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Nonconventional Tips from a Veteran Grant Professional

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Abstract

Many books and articles describe conventional tips on best practices in grant writing. This strategy paper draws on the author's 13 years of experience as a grants officer, as well as his experience in teaching grant proposal writing at a Master's level, to provide nonconventional tips. While these can benefit grant professionals in a variety of fields, they are especially useful for those professionals working in the field of higher education. Applying these tips can strengthen an author's case for their proposal to receive funding and differentiate their proposals from others in the very competitive field of higher education grants.

Introduction

Securing grant awards from an external funder is extremely competitive. Only 5% of submissions to private and corporate foundations and only 1% of submissions to federal agencies are funded (Karsh & Fox, 2003). To secure a competitive advantage and improve the rates of funded submissions, the author developed a list of nonconventional tips honed over a 13-year tenure as a grant professional.

TIP #1: USE YOUR INTUITION

In a graduation commencement speech at Stanford University, Steve Jobs shared the following sage advice: "Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your... intuition" (Jobs, 2005). In grant writing, intuition starts with the idea in the first place. Intuition actually comes into play at all stages of the grant writing process. While logic and experience are key, one's intuition is often the final arbiter when deciding:

- ✓ Which idea should I pursue?
- ✓ Which intervention should I advocate?
- ✓ Which funder should I approach?
- ✓ Which statistic should I use?
- ✓ Which testimonial will pull at the heartstrings of a reviewer?
- ✓ Which key personnel should I invite to partner on my project?
- ✓ What budget will the reviewers deem reasonable and not excessive?

Concrete examples from the author's professional experience of how intuition manifests include:

"I have four possible ideas to submit for funding, but I think creating an afterschool robotics club will most excite the reviewers."

"I have identified ten funders, all of whom sponsor afterschool robotics clubs. I am going to apply just to these three."

"Of all my testimonials, the one from a single mom trying to provide her son opportunities is the most heartfelt."

The author experienced an actual case of the benefit of heeding one's intuition. He was seeking funds to sponsor a family literacy project for a high-needs community. One funder, *Oprah's Angel Network*, with prime foci of literacy and disadvantaged communities, at first seemed an ideal target. Further delving, however, uncovered that their preferred catchment area was Chicago, and the university on whose behalf the author was applying was located in Los Angeles. Even more ominous, the funder's website flatly and explicitly stated that "no unsolicited proposals are accepted." Despite these admonitions, the author had a strong, intuitive feeling to still apply. The author followed this intuitive feeling and submitted a proposal. Eight months later the author received a surprise phone call from the program officer informing him that the project would be fully funded. The program officer shared that she was about to throw away the unopened submission (as per their policy), but then noticed the submission was from the university her two godchildren currently attend. She opened the submission, deemed it excellent, waived the proscriptions, and approved the application for funding.

Intuition cannot be forced and arrives in its own time frame. If one is experiencing writer's block, the author recommends stopping or taking a break from the writing or grant development process. Do not try to push through or force inspiration. Thomas Edison once said that ideas come from "space" (Raghunathan, 2016). One can find this space by taking a break from writing and taking a walk, or returning to a submission the following day. This gives time for moments of inspiration to arise. One returns to the proposal with a fresh perspective and solutions to issues which seemed insoluble the day before (e.g., *How can I distill the need statement to fit into the allotted word count? How can I improve the project design? Which evaluation tool should I use?*). Lastly, sometimes a grant professional can overthink or second guess elements of a submission, switching out less compelling statistics or inserting an extraneous argument. Intuition allows one to sense when a proposal is complete and ready for submission.

TIP #2: DO NOT UNDERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF BLANK SPACE

Most grant professionals want to provide as much information as possible, believing that the larger the quantity of information, the better one can persuade a reviewer to fund an application. So, they often choose the smallest font allowable, push the margins to the minimum allowable, and excise spacing between headings and content. Proposal reviewers look down and see an unending block of text squeezed onto all edges of the page. At a physical level, they have difficulty even reading the text as they must squint and often lose their place. At an emotional level, they may be filled with dread looking at the seemingly unending block of text. They may become annoyed and frustrated. At a practical level, they may wonder why the submitter did not spend the requisite time editing their submission so that it was succinct and readable -- and score the submission poorly as a result.

Better practices are to format text on a page so that it is visually appealing and maximally readable, using margins, indenting, and line spacing with a goal of harmony and spaciousness. A grant professional wants to ease the reading of a proposal as much as possible since proposal reviewers are often "tired, rushed, distracted, sleepy, and probably bored" (Reeds, 2002, p.37).

Grant professionals should format their submissions so the text appears uncrowded on the page, with sufficient blank space (i.e., the unfilled space around words, paragraphs, or sections). This can be accomplished through:

A legible font -- Choose a 12-point font even if guidelines allow for 10- or 11-point font.

A sufficient margin -- A ½-inch margin makes a Letter of Inquiry look crowded; a 1-inch margin all-around allows space to give the mind an opportunity to "breathe."

Ample use of line spacing --

- consider double spacing or 1.5 spacing even if single spacing is allowed;
- consider adding a line of blank space between a heading and text in the section which follows; and
- consider doubling the blank space between sections (two lines of blank space if single spaced; four lines of blank space if double spaced), thereby setting the sections apart easily in the eyes of the reviewer.

Blank space also serves an important and practical function -- it can set off information you want to highlight. In almost all online submissions, formatting such as underlining, italics, and bolding is not permissible. So one can highlight a particular sentence by including a line of blank space above and below the sentence -- even for a sentence in the middle of a paragraph. This blank space alerts the reader that there is a pause, and provides for a moment of reflection to ponder an important point offset by space.

The following is an initial version of a needs assessment the author drafted for an online submission:

Teacher attrition is highest in the critical first years of teaching, especially for male teachers of color. Moreover, male teachers of color tend to leave the field of education at higher rates than other teacher groups. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) hires 3,000 new teachers each year. The attrition rate of new teachers overall at LAUSD is 8%. The attrition rate of new male teachers of color at LAUSD is 25%. In our meetings over the past months designing this intervention, LAUSD requested that project leaders first train special education induction mentors since attrition rates are even higher in the first years of teaching for LAUSD special education teachers who are males of color -- 40%!

The revised, final version below was submitted:

Teacher attrition is highest in the critical first years of teaching, especially for male teachers of color. Moreover, male teachers of color tend to leave the field of education at disparately higher rates than other teacher groups.

LAUSD hires 3,000 new teachers each year.

The attrition rate of new teachers overall at LAUSD is 8%.

The attrition rate of new male teachers of color at LAUSD is 25%.

In our meetings over the past months designing this intervention, LAUSD requested that project leaders first train special education induction mentors since attrition rates are even higher in the first years of teaching for LAUSD special education teachers who are males of color -- 40%!

The need builds as the reader proceeds to the startling final statistic of a 40% attrition rate. The block of text – formerly one paragraph of dense statistics – is now in essence five paragraphs, with the reader absorbing each statistic discretely before moving on. This strategy is highly implementable since online submissions generally do not have space constraints, but do have word count constraints.

TIP #3: USE PUNCTUATION TO MAXIMUM EFFECT

Punctuation, properly used to maximum effect, can be a great ally to a grant professional. Punctuation can help a proposal reviewer by alerting them of the flow of a sentence, paragraph, or idea. Punctuation can assist when trying to squeeze information into a circumscribed number of words or characters. Lastly, punctuation can help draw attention to an important factoid or statistic which might otherwise be buried or lost in a block of text or a long narrative. Examples of each best practice in the use of punctuation follow.

Punctuation can help with sentence flow

Sometimes punctuation can be used correctly, but a reviewer can still be confused as to where to start and stop when reading a sentence:

Dr. Boris Ricks, Professor, Department of Political Science, California State University Northridge, and also a mentor for M3, the *Minority Male Mentoring Project*, has agreed to serve on the Advisory Board.

While the above represents a correct use of punctuation it is a phenomenon the author deems “comma overload,” in which a reviewer is exhausted just muddling through a sentence and also confused as to where to pause when reading. A revised version below employs the use of punctuation (parentheses, semi-colon, colon) to help the reader navigate this sentence more successfully:

Dr. Boris Ricks (Professor, Department of Political Science, California State University Northridge; mentor for *Minority Male Mentoring Project*: M3) has agreed to serve on the Advisory Board.

Punctuation can help in deleting excess verbiage

The author was tasked with answering an online prompt in no more than 35 words. His initial draft, a listing of outputs in Y1, was 47 words in length:

In Year One the project team will develop and pilot a one-hour workshop. Also, in Year One the project team will partner with the Media Production Studio to develop a five-minute instructional video. Lastly, in Year One the team will disseminate best practices at a national conference.

A second draft, with a judicious use of punctuation (colon; check marks), excised 12 words to total 35 words:

In Y1, the project team will:

- ✓ *develop and pilot a one-hour workshop;*
- ✓ *partner with the Media Production Studio to develop a five-minute instructional video; and*
- ✓ *disseminate best practices at a national conference.*

Punctuation can help to focus the reviewers' attention

As referenced previously, the author worked on a project which sought to address the high attrition rates of special education teachers who are new to the teaching profession and who are males of color. The key statistic was the dramatic attrition rate of 40%. Project leaders posited that our proposed intervention would decrease the attrition rate significantly. The original description buried the alarming 40% statistic in a sea of verbiage:

In our meetings over the past months designing this intervention, LAUSD requested that project leaders first train special education induction mentors since the 40% attrition rate for LAUSD special education teachers who are males of color is high.

Placing the percentage at the end of the sentence, and also setting off the “40%” with punctuation (i.e., double dash, and an exclamation point) brings the reader’s attention to this startling statistic in this finalized version of the submission:

In our meetings over the past months designing this intervention, LAUSD requested that project leaders first train special education induction mentors since attrition rates are even higher in the first years of teaching for LAUSD special education teachers who are males of color -- 40%!

In an age of social media and with an absence of handwritten missives, punctuation has become a lost art (Lukeman, 2005). While there are punctuation rules to be followed (Casagrande, 2014), punctuation, when used effectively, can bolster a submission.

Conclusion

Renowned author Saul Bellow said that for a writer “the fact is a wire through which one sends a current” (Garner, 2019). In formulating a needs statement (or any section of a proposal for that matter) a grant professional chooses among a multitude of “heated wires.” Logic, experience and intuition assist a grant professional in choosing which wires to include to “electrify” the reviewer. Effectively using punctuation and blank space also increases a proposal’s readability for reviewers. Since securing grant awards from an external funder is extremely competitive, savvy grant professionals would be well-served by using these tactics to develop and submit proposals which are succinct, inspiration-filled, well-reasoned, and well-presented on the page.

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AUTHOR’S BIOSKETCH:

Joshua Einhorn, Ed.D., has served as Grants Officer at California State University Northridge since 2007, as part of a team raising over \$13 million. He also served as President of the Southern California Chapter of the Grant Professionals Association from 2009-2010. Lastly, he has taught Master’s-level courses in grant writing for the past three years. He can be reached at joshua.einhorn@csun.edu.