

Writing Successful Foundation and Corporate Proposals

The good news about foundations and corporations is that there are literally thousands of them with billions of dollars to be given away. The not-so-good news is that, just as you see them as a potential source of funding, so does nearly every other school...or museum, or hospital, or symphony, and the like. Unlike public funding which is targeted to specific populations or eligible organizations for explicit purposes, money from foundations and corporations can go wherever the funders want it to go.

Here are some ideas for ensuring that your foundation or corporate proposal has the best chances for a successful review:

Do some research. Which funding sources have set priorities that match what you intend to ask for? Which funding sources are located in your community or state? Which funding sources have given to other schools? Which funding sources have given to organizations in your community, whether or not they are schools?

Tailor your request to the funding source. You can create several different proposals for the same project, depending on each funding source's interests. While the program and the requested amount will be the same, the focus will be different. For example, for a request for Renaissance Accelerated Reader 360® to a funder interested in literacy, focus on how it improves reading. Highlight Accelerated Reader 360's use of technology for a request to a technology-based corporation. Emphasize its motivational features for a foundation dedicated to drop-out prevention.

Keep your students at the heart of your proposal. Whether you are seeking funds for Renaissance assessment or instructional programs, or professional development, or library books, or a parent library, keep the focus on the students. How will these funds benefit them?

Create proposals that are easy to read and understand. You are writing for an audience that is not composed of educators. While state and federal agency proposals are often full of educational jargon, acronyms, and data, proposals to private funding sources must be more "lyrical." They should tell a story which humanizes the need, demonstrates that you have an appropriate and effective solution, and that could be summarized in a 30-second "elevator speech" if you had the opportunity to do that.

Tell a compelling story. Use what is unique about your students, school, or community to make the most compelling case for your request. Has your community experienced a natural disaster or man-made crisis (tornado, oil spill, gas leak, etc.) that affected students and their families? Do you enroll students who are homeless or who are new to the U.S. or those whose parents are members of the military, deployed far from home? Are your students so accustomed to digital devices with high-tech graphics appearing at the click of a mouse that they resist reading or using their imaginations to visualize what they read? Think about the distinctive factors in your school or community that could persuade a funder that your school deserves the grant you are requesting. Be creative, but factual.

Before You Write

The first step in submitting a proposal to a foundation or corporation is to determine to whom your grant request will be made. Most large foundations have their own websites which describe their priorities, eligibility requirements, application process, etc. Corporations often have a section related to funding opportunities on their websites—sometimes shown as “corporate responsibility”, “community involvement”, “request a donation”, or something similar.

If you are unsure of which websites to check, try this list:

- Foundations in your community
- Foundations in your state
- Corporations headquartered or with concentrations of employees in your area
- Corporations headquartered elsewhere but doing business in your area (large retailers, delivery companies, etc.)
- Corporations who provide services to the district (utilities, banks, food distributors, technology companies, etc.)

One of the most effective ways to ascertain whether a specific funding source is a good prospect is to make a preliminary contact. You can call or write a letter of inquiry. Many foundations require a letter of inquiry (or letter of intent) before applicants submit proposals. Because they use these letters to screen out applicants, it is essential that your letter be persuasive, with a brief, well-written description of the need, how you plan to address it, and the amount requested.

Whether you make the contact by phone or by letter, briefly introduce your school and what you are seeking funds for, state your belief that there might be a fit between your needs and the funder’s interests, and ask whether it would be appropriate to submit a proposal for the amount you require. Making this preliminary contact gets you in front of the foundation (they’ll recognize your school if and when you submit the proposal) and may provide additional information about their priorities that will be helpful as you prepare your request.

Writing the Foundation Proposal

The typical foundation proposal has the following sections:

- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Statement of Need
- Project Description
- Evaluation
- Future Funding
- Budget

These sections may be referred to by different titles—just be sure to use the funder’s headings in preparing the document.

An increasing number of foundations are requiring online applications—most of which include the above components, while limiting the amount of space or number of characters you can use. It’s a good idea to draft the proposal in a separate document which can then be cut and pasted onto the online form to see how much space you have, what needs to be edited down, where sentences can be re-phrased to stay within character counts, etc.

Executive Summary

This is the most important part of your proposal—it is where you hook the reader. It’s the first part that is read, but the last part you should write. In preparing it, go over the proposal to pick out the most important statements in each section and weave them together into a one-page, compelling narrative that encourages reading of the whole proposal.

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Introduction

Start the proposal with a strong introduction that describes your school, the community in which it is located, the number of students enrolled, the grades covered, a little of the school's history, parent involvement, your mission statement, and awards or recognition the school has received.

Statement of Need

What problem will the funder's grant solve? Why is it a problem? Here is where you describe the target population who will benefit from the grant and what their specific needs are. Use recent data (test scores, assessment results) or trend data as documentation. However, rather than relying solely on data, try to humanize the need. Use anecdotes, or descriptions such as "three out of five third-graders in our school are not reading on grade level" which evoke more of an image than data points.

The need you state is **never** for money. The need must be focused on the students: to improve achievement, to increase test scores, to engage more students in reading, etc. If your grant proposal is for professional development, focus the request on how it will make a difference for students.

Don't confuse the *need* with the *approach*. The need is not for Renaissance products and services. They provide the approach or method for addressing the need—which, again, is defined in the context of students.

Project Description

In this section, discuss the project goals and objectives, activities, timeframes, number of participants, staff qualifications, etc. This is the *who, what, where, when, and how* which follows the *why* you've explained as the statement of need.

Pay particular attention to goals and objectives. Goals are broad statements: *students in grades three through five will improve their reading skills*. Objectives are more specific: *150 students in grades three through five will increase their reading scores on our state's high-stakes assessment test next spring*. Objectives are the results you expect to achieve—the results of the work funded by the grant. Don't confuse the *objective* with the *approach*. *Creating a reading program* is not the objective—it is the approach. *Improving reading scores for 150 students* is the objective.

In writing objectives, many grant writers follow the acronym SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-framed. Because that acronym is so widely used, you can assume that the funders who review your proposal are likely to apply it as well.

Evaluation

The purpose of this section is to describe how you will know what changes occurred as the result of the grant. Well-defined objectives will tell you what to evaluate. Describe what the evaluation measure(s) will be (test scores, progress monitoring benchmarks, etc.), when the evaluation(s) will occur, and how the data will be collected.

Future Funding

Sometimes called *sustainability*, this section tells the foundation how you plan to continue the project after their dollars are no longer available. Even if you request multi-year (two or three years) of funding, foundations will expect you to have a plan once their grant has been spent. Avoid vague statements such as *we will make every effort to seek other funds*. Instead, present a plan that sounds possible to achieve. For example, if you are asking for funds for professional development, note that once teachers are trained, they will be able to share their knowledge with additional teachers in the future.

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Since Renaissance’s assessment, reading, and math programs require annual subscriptions, consider positioning your grant request as a “pilot” or “demonstration” project or “seed money”. In your proposal, describe not only why the program is important and how you plan to implement it, but also how you will communicate the successes that your students are experiencing and the time your teachers are saving to the school or district individual(s) responsible for purchasing decisions. Make clear to the foundation that your ultimate intent is to secure ongoing funding for the program from the school’s or district’s annual budget, and that this grant will enable you to demonstrate why the program is worthy of long-term, budgeted support.

Budget

The budget has to agree with the rest of the proposal. Any line item in the budget should be discussed in the project description, so it’s clear what it is and why it is necessary. Use real numbers, not *this sounds about right* estimates.

Your Renaissance quote will show unit price, quantity, hosting, shipping, or other charges, and the total costs. Transfer these numbers to the proposal budget in whatever format the foundation prefers or use your own simple format. Resist the temptation to cut and paste the quote into the budget—re-create it to provide a more easily readable, standard budget format.

Helpful Hints

- Avoid educational jargon
- Explain any terms that might be unfamiliar to individuals outside of the education field
- Spell out acronyms
- Give your proposal energy by writing in the active voice

The Cover Letter

You will need a brief cover letter on school or district letterhead addressed to the appropriate person at the foundation (the executive director, program officer, president, etc.) If you don’t know to whom to address it, call the foundation to find out. If you are unsure of spelling or whether Jan Anderson is male or female, ask.

The cover letter should be factual but should create a sense of excitement for the proposal. Explain your request—the purpose and the amount for which you are asking. Use the cover letter to convey information that didn’t fit anywhere else in your proposal’s format. If you have already obtained partial funding, note that. Reference any earlier contact you have made (“*as a follow up to our phone conversation last week...*”).

Offer to provide any additional details or to meet with the foundation. Thank the foundation for its consideration and have the letter signed by an administrator

Writing the Corporate Proposal

Most of the suggestions that apply to foundation proposals also work for proposals to corporations. The difference is that corporate proposals are most often submitted as 1-2-page letters.

Begin by stating why you are writing and how much money you are requesting. Briefly describe the need and how you will address it, tell how you will evaluate the results, and include a budget.

Many corporations are interested in how their funds will contribute to the communities in which their employees and/or customers live and work. Point out how your proposed project will help students become career-ready, or reduce drop-out

rates, truancy, or other situations which impact the quality of life in the community. Will this grant add features to the school that are attractive to parents whom the corporation might be recruiting as employees? What “return on investment” will the corporation receive as a result of this grant?

Note what is innovative about what you are proposing, how it involves technology, how it is accountability and results-focused—common areas of significance to corporate decision-makers.

Offer to recognize the corporation in whatever way(s) they deem appropriate. As with foundation proposals, offer to provide more information or meet with the individual to whom you are writing. Consider inviting the person to visit the school (perhaps for breakfast or lunch) to see first-hand what the need is.

When You Do Get the Grant and When You Don't Get the Grant

Sincerely thanking the foundation or corporation who awards you a grant is a must! It should be done immediately and enthusiastically. You do it not only because it's the right thing to do but also because it can be helpful to you in future funding applications. In the process of thanking the funder, ask if they would be willing to share with you what they saw as the proposal's strengths and whether there were any weaknesses.

Your thank-you letter has to be written, but you can ask for that feedback by phone. In fact, it's a good idea to call the funder as soon as you receive the letter informing you of the grant award. During that call, you can tell them how pleased your school is and how good it feels to have the funder's support, and so on. That's a good time to ask for the feedback.

If you learn of your grant award in a phone call from the funder, thank them immediately and ask for the feedback. In either case—award letter or phone call—follow-up with a written thank-you.

If you don't get the grant, send a “thank you for your consideration” letter. If you know the funder personally, you can call. Let them know you are disappointed but understand their decision. You can ask for feedback, but you may hear something like “your proposal was excellent, but we had many excellent proposals and we couldn't fund them all”. That may be true, but it's not very helpful.

While government agencies are obligated to give you feedback on how your application or proposal was scored, foundations and corporations are not. However, if you receive a positive comment, ask if they will re-consider a proposal from you in the future. If your project is a fit with what they usually fund, it may take additional tries before they award you a grant. Perhaps a modification of the project will have more appeal. Or the fact that you've had another year of success, or that you received grants for related work from other since your first submission to this source will help. Don't be afraid to re-submit, especially if they have given you feedback that you can use in your subsequent proposal.