

Writing Successful Grants

Guidance for Securing Federal Competitive Grants



Tips for Successful Grant Applications

1) Start early. Starting early on grant applications can help drive the development process. Creating a prioritized list of potential projects in advance can help applicants quickly match projects to available funding opportunities. When researching available grants, applicants must review the details in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to select the appropriate program to apply for. The NOFO provides essential information about eligibility, funding priorities, and specific program requirements. It outlines the grant goals, the types of projects being funded, and any specific criteria applicants must meet. Most federal grant programs accept applications annually and typically maintain consistent requirements from previous NOFOs. Reviewing past NOFOs allows applicants to begin preparing key application components in advance and serves as a useful reference for the current grant program details once released. Generally, the grant program will share previous awardees and the types of projects that were submitted, which can also be helpful in determining project eligibility.

To apply for grant opportunities, registering on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) and [SAM.gov](https://www.sam.gov) well in advance is crucial. These are required platforms for federal grant applications used to create a workspace and submit the application materials, which can take time for account verification and approval. Applicants must ensure that they have a clear timeline for their application and allow enough time to gather necessary documents and meet submission deadlines. By getting a head start, applicants can increase their chances of submitting a strong, well-prepared application.

2) Align projects with the grant programs. Each grant program has specific requirements that determine project eligibility. To align with the grant program, applicants should tailor the project to follow the specified guidelines, including cost sharing, eligible activities, and submission deadlines. At this stage, the focus is on adjusting the project to match these requirements. Applicants who tailor their projects to meet each program's specific criteria have a greater chance of success.

In the NOFO, each grant program outlines specific merit criteria that details what reviewers prioritize in a project. Grant applications are ranked based on these criteria. To increase the likelihood of success, it's important to not only meet the requirements listed in the NOFO but also align the project with the priorities of the current administration. Projects that support these goals are compelling to the federal reviewers and make an application more competitive.

The project scope should be well-defined and aligned with the NOFO's priorities, including but not limited to, community development, rural and disadvantaged areas, or technology innovation. Additionally, applicants must consider the project's timeline, as federal competitive grant programs have different deadlines that specify when funds must be obligated or expended based upon the NOFO.

The Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) is a key element of many grant applications, as it outlines the project's budget and helps determine if the project's benefits to society outweigh its costs. As part of the evaluation process, the awarding agency's review team will review the submitted BCA and perform their own assessment to verify whether the proposed benefits are accurate, well-supported by data, and reasonable. Therefore, it is essential to carefully review and validate the BCA before submission. Understanding all requirements in advance saves time and effort by ensuring the applicant only applies for grants that align with their project.

- 3) Gain support.** Support is essential in demonstrating that the community stakeholders understand the impact of the project and how it will benefit them. Reaching out early to the local highway division representative and other relevant modal staff is important to inform them of the project, address any potential concerns, and secure their input and support. Their involvement can strengthen the application by demonstrating coordination with key stakeholders responsible for project implementation.

It is also important to identify the right stakeholders who are knowledgeable about the project and build a strong application team. This team will gather all the necessary information to develop a complete application that meets USDOT's program requirements.

One component of the application is providing letters of support. These letters, usually from different stakeholders, help explain why the project is valuable. Leveraging government relations in these letters can also raise awareness among agency leaders and elected officials at various levels about the project's importance.

- 4) Develop a compelling narrative.** The application narrative should be unique, compelling, and easy to understand. It should effectively tell the story of the project in a way that is both memorable and persuasive. With awarding agency reviewers evaluating many applications, it's imperative the applications stand out by clearly demonstrating why it deserves to be selected.

The narrative should be structured around the selection criteria, with a strategic approach that addresses potential risks and how they will be mitigated. Federal reviewers will assess the application to ensure it presents a low risk. Reviewers are assessing if the proposed plan is feasible and likely to be implemented as described. It should also provide strong evidence of how the project aligns with the program's goals and the community benefits.

In addition to a well-crafted narrative, presenting the information in a visually appealing and organized manner can increase engagement and make the project more compelling. Thoughtful formatting, graphics, and clear data presentation can enhance readability and strengthen the application.

- 5) Financial Planning.** It is critical to analyze all funding sources when preparing a grant application to ensure the project meets all funding requirements and avoid unexpected financial challenges. Developing a strong grant application can be daunting, and many organizations turn to consulting firms for assistance, which comes at a cost. Budgeting for professional grant writing services in advance can increase the chances of securing funding.

Additionally, many grant programs require cost sharing, meaning the applicant must contribute a portion of the project's total expenses. Understanding these financial requirements early helps determine whether the applicant can meet the match or if additional funding sources are needed. If project expenses exceed the proposed budget, the recipient must plan to cover the extra costs while maintaining the level of non-federal funding stated in the application. This may involve securing internal funding, as well as identifying partnerships or alternative grants.

It is also important to consider the possibility of funding reductions, as awarded amounts may be lower than requested. In some cases, the awarding agency may ask whether the full project scope can still be completed with a reduced award. Proper financial planning allows for a more competitive application and helps keep the project on track, even if funding challenges arise.

6) Avoid common application mistakes. Some project ideas are unsuccessful in securing grant funding because of preventable mistakes that occurred during the application process. Applicants must ensure they carefully read all the instructions and that their application meets every requirement. Common mistakes in grant applications include:

- *Ineligible project types or applicants.* Make sure the project and organization meet all eligibility requirements listed in the grant guidelines before applying.
- *Late applications.* Submissions after the deadline are typically not accepted. Plan ahead and submit well before the due date to avoid last-minute issues.
- *Technical errors.* Many applications are rejected due to simple mistakes, such as the file type, exceeding page limits, or broken links. Always follow instructions carefully and double-check the application for errors, including grammar and typos.
- *Inconsistent project budgets.* The project budget should be detailed, accurate, and align with the project scope. Also, make sure not to include any costs incurred before the project is awarded, as these are usually not allowed.
- *Incorrect location designations.* Confirm that the project is within the required geographic area and meets location-based eligibility requirements.
- *Insufficient supporting information or evidence.* Strong evidence is essential, especially for merit criteria and project readiness. Not providing strong evidence can weaken the project's chances to be awarded.
- *Unclear scopes of work.* It is important to clearly outline the objectives, activities, and expected outcomes that will come out of the project.
- *Misalignment with the program criteria.* While past NOFOs can be helpful for reference, always use the most recent guidelines when preparing the grant application.