



Top 10 ways to make your foundation proposal a success

1 Start with a good idea — something with the potential for a significant impact.

Most foundations want to make a difference — they want to launch the career of a promising investigator who will go on to great things, or to fund a new idea with the potential to effect great change (new discoveries, research or treatment approaches that change the way we prevent, diagnose, or treat disease). Some may even be interested in funding things that are controversial, or that fit their own political agenda, political cause, or personal passion. Many want to fill a unique niche by funding projects that wouldn't receive funding from any other source.

Most foundations don't want to fund program operations or program maintenance. If this is what you need, consider whether you can reinvent your program or use the proposed project to take your program to the next level. Think about what is unique in what you have to offer. Don't forget to talk about the value of the other research that is going on here at the institution. You have a tremendous edge in working at a very well established research institution. Remember to use this to your advantage.

2 Research the resources and read the fine print. Make your first stop the Research Funding Service to look at key-word searches and other research tools. Read information on the foundation's website. Be informed. Read all of the information carefully. Make sure you understand the process, and then follow it. Answer all of the questions and concerns raised in the call for proposals. Follow any suggestions.

3 Find the best fit. Foundation proposals are almost never a one-size-fits-all proposition. After you've looked at the possible funding sources, pick the ones that are the best fit for your project. Successful proposals exploit areas of mutual interest and benefit. The better you understand your funder and the better the fit between their interest and your idea, the better your chance of getting the funding. If your proposal is turned down, see if you can find out why. Then ask if you can apply again in the future.

4 Know your audience. Research your foundation, and then look beyond the guidelines to understand what motivates giving. What are their needs? What are they looking to accomplish? What impact do they want to have, and how can you help them achieve their goals?

Also examine how your prospective foundation likes to give. For example, do they like to be the sole funding agent? Many foundations don't want to be the only one funding a project. If that is the case, make sure you mention any other grants or gifts from others who are contributing to the proposed project or mention other sources of funds your program is receiving for other projects. Can you show that your project is part of something larger? If so, mention other sources of funds for the larger effort. Some foundations like to make the lead gift, while others want to make the last (or capstone) gift. Try to match your request to all of the stated criteria and all of the other clues about how your foundation likes to operate and effect change.

5 Paint the big picture, and make sure you connect the dots. In other words, make sure your proposal gives the context for your idea and explains the possible impact of the foundation's support. Look for ways you can leverage the gift or grant to maximize the impact. Think about and address how you will disseminate your findings or recommendations. Also explore any other ways that the foundation's support can be leveraged to "spread the wealth" and increase the impact of the gift. A small pebble, if thrown correctly, can make a big splash.

6 Take care with the proposal writing. Your proposal should be clear, succinct, and compelling. Have someone edit your work and make sure it is free of mistakes. Follow the foundation's preferred format, and make sure your proposal addresses several key points:

- Clearly state the need or problem.
- How does your project meet the need or provide a solution to the problem?
- What exactly do you plan to do? Make sure you explain your program, the project components, and the specific budget needs.
- Outline your plan for program evaluation.

Then step back and think about your proposal as a story. Be sure that it hangs together from beginning to end. Your proposal should be self-explanatory and stand alone, as this may be the only chance you get to present your case. Avoid jargon. Write for a sophisticated lay audience.

Remember, your average foundation proposal will likely be very different from NIH or other federal proposals you have written. An NIH audience is likely to be much more sophisticated than the readers at a typical foundation. At the NIH, the readers are experts in your field and can easily understand the significance of your proposal. Do not expect foundations to do the same. If your foundation prospect employs a scientific advisory panel, then some of your readers may be highly sophisticated — though not necessarily in your research specialty. In many cases, the source of the foundation's monies and those making the ultimate funding decision are not scientists.

7 Sell yourself. Is there something unique about your program that makes you particularly well qualified to take on your proposed project? If so, use this to position yourself. Be sure to identify past successes and tie them to your current proposal. Show the prospective funder how your past successes predict your future success. From a businessperson's perspective, you are selling stock in your work. Think of your idea as an investment that the foundation is making, and spell out what they can expect as a return on that investment.

8 Don't oversell or over-promise. While you want to be compelling, you need to avoid dazzling them today and disappointing tomorrow. Be realistic about what you can accomplish. *Do explain* how you plan to evaluate your progress. How will you know if your project has been a success? Consider whether you are prepared to take on the foundation's reporting requirements, and then make sure you always send your reports in on time.

9 Have a plan for the future. How will you sustain your program after the funding is gone? Most foundations want to know that what they start today will continue tomorrow — but they don't want to be the ones who are financially responsible to make sure that happens. So think through the long-term future of the project and determine whether you will be in a position to get additional funding from other sources when the funding is complete. Will your program begin to generate its own revenue through fee for service or other means? Whatever your plan for future, be sure to include a few sentences about this important point.

10 Be a thoughtful recipient. If your proposal is funded, remember to thank the foundation and then, even if they don't have reporting requirements, take the time to stay in touch. Send articles, papers, or other materials that demonstrate the impact of their support. If the foundation's support leads to government funding, let them know. Building your relationship over time may lead to future support.