



20 Things to Never Write in a Grant Proposal

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1. **Innovative:** Whatever you are doing, I promise you that it is not as innovative as you think it is. This word is so overused in grant proposals that it has started to lose its meaning. Find another way to say this. Or, better yet, if what you are doing is truly innovative, don't just declare it – *describe* how it is innovative.
2. **Unique:** See #1, above.
3. **Cutting-edge:** See #1, above.
4. **Etc./Etcetera:** If you want a foundation to fund something, you need to spell it out for them.
5. **Miscellaneous expenses:** A donor doesn't want to fund your miscellaneous anything. Tell them how you are going to use their money.
6. **Other expenses:** See #5, above.
7. **Descriptions of your organization's needs in lieu of descriptions of your clients' needs:** Instead of saying "we need 5 computers, we need a dedicated phone line, we need 2 job trainers..." you should say something like, "our clients need job training and job search resources, in order to address the issue of chronic underemployment..." It's not about your organization; it's about the work that your organization is undertaking in support of your mission.
8. **Anything with grammar or punctuation errors.**
9. **A specific dollar amount that only appears on the last page of the proposal:** Tell the foundation or donor what you are asking for up-front and early. Waiting until the last page to ask for a dollar amount doesn't soften the blow – it raises the donor's level of irritation.
10. **References to your professional staff by first name only:** Please. This isn't an Evite or a Facebook shout-out. This is a grant proposal. Professional demeanor applies.
11. **Alot:** This is not a word.
12. **Research shows:** If research does, in fact, prove your point, cite and/or footnote some research from credible sources.
13. **Dear Sir or Madame:** It's easy to find a contact person's name. If they don't have a web site, you can use Guidestar.org to look up a foundation's IRS Form 990, which lists staff and trustees.
14. **Jargon:** If you are using "insider speak" from your industry or service area, explain what it means before using it repeatedly.
15. **Mathematical errors:** We are living in the Age of the Calculator. Check your math.
16. **Mismatched budget and narrative:** If you have an expense listed in your budget, make sure that the expense item is described in the proposal narrative (or in the budget narrative).
17. **Anything that does not meet a foundation's proposal submission guidelines:** If a foundation says that proposals may not exceed five pages, do not send them a six-page proposal. If a foundation gives you a specific set of questions that you must answer, answer all of them (even if some of your answers simply say "not applicable").
18. **I:** First person singular is acceptable in a cover letter, but the proposal is not a letter from you. It is a document that represents your entire organization. Writing in third person will sound more professional ("the organization will..."), but it is acceptable to use the first person plural ("we will...").
19. **Declarative statements that cannot be backed up by data:** Rather than writing "we are the best job training program in the county," write something like "our program is the most effective job training

program in the county, placing more than 80% of our graduates in jobs within three months of graduation, with a 90% retention rate in those jobs after 12 months.”

20. **Anything that sounds like a demand, not a request:** Asking a foundation to support your cause is something that should be approached with professionalism, grace, and respect. Anything less is not worthy of a philanthropic commitment.

Do you want more tips, ideas, and strategies to help your organization submit grant proposals that stand out from the pack? Check out [Grant Writing Quick Tips](#), your one-stop-shop for grant proposal greatness!