



Contracting with Grant-Writing Consultants

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Helping you to be successful

A reputable, competent grant-writing consultant can save you time and offer specialty expertise and support, while building your capacities in the course of providing consultation services. The following items are some cognitive skills, attitudinal dispositions, and behaviors to look for in a consultant.

Have superior skills and knowledge

- Grant-writing consultants should have better skills in computer technology than the agency that hires them. They should be proficient in Word, Excel, and—for many proposals—Adobe Acrobat, and they should be able to troubleshoot technical problems. They should know how to use the Internet for research, and experienced with varied electronic submission portals (e.g., Grants.Gov, NSF Fastlane, DJJDP, NC Governor’s Crime Commission, etc.).
- Consultants should have excellent writing skills. Besides knowing where to put the periods and the difference between “affect” and “effect,” consultants should be able to write clearly, edit your work to make it more concise and polished, and be acquainted with standard style manuals (e.g., APA, Chicago, etc.).
- Numbers are essential: Consultants should be skilled with interpreting, organizing, and presenting data in easy to understand formats. Consultants must also be skilled in developing budgets, acquainted with common budget elements and the interpretations that funding sources put on ‘allowable’, ‘reasonable’, and ‘allocable’.

Negotiate a contract to fit your needs

Consultants should work with you to develop a clear, understandable contractual relationship:

- How will the consultant work with you?
- What about fees and pay schedule?
- How will the consultant respond to cost-overruns and/or provide any pro bono work?
- **Note:** Generally speaking, contracts with conditions to pay the consultant some bonus or percentage of the grant award should an award be secured are not looked upon favorably among grant professionals.

Educate you

- A consultant should help you understand the RFP. The consultant should help you dot the i’s and cross the t’s, meeting all the requirements of the funding agency. Proposals are routinely thrown in the trashcan for failing to follow instructions on something as minor as required font size. You cannot afford to have this happen to you, and a consultant should help you avoid it.
- Consultants should be able to make a rough guess about your chances of winning the grant. Anyone can take your money to write a proposal, but if there isn’t much chance of your winning the grant, what’s the point? The consultant should be prepared to advise you to NOT develop a proposal should your chances of winning be slim to none.
- The consultant should see the proposal development process as a training activity—one that is helping you to build your skills. Because of what you learn from working with the consultant, you should be better prepared to develop proposals in the future using your own resources.

- The consultant should advise you of challenges that may develop for you should you be successful with securing the grant award. The consultant should help you to understand your responsibilities for managing the grant project.

Bring resources to the table

- If your consultants are local, they should be able to bring to the table new opportunities and possibilities, based on who they've worked with, what grants they've worked on, and who they know. Can they hook you up with public organizations? Governmental agencies? Other nonprofits? Local consultants should complement your developing collaborations and partnerships, and identify potential resources.
- Grant-writing consultants should understand what a logic model is, and be able to create one for any project. For federal grants in particular, this is a requirement, but it's also a sound grant-writing practice, a good foundation for any proposal.
- A consultant should help you create a winning project design. Can a consultant sit down with members of your agency and refine a half-formed project design? Is the consultant a visionary who is able to flesh out the ideas of your team members, and continue to do so as the proposal develops? Can the consultant design a project that fits what you want to do, answers the preferences of the funding agency, AND is viable and realistic for your agency's capabilities?

Offer solid references

Consultants should have a selection of references available, past clients who can attest to the quality of their work. You should also ask of the consultant:

- How much experience do you have?
- What types of proposals have you written? Federal, foundation, corporate? Do you specialize in, or have more experience in, one type of funding?
- What types of clients have you worked for? Nonprofit, university, government? Do you specialize in working for certain types of clients?
- What are some recent grants you have helped win? (Beware of asking for a success percentage. Those percentages are misleading, especially in a tight economy, and even the most skilled grant writers don't succeed all the time.)

Stay on top of the process

- Finally, you should assess how comfortable you will be working with the consultant in a close, and at times, stressful process of developing the grant proposal. Is the consultant the kind of person you will be comfortable with assuming a leadership role in the preparation of your proposal? You need to be comfortable with your consultant, and the consultant needs to be comfortable with assuming leadership, with developing a production schedule, with helping team members fulfill their roles in the proposal development process, with settling for only the highest quality, and with working to earn the team's respect.