

Bette Hartnett
Certified Grant Professional
Nevada Department of Education (NDE)
755 N. Roop St. - #201 · Carson City, Nevada 89701
775-687-7286 · bhartnett@doe.nv.gov

How to Prepare Successful Federal Grant Applications

Bette Hartnett has reviewed for several programs for the U. S. Department of Education, as well as her own State agency. She has worked in California, Wyoming, and online education K-University for 25 years as a science education teacher, lecturer, and associate professor; teacher mentor and trainer; California state science exam writer; and grant professional. While a high school science teacher, in her "spare time" Bette began writing grant applications to access private and corporate funding to fund her own science program. In four years she brought in nearly \$500,000 for her students, colleagues, the high school, and teachers throughout the school district; two of her applications won funder awards.

In 2006, she accepted the newly created discretionary grant professional position at the Nevada Department of Education. That same year Bette began working as a peer reviewer for U.S. Department of Education grant programs in order to refine her own skills. In doing so, she gained insight into how Federal grants are funded and what constitutes a competitive, high-quality application. In less than five years she brought more than \$110 million in federal, private, and corporate grant funds to Nevada education, as well as collaborated on successful applications for other State agencies.

This presentation covers the basic, step-by-step process about how to write a high-quality federal grant application. Although the focus is on federal discretionary (competitive) grant applications, the process is applicable to private and/or corporate funders. In the federal grant world, the people who read and score grant applications are "peer reviewers". They are the major hurdle to clear for receipt of a Federal grant; how they score an application usually decides who wins and who loses.

HOW TO START

Search for grant opportunities and when one looks like it has potential, skim through it to determine if it is a fit for your organization. Be realistic as you look at

- **Submission Deadlines** Letter of Intent, Pre-application, and Full Application. Determine if 20, 30, or 40 days is really enough time to "get your act together" and meet the deadline.
- **Eligibility** Do you qualify according to the program requirements and can you apply as a single organization or is the requirement to include partners?
- **Awards** Is the amount of money and grant period adequate to fund your project and comply with funder requirements? Are the amount and number of awards worth the time and work to produce a high-quality, competitive application which can take 10-15 hours a day, seven days a week to produce?.
- **Compliance with regulations, laws, funder requirements** Federal grant programs are governed by laws with which you must agree to comply when you sign your submitted application. Beware of minimizing the importance of compliance. Assurances, certifications, federal performance measures, and audits must be guaranteed or all or part of an award can be rescinded and a grantee can find themselves returning money they spent or allocated, or in court fighting an accusation of wrongdoing.
- **Capability to write an application** Realistically and honestly assess if you have the skills to write the application and if not, who could help you for free or a fee.
- **Data** All funders want qualitative and/or quantitative data to document project progress. It is imperative that you have data to include in the Narrative and the capacity to collect it during the project.

Start by writing a draft project outline and Budget spreadsheet that identifies WHO, WHAT, WHY, WHERE, HOW, HOW MUCH, SO WHAT? Use the draft to determine feasibility of a project aligned to funder requirements and to guide the development of a full proposal. Eliminate the fluff and stick to the facts. Make it easy for the people who read and score applications (federal peer reviewers and private/corporate foundation reviewers). Federal program reviewers have neither the time nor desire to wade through 6, 7, or 20 pages of information that is irrelevant to the grant program priorities and selection criteria. On average, a federal reviewer receives a \$100 honorarium per application and must score three to 12 applications in a 10 day or less time period.

The 3 Cs: Clear, Concise, Coherent

CLEAR Do not write generic, vague statements. Precisely respond to priorities and selection criteria, always explaining what could be unknown, misunderstood, or erroneously assumed by a reviewer. Use the same terms as the grant program with only one term for one meaning. For example, a "pre-service teacher candidate" should always be referenced as exactly that and nothing else. Ensure that spelling, grammar, punctuation, and syntax are without errors. Access to information should be quick and easy, so organize the sections of the application using the exact headings and sub-headings of the grant program priorities and selection criteria. Following is an example of headings and sub-headings in a Narrative, which should be the grant program priorities, selection criteria, and program requirements. Background information is generally not required, but should always be included in order to inform reviewers who may not be familiar with the applicant's state, geography, energy sources, infrastructure, economic base, population demographics, and/or history.

BACKGROUND

Nevada Population, Geography, Economy, Target Population Demographics

PRIORITY 1: INTERVENTION for LOW-INCOME TARGET POPULATION

Selection Criterion 1: Project Need

- a) Documented by valid and reliable data collected in a thorough needs assessment
- b) Quality of the intervention as a new or established program
- c) Expected efficacy of the intervention

Selection Criterion 2: Project Design

- a) Goal(s)
- b) Measurable objective(s)
- c) Measurable, performance-based outcome(s)
- d) Activity(s) to achieve goals and objectives (type of work proposed)
- e) Benchmark(s)
- f) Deliverable(s)

Selection Criterion 3: Adequacy of Resources

- a) Matching / in-kind resources
- b) Personnel
- c) Sustainability beyond the grant period

Selection Criterion 4: Management Plan

- a) Governance structure for the proposed project
- b) Partners
- c) Project staff and management protocol
- d) Timeline of activities and deliverables aligned to goals, objectives, outcomes, activities

Selection Criterion 5: Evaluation Plan

- a) External and/or internal evaluator
- b) Performance measures: Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) or other
- c) Alternative measures (project specific objectives, outcomes, benchmarks)
- d) Methodology and metrics: Quantitative and qualitative data to be collected, analyzed, and used to guide project activities and modifications

CONCISE Write sentences that pack a lot of information without the fluff. Use simple charts, tables, and graphics to organize and compact information, data, and timelines.

COHERENT Never assume the reviewer is knowledgeable about acronyms, data, or familiarity with a location, organization, or event. Include a "Glossary of Terms and Acronyms" either following the Table of Contents, at the end of the Narrative, or as an Appendix. Terminology differs from region to region throughout the country. A cougar, Mexican lion, mountain lion, deer tiger, puma, Florida panther, swamp lion, and catamount are all the same animal. The terminology for the same animal changes depending on the region of the country. Without a clear definition or explanation of terminology, a reviewer may erroneously assume or interpret what the grant writer intended. For example, Nevada is the only state in which the 17 school districts are the 17 local education agencies (LEAs). In other states, each LEA is comprised of two or more school districts. Therefore, unless it is clearly explained to the contrary, if the grant program uses the term LEA, it is imperative that a Nevada grant application neither substitute the term "school district" for LEA nor interchangeably use LEA and school district. Reviewer confusion may result in point deductions and a lower score for the applicant.

Processes and procedures, as well as interpretation of law, vary according to the area in which a reviewer resides or the reviewer's personal experiences. For example, if a Nevada grant professional states, "The Superintendent of Public Instruction will submit a Bill Draft Request (BDR) to the Legislature for consideration of new legislation", most reviewers will erroneously interpret that to mean the Superintendent is engaged in lobbying and/or that it is illegally influencing legislators based on federal regulations. In Nevada, the BDR is one process in how government business is conducted and is not lobbying or illegally influential. This must be clearly explained.

WHO are you? Who are the people who comprise the applicant organization and the target audience, recipient(s) of funds and/or services, beneficiaries of project activities, key organization people, board of directors, and constituency who will be decision-makers for a grant project? Clearly state the **mission, vision, goal(s), and limitations of your organization**. Can your organization comply with funder requirements? An applicant organization must align the project with funder priorities and performance expectations, as well as federal, state, and local laws and regulations that govern a specific funder and grant program.

WHO is the target population? Use precise information that is easy for a reviewer to read and compare.

YES					
MIDDLE SCHOOL	PROJECT TEACHERS #	STEM KIDS PROJECT STUDENTS - GRADES 7-8			
		Minority #	Minority %	Low-income #	Low-income %
XXX	15	1,155	38.0	832	72.0
XXXXXXX	10	978	83.5	895	91.5
XXXX	11	1,623	78.8	1,359	83.7

NO
The project will include a majority of minority and low-income students in grades 7-8 in 12 middle schools.

WHAT does the organization want to fund? Write a draft summary of the project that will guide your Narrative and Budget development.

YES	NO
<p>The three year, \$1,200,000 pilot project utilizes the STEM KIDS program for students and teachers to assess the efficacy of STEM education in four middle schools with an average 62% racial/ethnic minority and 83% low-income. The 100 math and science teachers of more than 6,400 grades 7-8 students will form 10 cohorts to facilitate, guide, and support students to design and build models for the annual XXX STEM KIDS competition. Each cohort of teachers will collaborate weekly for technical assistance and sharing of best practices, and ensure project deliverables are completed per project timeline and within Budget. To meet grant program performance measures and evaluation requirements, qualitative surveys from students and teachers and quantitative STEM assessment data will be collected monthly and analyzed to determine project efficacy, progress, and need for modification.</p>	<p>The project is a STEM program for more than 6,000 low-income and minority students in 4 middle schools with nearly 100 teachers. The teachers will form groups that will meet regularly to assist each other, determine the curricula that works best for each group of students, and design a program to enable kids to build models for the annual XXX STEM KIDS competition. Teachers will collect data that will be analyzed and used to meet program requirements. This program will require approximately \$1.2 million over 3 years.</p>

WHY should the funder give your organization money, resources, and/or technical assistance? Make your case with specific information, data, and a track record of need, success, and/or innovation.

YES	NO
<p>After a 10 year decline in grades 7-8 math and science XXX assessment scores, 34 teachers convened during summer 2009 to redesign the math and science curricula, attend a minimum of five subject content and teaching strategy trainings, and create cohorts for support and mentoring during the 2009-2010 school year (SY). From 2010-2012 STEM assessment scores increased by an average of 6.5% over 2009 scores for all demographic groups of students in grades 7-8. Based on the 2010-2011 success of the teacher cohorts and a needs assessment, the cohorts were expanded to 78 teachers the following summer and SY2011-2012. Grant funds will support 100 teachers for STEM training, technical assistance, and mentoring, as well as provide 6,400 students with the opportunity to apply their math and science knowledge and skills in the first year XXX STEM KIDS competition.</p>	<p>After 10 years of poor math and science scores in grades 7-8 math 34 teachers collaborated during summer 2009 to redesign the math and science curricula, attend a subject content and teaching strategy trainings, and create groups for support and mentoring during the school year. In 2010-2011 assessment scores increased by up to 6.5% for all groups of students. Grant funds will expand teacher training, technical assistance, and mentoring, as well as provide students with the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills in the XXX STEM KIDS competition.</p>

WHERE will the project occur? Clearly state the location of the target population, project activities, the locale(s) of major components of the project.

YES		
MIDDLE SCHOOLS	CITY	XXX COMPETITION LOCATION
XXX	XXX	YES
XXXXXX	XXXXXX	NO
XXXX	XXXX	YES

NO
<p>The project will include 12 middle schools in XXX School District with a majority of minority and low-income students. The XXX STEM competition will be held at 7 schools.</p>

HOW will the project be accomplished? Create a draft list of activities aligned to a timeline, benchmarks, measurable outcomes, deliverables, and key personnel and their responsibilities that fulfill the mission, vision, and goal(s) of yours and the funder organization, as well as funder requirements. Project components must be reasonable, feasible, and aligned to Budget line items. They should be innovative and creative, and must be measured by quantitative and/or qualitative data based on funder requirements.

HOW MUCH is the monetary and/or resources request? Create a draft Budget spreadsheet using EXCEL or other format that can easily be revised many times. Precisely follow the funder requirements for Budget categories, codes, limitations on funds for specific categories, and indirect costs. Budget amounts should be aligned to project activities, measurable outcomes, and deliverables. Provide the cost basis and/or rationale for each category or line item as applicable.

SO WHAT is a summary of why your organization should be funded. What is the return on investment for the funder? What makes your project unique, innovative, stand out? Write a clear, concise, coherent summary of your expertise, intelligence, and integrity - SELL YOUR PRODUCT.

Cover All Bases

FOLLOW DIRECTIONS - FOLLOW DIRECTIONS - FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

One of the common, major downfalls of grant applications is failure by the writer(s) to FOLLOW DIRECTIONS specified by the funder. If the Narrative is limited to 30 pages, double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, 1" margins all sides of paper, then do not exceed 30 pages and FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS. If measurable outcomes, benchmarks, and deliverables are required and you are uncertain how to write them or compare them to baseline data, ASK FOR HELP. Reviewers often stare at an application section, shake their heads, and wonder what the heck the writer was thinking - or not thinking. ALWAYS focus the project proposal on Who, What, Why, Where, When, How, How Many, How Much, So What?

WHO

applicant background • target population • partners • key project personnel • subgrantees

WHAT

purpose • project design • steps / actions / activities / tasks to be accomplished • measurable objectives • measurable outcomes • milestones / benchmarks • evaluation plan

WHY

project need • cost-effectiveness • improvements
short-term benefits • long-term benefits • use of technology • peer reviewed / other references to support why the project is needed, has potential, will produce expected outcomes

WHERE

project activities location(s) • key personnel operating location(s) •
dissemination / communication / training / conferences / oversight locations

WHEN

timeline for employment of key personnel • timeline of activities / milestones / benchmarks •
initiation and completion of activities / tasks / data collection / oversight / review / modifications •
reporting schedule • dissemination of information plan

HOW

governance structure • management plan • partner buy-in • systems • sustainability

HOW MANY

target population and other beneficiaries • number of active partners • scale-up

HOW MUCH

Budget • Budget justification (Budget narrative) • time • cost matching / in-kind

SO WHAT?

summarize • recap • restate • why the project is great • funder benefit

One may now ask, **SO WHAT** is so difficult about writing a high-quality, competitive application? Do the little things really matter? Oh yes, they definitely do. A point lost here and there can mean the difference between funding and no funding. The "cut score" or point level at which funding occurs can be less than one point. When writing a discretionary grant application to maximize the competitive edge, the writer must write for reviewers, not the writer's employer, the applicant, or the funder. Write for the reviewers and always assume the reviewers know nothing about the people, places, or events in the project which is proposed. This takes a bit more thought, some extra time, and looking through the lens of others; however, it will pay off when reviewers do not waste time and become frustrated or angry wading through pages of unnecessary information, dozens of appendices, and generic, vague text. Make every effort to ensure reviewers do not misinterpret, erroneously assume, or fail to comprehend what is written.

FIND GRANT OPPORTUNITIES and OTHER RESOURCES

Private and Corporate Foundations

Search each of the foundations on the lists provided. The Foundation Center provides lists of funders specific to each state. Create a spreadsheet or other system for possible funders. Many foundations fund only in the region where they are headquartered, do not fund in Nevada, or have stopped funding anywhere due to the economy. Some foundations, such as Bill & Melinda Gates, accept applications by invitation only.

Federal Grants.gov <http://www.grants.gov>

To minimize time and maximize productivity, begin by clicking on "Get Registered" in the dark blue box on the right. Make sure your organization is ready to apply for grants. In the same dark blue box click on Grant Email Alerts and follow directions to subscribe to receive daily grant notices. In the red box on the left, click on "Find Grant Opportunities". For a list of funder agencies, click on the blue link "26 federal grant-making agencies". To search for a specific grant, click on "Search Grant Opportunities" and then click on one of the gray tabs. Follow directions from there.

Federal Register Notice <https://www.federalregister.gov/topics>

More difficult and complicated to use, but highly informative. On the left, click on "G-J" and scroll to the grant program applicable to your organization. Click on the program and follow directions.

State of Nevada Office of Grant Procurement, Coordination, and Management

<http://grant.nv.gov>

Click on the March 13, 2013 Training. On the left side of the "Training" page, click on "Training Library". Scroll down to find lists of Corporate and Private Foundations and the copy of *Write for Review, Not You* with tips on how to become a federal grant program Peer Reviewer. Check out the other information for assistance in writing a high-quality, competitive grant application.