/or the effectiveness of the program.
9. Recent grants received and applications pending.
10. Names and members of the Board of Directors and their principal occupations.
11. Evidence that this application has the approval of the Board of Directors – a copy of the minutes of the Board of Directors meeting.
12. A copy of the organization's internal revenue service federal tax-exempt letter.
13. Names, titles and telephone numbers of three professionals familiar with the work of your organization.

After these materials are received, you will be contacted for a visit if your application is accepted for consideration.

The general policy of the Foundation is to make grants for innovative and creative projects, and to programs which are responsive to changing community needs in the areas of health, social service, education and cultural affairs.

Agencies applying for funds should be serving citizens of (**Your Specific**) area.

Foundation grants are made (**Number**) times a year.

## Proposal Writing Kit

### Proposal Writing Outline

By Bill Somerville

Your Proposal should tell the funder:

1. Who you are.
2. What you want.
3. How you are going to do it.
4. What it will cost.

The Proposal Package: The following items can be included in the package you send to a potential funder.

- **Cover Letter** – Be sure the cover letter is addressed to the correct person. State who you are and a couple of sentences about the proposed project. Give the name and phone number of the person to contact for further information.
- **Abstract or Summary** – A clear and brief summation of your proposal.
- **Introduction** – Establishes the organization's credibility. Includes background, accomplishments, etc.
- **Statement of Need** – Why is what you are proposing necessary? Document the need with statistics if possible.
- **Objectives** – Refine your idea and tell what you expect to accomplish. Be realistic. Make objectives measurable if possible.
- **Methodology** – Activities and tasks to be carried out to accomplish objectives.
- **Evaluation** – What methods will be used to analyze your results and refine your program.
- **Future Funding** – How will the program be funded in the future?
- **Budget** – Translates methods into dollars. Should be adequate and clear.
- **Appendix** – This may include such items as a copy of your IRS tax exempt letter, endorsement letters, names and occupations of your Board of Directors, list of past support from other funders and applications pending, a copy of your latest annual budget, etc.



## Proposal Writing Kit

### Where Proposals Fail The Proposal, cont.

- Do funding research for your proposal; don't just blanket every foundation with the request. Make your request fit the foundation's range of giving; don't ask each foundation for the total amount. Ask for things that foundation funds.
- Be clear in how you will operate; don't say or imply that money alone will solve the problem.
- Submit a finished proposal; don't ask the funder to review a draft. Send in proposals that are completed. Did you sign it? Is it legible? Are the enclosures there? Is there a budget? Is there enough postage?
- Present your proposal without encasing it in plastic, binders or binding; the funder needs to copy it.
- Ask for things you need; don't include items you already have, and don't ask for retroactive funding.
- Treat the funder with respect and respect yourself; don't grovel; don't say, "If you don't fund us we will go out of business," since this implies the funder is responsible for your actions.
- Do it yourself; teach your own staff about fund raising, but if you hire a development person or a consultant, stay on top of it; proposals exclusively written by development people usually don't make sense because that person isn't familiar with the project.

### ð Credibility

- Give details about who will do what. Give evidence of your ability to undertake the program, the past experience of your agency in this area or of your personnel; don't assume anything.
- Show that you know your field and what else is being done; don't say your project is unique unless it really is.

- If you are undertaking something new or for which you have no previous experience, then give some evidence of why the funder should have confidence that you can do it.
- Plan ahead; don't call the funder with a request for immediate money unless it is an unforeseen emergency.
- Give evaluation evidence of past work, not general statements of how many people were affected.

### ð Budgets

- Make detailed budgets, not general categories; don't hide anything. Be able to substantiate your budget figures.
- Have budgets that anyone can understand; don't submit fiscal items that are so customized that the funder can't understand them.
- Give evidence of future support or a realistic appraisal of future fund raising; vague statements such as "We'll go to corporations" do not substantiate your future prospects.
- Be honest; don't ask for short-term money when your future is uncertain; don't turn the funder into an ambulance driver to the rescue.

### ð Communicating

- Use the telephone; don't ask, "May I come in and talk to you?" without explaining what you have in mind.
- When you call a funder, be organized; don't use the funder to motivate you to organize your thoughts.
- When calling a funder yourself, don't have your secretary make your inquiries, and never have an assistant say, "One moment for the executive director who wishes to speak with you."
- Remember telephone etiquette; a funder will try to return calls, but if your line remains busy, it is not the funder's responsibility to get back to you. Try not to use the phrase "he or she is in a meeting" repeatedly, since

it gives the impression that the caller is being undervalued or that meetings are more important than dealing with the public. Avoid asking who is calling and then saying that the person being called is not in, since this gives the impression that the person is "not in" for the caller.

- In an interview with a potential funder, take notes and be aware of the questions being asked; they show where your proposal is weak and whether the funder understands your request. The interview should be a learning experience.
- Use the cover letter to its full extent, summarizing the request in a concise way, and don't ramble or miniaturize the total proposal.
- Make letters of intent succinct; don't let them ramble to multiple pages. Describe who you are, what is proposed and how much is needed.
- Take full responsibility for your proposal; don't say, "I am writing as you suggested," implying some sort of endorsement by the funder.
- Know whom you are dealing with; don't write "Dear Friend" or "To Whom it May Concern" or leave out the salutation altogether.

### ð Afterwards

- Be open to having someone say "no" to you; don't have a brittle ego or one that is attached to the proposal.
- Keep the funder informed of your work; don't let the next time the funder sees you be when you are asking for second-year funding (one of the most informative documents is the minutes from your board meetings).
- Requests for continuing funding are just as important as the original request; don't merely submit a letter asking for more money.
- Know the difference between community and private foundations; a geographic name indicates a community foundation with a limited geographic giving area. ♦

## Proposal Writing Kit

# Grant Making Criteria for Funders

By Bill Somerville ©

### Responding to proposals:

- **Does the project fill a need?** It doesn't matter if it is similar to other programs, maybe the need is unmet.
- **Does the person in charge seem capable of doing the project?** Sometimes the director has not yet been selected; then one looks at the sponsoring agency.
- **Does the applicant indicate a depth of awareness of the subject area in which the project will operate?** Promises of accomplishments should not be confused with awareness of what needs to be done.
- **What is the track record of past work by the applicant?** Accomplishments in any subject area, not just the project area.
- **How does the project fit into overall program?** One should look for a dynamic quality in the project in that it should improve the applicant's overall program, not just fill in for budget cuts.
- **Is the budget reasonable?** One can often feel as much confidence about a project from the budget as from the proposal narrative.
- **How do related professionals feel about the project?** Hopefully the applicant will have listed references, if not ask for them, and then ask the reference people for other names.
- **Is the project in response to a problem or is it a creative approach to getting something done?** Money doesn't solve a crisis.
- **Is the project controversial?** Controversy is not correlated with need or the lack thereof so judge the applicant as you would any other.
- **Does the application raise more questions than it answers?** If so, this might indicate something about how well thought out it is.
- **Does the applicant promise too much?** This might reflect on the applicant's credibility.
- **Does the application read like a rescue mission?** New approaches often represent a good buy.
- **Does the reader get a picture of how the project can be evaluated?** The project should add something to the quality of life and demonstrate that.
- **Does the applicant indicate the factors of excellence in the operation of the agency?** This is a good way of knowing whether or not there is a concern for and awareness of quality.

## Proposal Writing Kit

### Initiating your own ideas as a funder:

- **Is there a need not being responded to?** Send out a request for proposals or offer grants for a specific purpose.
- **How can agencies and professionals be more responsive to the public they serve?** Maybe they should have the choice of how to spend money, try discretionary grants.
- **Would a demonstration project be useful?** The funder might consider showing the way.
- **Does the agency need management assistance?** Offer small grants so the agency can operate better.
- **What do you do with a poor proposal from a good applicant?** Negotiate a grant and make known your opinions of what needs to be done.
- **What is there to stimulate inter-agency cooperation?** Act as a convener, host, or sponsor to bring people together.
- **Are special population groups being overlooked?** Focus specific attention on that group.