

A Guide to the ABAG Grant Proposal Format

The following document is not a form to be completed, but an outline and advice for writing a grant proposal developed by a task force of grantmakers and nonprofit professionals.

The Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers (ABAG) recognizes the potential burden of application and reporting practices on both nonprofits and grantmakers. Nonprofit organizations devote significant time to researching and writing grant proposals and reports, and grantmakers expend significant (often volunteer) time managing grants and evaluating how to best make a difference.

In pursuit of its mission to maximize the impact of philanthropic giving, ABAG helps members develop grant processes that meet their information needs and acknowledge the efficient practices of [Project Streamline](#). Further, ABAG offers nonprofit organizations free (or low cost) resources to identify funding opportunities and to write high quality grant proposals.

As the largest Maryland network of donors, public charities, corporate giving programs, and private foundations, ABAG brings the voice of grantmakers who review proposals directly to you. Whether applying for a grant for the first time or checking your knowledge of grant writing, we encourage you to read this entire document before you submit your next proposal.

Before You Apply [Read Me](#)

When applying for a grant, a complete proposal includes:

1. **Cover Letter** (page 3)
2. **Proposal Narrative** (pages 4-6)
3. **Budget and Budget Narrative** (pages 7-10)
4. **Attachments** (see pages 11)

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Do not twist yourself in knots answering every bullet in the ABAG Grant Proposal Format. Use judgment whether the instruction makes sense for your organization.

The Grant Proposal Format will help your organization create a sample grant proposal that can be adapted to apply to specific grantmakers. The Grant Proposal Format is not a “common grant,” a single proposal for a community of funders. The primary purpose of the format is to provide free education on how to write a high-quality proposal. Before you submit a proposal:

1. Research how your organization and programs fit a specific grantmaker’s funding priorities.
2. Check that you understand the deadlines and process for applying.
 - a. Does the grantmaker request a Letter of Intent, or conversation, before submitting a full proposal?
 - b. Does the grantmaker advertise that it accepts the ABAG Grant Proposal Format?

All grantmakers have unique processes and guidelines based on their priorities and information needs. Confirm a grantmaker’s process by looking at websites, published directories, or contacting them directly. Increasingly, grantmakers have online grant applications or invite direct conversation about potential fit and partnership. Do not be afraid to contact a grantmaker by email or phone with questions about the grant process, but ABAG recommends doing research first and preparing specific questions in advance.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Contact grantmakers using the method they request in the time frame they set, in the way they ask. If they want, or do not want, a letter of inquiry before a full proposal, follow that. If they specify what documents they want to see, show them. Not following instructions will significantly reduce your likelihood of getting funding.

Additional information about local grantmakers is available from the [ABAG Member Directory](#) and the [Grants Collection at the Enoch Pratt Central Library](#) (free).

Writing Style Does Matter

- Avoid leftovers. If your proposal has been adapted for multiple funders, make sure you omit other grantmakers’ names, as well as references to previous requests.
- Proposals should always be free of typos and grammar errors. Have someone unfamiliar with the organization or program proofread!
- Avoid jargon and acronyms unless absolutely necessary, and then provide explanations.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs concise. Break up text with headings, subheadings, and use formatting (bullets, italics, bold, etc.) to draw attention to key points.
- Avoid fancy bindings. Use paper clips since the grantmaker may make additional copies.
- Number the pages. Put footnotes on the same page as their reference.
- Best to use single spaced, 12 point font, and one inch margins.

Cover Letter

Standard practice is to write a one page cover letter on letterhead to submit with your Proposal Narrative, Budget and Budget Narrative, and Attachments. The Cover Letter should be signed by the chief executive, or most senior program staff person responsible for the grant activity.

Your Cover Letter should contain the following information (1-1½ pages):

- Name of the organization and project (if applicable).
- Dollar amount requested.
- Time period of the grant activity.
- The purpose of the request.
- Explain how your organization's proposal fits with the grantmaker's mission and priorities.
- Detail previous contact, or relationships, with the grantmaker to which you are applying (for example, a corporate employee who sits on your Board or a foundation contact who invited you to apply).
- Contact person's name, title, daytime telephone number, and email address.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Always address your cover letter to a specific person; never start out with "Dear Sir or Madam" or "To whom it may concern." Verify the spelling of names, titles, and addresses.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

The best Cover Letters provide me language that I can copy for writing a summary to my foundation Board of Directors.

Proposal Narrative

The Proposal Narrative provides an opportunity to describe your organization and what will be accomplished with grant funding. While your Proposal Narrative may vary in length, a rule of thumb is to complete each of the following sections within six pages. Be thorough, yet strive for brevity.

A. Summary Heading

Starting at the top left of your Proposal Narrative, provide the following basic information.

- Organization Name:
- Amount Requested:
- Activity Start/End Dates:
- EIN/Federal Tax Number:

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Do not repeat the same information in different sections of a Proposal Narrative.

More is not better.

It's not a bloody novel.

B. Organizational Background

Try and limit yourself to one to two paragraphs. Succinctly provide background on your organization:

- State your mission.
- Summarize your organization’s history.
- Outline current programs and activities.
- If you work with a fiscal agent, or are an affiliate of another organization, describe the relationship.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Give more words to CURRENT activity than your history. I often skip to move quickly to the Purpose of Request.

C. Statement of Need

Identify the specific problem, or opportunity, that this funding request will address:

- Describe the size and severity of the need using local data.
- Provide demographic and geographic information regarding the population benefiting from the request.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

The Statement of Need lets me know that you understand the problems and therefore can reasonably address them. Do not pack the proposal with statistics, but decide which facts best support the need. I like data:

- *That is accurate – cite your sources;*
- *That is current, or at least recent; and*
- *That matches the size of the project (neighborhood, state-wide).*

D. Purpose of Request

Illustrate the work of your organization or the activities that will be supported by the grant. Grantmakers know the problems and challenges facing the community. Now tell how you are going to improve the community:

- Describe how things will be different if the project is successful and how you plan to get to that successful outcome. Note: You will provide more details about outcomes in E. Anticipated Results and Learning.
- Identify the tasks you plan to complete that illustrate how the work will be accomplished. Consider whether it is helpful to include — either in the body or the appendix — a table or flow chart to show the process.
- Describe who will be served and how they will benefit, including age, race, ethnicity or other relevant characteristics.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

In bringing the work alive for me you are answering what, how, who, where, when and why. Spend more time here describing your solution rather than the problem.

- Name where the services are provided, including type of facilities or specific site locations.
- For ongoing work, provide context about when activities will occur during the period of the grant, including frequency of activity and number of participants. For new projects, provide a timeline for implementation.
- Briefly describe who will get the work done – staff/volunteer descriptions. If specific expertise or credentials are needed, consider attaching staff biographies.
- Report your organization’s relationship to other similar community efforts and how you are cooperating with other agencies working in the field. If you have formal partnerships, describe the roles and responsibilities of any community partners with whom you are working.
- State the reasons your organization chose this approach to address the need. For new programs, describe how the program model was developed with supporting research or evidence of effectiveness of the model, if available. For ongoing activities describe your past success. Use an appendix, if necessary, for extra information such as detailed results of a program you are replicating.

Optional for Capital Campaigns

Capital campaign requests are designated for equipment, construction, renovation, or improvement of a property. The reviewer will be most concerned with the feasibility of completing the project and future maintenance costs and use of the equipment/building.

- Provide a case statement for the project that discusses the feasibility and cost of the capital campaign and its implications in relation to the organization’s ongoing operational expenses.
- Fundraising strategy. Specify prospects and the amounts committed or requested.
- List naming opportunities.
- Indicate the board’s financial participation in the campaign (percent participating and amount contributed).
- Identify regulatory approvals, if required.
- Describe plans for funding the ongoing maintenance of the new capital project.
- Indicate if timing is a factor or a “window of opportunity” exists that impacts the success of the campaign.
- If applicable, summarize your most recent capital campaign including the campaign goal, amount raised, board contributions, and beginning and ending dates.

E. Anticipated Results and Learning

Indicate how you will know that you have been successful:

- For general operating support requests, describe how your organization will assess its overall success and effectiveness during the grant period.
- Include specific output and outcome measures that you plan to collect, and how those measures will be used to determine if the organization or program/project was successful. Note: Expect to report back on these measures at the conclusion of the grant period.
 - outputs are the direct products of your activities
 - outcomes are the benefits or changes your activities caused
- Identify the tools you will use to learn from or evaluate your program and organization (records, surveys, interviews, pre- and post-tests, community feedback, etc.)
- Explain how you will incorporate learning from evaluation to either improve your activities or inform the work of others.
- If this is an existing activity, describe current methods of evaluation and provide data on past performance, including numbers served and client outcomes in the past year (or the most recent period for which data is available).
- If an external evaluation will be conducted, detail who is conducting the evaluation and their scope of work.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

When I ask organizations to report back on their grant, I copy and paste the output and outcome measures from their proposal and expect to hear what happened – success or failure – and what were the lessons learned

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

I want to know what you want to learn. This may be simply a list of questions that will be answered once the project or grant period is over.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Regardless of need or performance, I am not able to fund a single organization or activity forever.

F. Stewardship and Sustainability

Explain how the activity will continue at completion of the grant period:

- State your commitment to meet all reporting requirements of the grantmaker.
- Indicate any specific plans for sharing lessons learned from your activities.
- Specify plans for financing the organization or project at the end of the grant period. List other financing sources or strategies that you are developing.
- Beyond financing, suggest what will be the long lasting outcomes or mechanisms by which the change is sustained.

Budget and Budget Narrative

ABAG presents here a lot of guidance on the budget and budget narrative because local grantmakers report that nonprofit organizations struggle with this section of grant proposals. Your grant proposal must include a budget that shows all of the information captured in the sample table below. Ideally the complete budget will be presented on one page so that the reader can get an overview of the activities and see relationships at a glance.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

An accurate, detailed budget and budget narrative is super important and a requirement. I should be able to understand the organization or project just from reading the budget.

It is good practice to include a narrative statement about the budget. Also known as a budget detail, budget description or budget justification, the budget narrative explains what the numbers in the budget or spreadsheet represent, how you arrived at them and what assumptions underlie the budget. The budget narrative tells a funder exactly how a grantseeker will spend its investment.

A. Budget Format

- **Heading:** specify the budget period (e.g., July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021).
- **Heading:** specify the requested amount and the total cost of the activities.
- Itemize all confirmed and pending sources of revenue, or income, showing the total for each (committed and pending), if the requested amount is different from the total cost of the activities. You may omit categories that are not relevant to your particular activities.
- List each foundation and corporate supporter by name, including the amount of the committed and/or pending grant.
- Do not name individual donors, but provide the total giving by individuals.
- For a specific project budget, indicate if any general operating dollars from your organization will be spent on the project.
- Itemize your expenses, including only those costs that are relevant to the particular activities for which you are seeking funds.
- For project or program support requests, you should show two columns – one listing the total expense and one listing the specific costs requested in this grant proposal.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Many grantseekers understandably focus on the proposal narrative when applying for funds, but even the best proposal narrative will not receive funding if the budget and budget narrative do not demonstrate that the applicant has carefully considered the costs.

Additional Considerations

- All budgets, whether for general operating or project support, should include both revenue and expenses. A budget is considered incomplete if the revenue section is missing.
- If you are seeking a project grant, you should include both a budget for the project/program and an organization budget for the same time period. If your request is for a particular program or project, you should indicate whether the program's budget is included in the total organization budget, or whether it is in addition to the total organization budget.
- If you are seeking partial funding for a project, you should still include the entire budget for the project. This provides context for the scope of the entire project and the portion that the grantmaker is being asked to support.
- Multi-year requests should include a budget for each fiscal year for which funding is requested.

B. Budget Narrative

- The categories in the narrative should use the same budget line names and follow the exact order in which the items are listed in the numerical budget. One option is to number each line item in the budget to serve as reference marks for the narrative.
- Discuss the status of requests to other funders (if applicable) and the overall likelihood that the project budget can be raised to support the proposed grant period. For pending requests, include the date you expect notification.
- Personnel: List each position that pertains to the proposal. The cost calculation should show the employee's annual salary rate and the percentage of time devoted to the project. Be sure to use the same job titles in the proposal narrative and budget narrative.
- Benefits/Fringe: Fringe benefits should be based on the grantseeker's established formula and should be only for the percentage of time devoted to the project. It is important to explain what is included in the benefit package and at what percentage.
- Consultants and Professional Fees: A description of the product or services to be provided by the consultant should be included along with the rate being charged.
- Travel: An explanation for the reason for travel expenses should be included along with the location of the travel if it is not local.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Do not be afraid to use abbreviations in the budget narrative. Mathematical symbols and equations can also be used. Clarity is the guiding rule.

- Professional Development: This may include required trainings, workshops or classes for project/program staff. The project-related purpose should be noted and explained.
- Equipment: Non-expendable items should be listed, including an explanation of how the equipment is needed for the success of the project/program.
- Supplies: Expendable items should be listed by type with the basis for computation shown.
- Administrative, or Indirect Costs: Check the indirect cost policies of the grantmaker before including it in your budget. Indirect costs represent the expenses of doing business not otherwise itemized (examples: insurance, maintenance, and human resources) that are not directly tied to a particular project function or activity.

WHAT GRANTMAKERS SAY

Before you send me your budget take the total budget and divide by the number of people served. Does the cost per person seem reasonable to you?

Budget Format

[Title featuring name of the organization or specific activity]

Grant / Budget Period: _____

Requested Amount: _____

Sources of Support

Revenue Categories	Committed Funds	Pending Funds
Grants/Contract/Contributions		
Federal Government		
State Government		
Local Government		
Foundations (itemize on separate lines)		
Corporations (itemize on separate lines)		
Individuals		
Other (specify)		
Earned Income		
Tuition/Fees		
Events		
Publications/Products		
Other (specify)		
Membership Income		
In-Kind Support		
Other (specify)		
TOTAL		

Costs

Expense Categories	Amount Requested	Total Expenses
Personnel		
Fringe/Benefits		
Consultants and Professional Fees		
Travel		
Professional Development		
Equipment		
Supplies		
Rent		
Utilities		
Postage		
Printing and copying		
Telephone		
Other (specify)		
TOTAL		

Attachments

Check each grantmakers' guidelines for required and optional attachments. Most grantmakers today want few or no attachments. Suggested for the ABAG Grant Format:

- A copy of the organization's current IRS determination letter (or the fiscal agent's) indicating 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.
- List the board members, roles and affiliations. Provide the board's total financial support of the organization (percent contributing and amount contributed) for the most recently completed fiscal year.
- If this request includes partner organizations, provide a copy of a Memorandum of Understanding or a description of the roles and responsibilities for each organization that is signed by all parties.

Frequently Requested Attachments (optional)

- A copy of the organization's registration with the Charitable Organization Division of the Office of the Secretary of State for the State of Maryland, or indicate the reason for exemption.
- A copy of the organizations most recent 990 tax statement.
- For organizations with annual budgets over \$500,000, a copy of Audited Financial Statements for the most recent fiscal year.
- Letters of support, recent media articles. Please use discretion in limiting additional attachments