

# There's money out there for you

# Writing personal grants

by Gerald T. Burke and Carol Anne Germain

Does the idea of submitting a grant seem overwhelming or too much of a bother? Does taking on the National Science Foundation (NSF) seem like an impossible task? Does the idea of getting "personal" seem too, well, personal to be used for grants? You might find that some of your fears are unwarranted.

Grants come in various sizes. With a little work, you'll find one that will meet your needs. You don't need to start with a large NSF grant. Taking on the grant endeavor one step at a time can make you a successful grant writer, and grants can help enhance your professional experience. They are available from a variety of sources and can help you fund training, attend conferences, or conduct research.

To start with, there are many falsehoods surrounding the acquisition of grants, such as:

- There's too much competition.
- It's too hard.
- · Grants are charity.
- I have to write an extensive proposal.

Of course, if you never apply there is a 100 percent chance that you won't get a grant. Many grants require extensive documentation, support letters, matching funds, and price quotes. However, numerous grant agencies have reasonable and attainable expectations and their grants still go unclaimed. For example, the Association of Specialized and Library Agencies' Research Grant was cancelled in 2000 because of insufficient applications.

#### Motivation

An important aspect in writing a grant is self-confidence. You need to believe in yourself and your initiative. If your letter is passive or reads like an apology, the sponsor won't fund you, even if your idea is clever.

Initially, make a list of your professional accomplishments. Weaving these into the application will give the reviewer a better look at you.

Wants are important. List priorities, making sure they're attainable. A trip to Hawaii to review a library collection may look suspicious. However, to review ethnic oral histories of Hawaii, a visit to the Manoa Library is essential and may get funded. Apply for something that interests you; your excitement will encourage funding.

#### **Getting started**

Start early. Preparing the grant application can be a time-consuming task. You may have to rely on others for recommendations, price quotes, or administrative approvals. Set aside extra time so surprises are not catastrophes. If your grant has potential, it's better to put it aside until the next cycle (usually a year) than to write a hasty proposal.

Also, don't get stuck on the word "grant." Awards, fellowships, scholarships, stipends, prizes, and professional development are funding sources frequently overlooked.

#### About the authors

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#### **Funding sources**

Many organizations maintain Web pages and produce publications providing grant information. ALA has many grant resources at http://www.ala.org/work/awards. Look into your institution's research foundation. Grant notification services, such as Community of Science, e-mail upcoming grant information that fits your preregistered profile. Explore opportunities that unions offer. Review the grants sections of library publications. Join an awards committee. ALA has a volunteer jury panel; information is available at http://www.ala.org/work/awards/juryfm.html. Being a jury member is a wonderful way to experience the grant selection process.

Once you've found an interesting grant, you'll have plenty of homework. First, research the funding organization. Its mission statement will provide insight into whether you would be supported. For example, the National Rifle Association won't fund projects about gun control.

Next, review projects previously funded by the grantor. Do they have flexible criteria? If they focus on funding government document projects, and your main interest is information literacy, don't give up. A study reviewing the use of government documents in the information literacy curriculum may be an exciting proposal to them.

Additionally, are there restrictions? Will you be committed to do something for the grant, like attend a conference? The grant administrators are a good source of details. They know the review process, grant scoring, budget allowances, and other inside information. If asked, they may evaluate your draft application or provide winning examples. The grant administrator may turn into your largest advocate.

#### Thinking big/acting small

Once you've gotten some background information about the grant and the benefactor, it's time to start thinking. Follow the "Thinking Big/Acting Small" method. Thinking big involves coming at the grant with a novel approach. Acting small means taking on a reasonably small project. Better to have a few successful little grants than one huge failure. A project in the \$200 range will be relatively straightforward with few extraneous details.

A novel idea grabs grant readers' attention. If you request funding just "because you need it," the likelihood of success is slim. Think about ways in which this project benefits you and others. Are you applying to an organization that sponsors a conference where you can present the material? Does this organization have special interests that you can include in your research? Can you take what you've leamed and teach others? Clearly, the grant will profit you; however, if you can prove it will benefit others also, it may be more attractive to the grantor.

#### Writing the proposal

Like any writing assignment, personal grant writing presents a number of challenges. There are two important tools you can use: outlines and narratives. Using outlines can help you shape ideas and frame narratives, and honing narratives can help you perk up your prose style. Both of these can give your personal grant proposal the extra edge to secure your goal.

First, let's look at outlines. They can help organize ideas and processes, and they can be used anytime in the personal grant writing process by sketching out ideas, organizing procedures, and structuring and revising narratives. Outlines come in three major forms: scratch, informal, and formal.

Let's say you want a grant for a Zip drive. You make presentations at numerous conferences, and your Power Point presentations require large files. The Zip drive will make them portable without using floppies. To get started using this example, a scratch outline might look like this:

```
Title: get a grant
request
Zip drive
reasons
conferences to do
snappy graphics
floppy blues
Zip fix
funding
anyone with $$$
budget
???
```

Now that you have a general feel for the parts of the grant, a little research would al-

low you to revise and focus the scratch outline into an informal outline. The revision might look like this:

requesting Zip drive reasoning presenting at numerous conferences developing presentations with many graphics eliminating floppy diskette complications

Janice Newkirk Award—ENY/ARCL budgeting

\$150-200

For most personal grants, working from a well-thought-out and balanced outline is sufficient, but a grantor may require an outline as part of the proposal; if so, remember to use the standard alphanumeric structure found in most writers' handbooks, such as the Bedford Handbook<sup>1</sup>

#### Proposal narratives: perking up prose style

Narrative is a "loose" word in grant writing. Here, we will use it in the traditional sense, i.e., an account of events. The important idea is to write clearly. Grantors will be reading quickly, so it's important that your proposal is easy to follow. Think of grant writing as a road map to your ideas. If grantors can't follow your directions, they get lost—and so does your grant!

There are a number of narrative tips to help perk up your prose: eliminate jargon, avoid bureaucratese, write in the active voice, use parallel structure (when possible), avoid complex sentences, and write in short paragraphs.

• First, there is the issue of jargon, which will confuse, not impress, the majority of grantors:

"With the enhanced capability of my high-speed I/O peripheral data storage unit connected through a USB data port with 12 Mbs throughput, I will be able to design and execute multimedia . . . "

· Second, avoid language laden with bureaucratese, like the following example:

"You can include a page that also contains an Include instruction. The page including the Include instruction is included when you paginate the document but the include text referred to in its Include instruction is not included."2

Be careful not to muddy your proposal by trying to make it too precise. Remember, if readers do not understand your request, they will not fund it.

- · Third, keep your narrative lively by using active verbs and maintaining the active voice as much as possible. The following URL has plenty of active verb examples: http://www.grantproposal. com/proposal\_verbs\_inner.html.
- Fourth, use parallel structure for balance and organization. Ideas are parallel when they are expressed in parallel grammatical form: words with words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses. For example:
- A successful grant requires creativity, work, and dedication. (word, word, word)
- The committee members read the grant proposal, discussed its major points, and decided to accept it. (phrase, phrase, phrase)

Parallel structure expresses your ideas in a balanced form, which gives strength and grace to your proposal. A reader may not say "nice parallel structure," but he or she will find your prose lucid.

Also, use parallel structure in outlines. If you look at the Zip drive proposal outlines earlier in this article, you will notice how the revised outline is much more coherent because of the use of parallelism.

• Finally, avoid complex sentences and keep paragraphs short. The ideas behind your proposal need to be understood easily; besides, grantors' attention spans shorten when they read large numbers of applications.

#### Budget

For personal grants, the budget issue can be tricky, but remembering a couple of simple principles will resolve most problems.

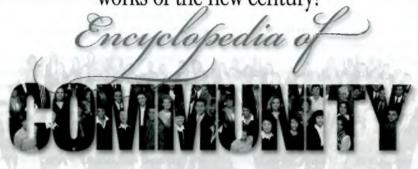
First, adjust for time. Most personal grant processes take months or longer, so remember to calculate the possible increase in cost over time. In today's economy, a lot can happen in six months.

Second, "pad a tad." Adding a little leeway in your estimate will help cover unexpected inflation or minor missed necessities, but don't overdo it. Experienced grantors are good at detecting "grant inflation."

(continued on page 170)

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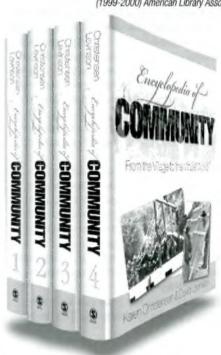
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> -Sarah Ann Long, Past President, (1999-2000) American Library Association



<sup>\*</sup>Prepublication price valid up to three months after month of publication

interim report at Midwinter 2004 and a final report at Midwinter 2005. The task force will coordinate with the ALA Endowment Task Force, especially ACRL's representative to that group.

**Defeated the Membership Committee's** proposal to include section and chapter repre-

sentatives on the Membership Committee and recommended that these representatives be exofficio members and that the Membership Committee be encouraged to share a draft of their proposal with section and chapter leadership before bringing it back to the ACRL Board for approval.

Approved the expenditure of \$13,300 in FY2003 to support and to fund association strategic planning efforts, such as focus groups at the ACRL National Conference in Charlotte and a forum at the ALA Annual Conference in Toronto.

("There's money out there ..." cont. from page 157)

Finally, investigate for any hidden costs. Frequently, there are costs associated with your grant process that you do not want to forget; for instance, if your grant involves continuing education, don't forget to include the cost of books.

The Zip drive grant is a good example of these principles. If the grant will be awarded in six months, will the Zip drive model you are basing your request on still be available, or will it be replaced by a new and more expensive one? Also, did you add the price of shipping to the overall cost? Padding would take care of that. Finally, the hidden costs: most Zip drive units do not include a parallel communication cable or Zip diskettes; these can cost an additional \$20 to \$40 that the grant could cover.

You might consider approaching the budget like Goldilocks—not too much but not too little.

#### Conclusion

Before sending your application out review it. Is it complete? Reread criteria to make sure you've answered all the questions and provided requested materials. Some grants are automatically rejected if instructions aren't followed to a tee.

Some small details to check: correct number of copies, length, attachment limitations, spelling, grammar, content, and deadline—too late is too late.

Approved signing an agreement with Tecker Consultants for strategic planning in FY2004 at an estimated cost of \$52,000.

**Approved expenditure of the accumu**lated donations in the Friends of ACRL Professional Development Scholarship Fund, supplemented by a portion of the accumulated donations in the unspecified funds, to a total not to exceed \$7,500 to fund additional scholarships for the ACRL National Conference in Charlotte according to the criteria and procedures being used for the scholarships previously budgeted.

Approved the ACRL Membership Business Plan.

**Approved allotting chapters \$1.50, a 50** percent increase, for each national personal ACRL member living within the geographic region served by the chapter, for fiscal 2004. ■

Don't forget the big details:

- Have you proved you have a good idea?
- Will your idea benefit others?
- Is the project realistic?
- Can it be completed with requested funds?
- Is your budget concise?
- Have you gotten their attention?

Have others review your draft. They will pick up errors you didn't spot. If you do not receive the grant, do some follow-up work. Ask the grant administrator for recommendations and for your scored application. This will provide insight into your grant writing weaknesses and strengths. Find out if you can resubmit an edited version of your proposal in the next cycle. Always keep trying; the likelihood of getting all requested grants is slim. Win or lose, write a thank you note, it's a nice extra touch.

Personal grants help you get more than just funding, receiving them is personally rewarding and affirming. Grants support projects you might have abandoned due to lack of funding.

Cultivate a grant nose. In other words, always be sniffing for creative ways to cash in on your ideas.

#### Notes

- 1. Diana Hacker, *Bedford Handbook* 5th ed. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).
- 2. Lynn Q. Troyka, *Simon & Schuster Handbook For Writers*. 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.:
  Prentice Hall, 1996). ■