

Arts Grantwriting

The Importance of Planning, Research and Devil's Advocate Thinking

By Suzanne Callahan, CFRE

1. What specific questions might someone ask about your project?

Why are exhibits about the arts, history, and culture necessary? Who will coordinate the project? Why was this exhibit idea selected? Why are these art forms significant? What is their context? What will prompt people to attend this exhibit? How many? Tourists or residents?

2. Address the common questions that arise:

- What is your **plan** for implementing your project? What is your timeline?
- What is your overall **budget**? How does it break down? Have you included all costs? Is the budget connected to the narrative?
- How are you obtaining **other resources** for the project? This might be donated time or materials, or other funding sources. What have you obtained so far?
- **Who** will carry out the project? Have you shown that they are qualified?
- Is the **art** itself and the **overall project** clear and well-defined for people who may not be familiar with its content and/or forms?
- How are artists and/or partners **selected**? What are their qualifications?
- If **partners** are involved, are they aware of and committed to the project?

3. What are the reasons why a foundation would want to fund this project?

This comes from research. Have they funded similar activities? Does it fit in with their priorities and/or market? Note that answering this question involves addressing **their** priorities, **not** yours!

4. Important: Why might a foundation *not* fund the project?

This involves learning to think as a devil's advocate. What are the weaknesses, gaps, or inconsistencies in your project? Incorporate this thinking into your writing process. As you expand and revise your proposal, try to eliminate your weaknesses if possible through planning, research, and staff dialogue. Try to address your weaknesses in a positive light. Consider an example of how this process works:

***Anticipated question from the Funder:** Why didn't the organization look for potential partnerships with local organizations who work on the Latino issues?*

***Weakness of proposal:** Although the applicant had numerous partnerships with local colleges and organizations, it did not set aside time to plan collectively with them and discuss the role of the partners in the project.*

***Solution:** A revised, stronger proposal would read: "Over the past several months, we had have been in discussion with numerous colleges and other organizations who serve the local Latino community. Professor Suarez, who heads the Latin American Studies program at ABC*

University, has agreed to host a series of panels at the museum that explore the concepts in the exhibit and all students in the college will attend. The Latin American School will help to develop curriculum for younger students and all students will visit the exhibit and meet the artists at a bilingual presentation.”

Planning and research involved: *“We learned to address this problem in advance of submitting the proposal by contacting the partners to see if they would donate their time, to secure their support, and to design a mutually beneficial project. We also know that partnerships are important to this funder and will remember it for future proposals.”*

Result: *“We turned a weakness into a strength - evidence of our partnership in ensuring the program’s success and increasing the foundation’s interest.”*

5. Have someone outside of your organization read your proposal.

The reader should not tell you if the proposal is good or bad, merely what they think it said. Are any parts unclear? Were they able to understand your vocabulary? Did they grasp the main points?

6. Think about your proposal a lot. Talk about it a lot with other staff.

Good writing does not usually happen in a vacuum. Rely heavily on the guidance and experiences of those who design and implement the projects. This means starting the writing process early, as much as six to twelve weeks before the deadline.

7. Avoid the Common “Don’ts.”

- **Don’t claim to be all things to all people.** The whole world is probably not going to change if you get this grant. Don’t promise to achieve world peace or end hunger.
- **Don’t talk over your reader’s head.** Educate them. They may not be familiar with your art form, aesthetic, mission, or cause. Don’t assume that they will ask you - funders are people and sometimes they do not want to appear ignorant! They may not want to admit their own lack of exposure.
- **Don’t use superlatives.** Be careful about saying you are the only, biggest, best, most innovative, etc.
- **Don’t appear arrogant, angry, or austere.** Your writing must connect with and relate to the reader.

8. Remember the basics of good writing:

- **Use active verbs.** Careful about using the verb to be. “Mr. Smith is the person that will be the director” is greatly improved as “Mr. Smith will direct the program.”
- **Use simple, clear English.** Double-check your grammar or, if you feel weak in this area, have someone else edit your writing.
- **Avoid jargon, acronyms, and technical terms.** Be sure that the reader’s understanding of a word or term coincides with your use of it.

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