Elements of Proposal Writing

Community development through art is about people-centered needs assessment, resource (human and material) management, strategic planning, hard work, passion, risk, persistence, innovation, collaboration, networking, and a lot of listening and learning in the process. A proposal must convince the reader of two things: that a problem/need of significant magnitude exists, and that the proposal writer has the means and the imagination to solve the problem or meet the need.

This quarter, your Spring Project Group will be preparing a proposal for your upcoming projects. Through this process, you will be:

1. Developing a clear description of the need for your project.
2. Determining objectives and goals you would like the project to meet.
3. Developing methods and a detailed timeline for carrying out your project, including a means of measuring and evaluating the outcomes.
4. Identifying resources for and costs of your project.

Your proposal will be a guiding document for your project, and will allow you to share what you are doing with others, defining what you are going to "deliver", to whom, at what cost, to what tangible benefit, and over what period of time. These preliminary steps are time consuming, yet vital aspects of doing projects with the public—particularly if you hope to develop grant proposals for funding in the future. Though most grantmaking organizations require a specific format and have guidelines for their proposals, the sections you will be developing this quarter are among the elements most commonly found in the application process.

Build a strong shared vision within your group and with your partner organization to clarify the purpose of your project. It's a good idea to write a mission statement that will drive your decision making process as you develop your project. Mission statements are values driven and allow you to maintain focus as you make choices about your proposal components. If an idea matches your mission, go for it. If it doesn't, save it for a later project.

Whatever the format, your proposal should be clear, logical, thorough yet brief, and presented in a simple manner.

Preparing to write

Proposal writing requires careful research and partnership building. Prepare for writing the proposal by gathering information and documentation in three areas: concept, program and budget. Many of you have already gathered much of the organizational information you will need through your Research Projects. The research you have done and will continue to build on will be critical in assessing and measuring the need in the community for your project.

Concept

The concept of your project will ideally be decided upon in conjunction with your partner organization. The very second you make your decision about which organization that is, get on the phone and make an appointment to discuss options with them. Go to this meeting prepared with ideas in terms of media and product, but also ask questions about what their needs are so that you do most of the listening.

Program

Program research involves finding out about other organizations that serve a similar population, and learning what programs and projects they have tried that work—are there elements that you could incorporate into your proposal? Referencing other programs similar to yours that have worked is also a good way to validate your project, and is rarely considered "copying" in the funding world.

Budget

Budget research will be concentrated towards the end of your writing, though it is helpful to do some of the work up front in order to determine whether your ideas are realistic within the range of funding you expect to have.

Developing a clear description of the need for your project.

The section of your proposal that describes the need your project will meet is often called the Needs Statement or Problem Statement. You must get the point across in the most effective, attention getting and memorable way that you can. You want this section to be succinct, yet persuasive. Assemble all of your information and then present it in a logical sequence that will inform and convince the reader of its importance. Careful choice of terms and powerful, direct writing will convey a genuine need for your project. The reader should finish this section of your proposal with the feeling that it will be a huge loss of an opportunity to meet community needs if your project isn't completed.

Who will your project serve/benefit?

Some background information defining the population you are working with will help you make a compelling case about why your project is necessary for this group. Facts and evidence in the form of current numbers and statistics will also help you illustrate that you understand the problem you are addressing, and have carefully considered all of the options and know what you are talking about. Tell the reader the nature of the problem the population you are working with has at the local level and the number of people impacted by the problem.

The more specific the information you have on the topic, the easier it is to write a statement of need, avoiding over-generalizing in the process. The section containing the problem or need should be carefully prepared so it leads a reviewer from the point of knowing nothing about a specific situation to an informed state. Listed below are a few problem/need statements that illustrate a straightforward approach. Keep in mind that these statements would be preceded by compelling statistics and factual information gathered formally and informally in the community.

Making constructive after school activities available to students in area junior high schools is critical to ensuring their academic success .

Volunteers for mathematics tutoring need additional training in the use of math manipulatives.

- *Children who attend schools in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods have very limited access to personal computers in their classrooms.*

- *Based on attendance numbers, public awareness of free arts opportunities is limited.*

- *The "Reading Recovery Program" is addressing only 40 percent of those needing the service.*

- *The public schools in Bushville lack the instructional resources and qualified personnel required to provide students with experiences in the visual arts.*

Explain the situation in both factual and human interest terms, if possible. Quotes from people your project will serve can personalize your proposal. Providing good data demonstrates that you are very familiar with issues related to the issue your proposal is focused on. If there are no good data on your issue, consider doing your own research study, even if it is simple.

Portray your issue in as local a context as possible. If you want to educate people in your county about HIV/AIDS, tell the reader about the epidemic in your county -- not in the United States as a whole.

Avoid the pitfall of circular reasoning, which is describing the absence of your project as the problem. "We don't have enough beds in our battered women's shelter" is not the problem. The problem is increased levels of domestic violence. More shelter beds is a solution.

Pie charts and graphs can help the reader quickly understand the information you are presenting, and provide a break from reading a lot of text.

Describe a problem that is about the same size as your solution. Don't draw a dark picture of nuclear war, teen suicide and lethal air pollution if you are planning a modest neighborhood arts program for children.

Needs/Problem Statement Checklist

☐ Has a logical lead-in or introduction.

☐ Describes the target population to be served.

☐ Defines the community problem to be addressed and the need in the geographical area where the organization operates.

☐ Is of reasonable dimensions - not trying to solve all the problems of the world.

☐ Is supported by relevant statistical evidence.

☐ Is supported by relevant anecdotal evidence.

☐ Is developed with input from the organization and its beneficiaries.

☐ Is stated in terms of clients' needs and problems - not the applicant's.

☐ Is not the "lack of a program".

☐ Contains no unsupported assumptions.

☐ Is as brief as possible.

☐ Is interesting to read.

☐ Makes a compelling case.

☐ Is presented in a logical order.