

The Seven Habits of Successful Grant Writers

There is a myth within the general art world which claims that anyone could get a grant if given some sort of formula or other such secrets to successful grant writing. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth! There are no secret and there is no formula. What has proven useful though are common sense and the applicant's willingness to put a certain degree of effort into the task, not an unreasonable notion if the public purse is expected to fork out considerable sums of cash.

Apart from the fact that their work is of a sufficiently high level of artistic merit to be competitive within the context of the assessment process, successful grant writers developed habits that have proven to work for them. Here they are:

1. Have a really good reason to seek a grant

Successful grant writers know when a planned project or anticipated activity is fully developed and of significant importance to their artistic development that it should persuade a peer jury to support it. On the other hand, grant requests for projects that are only vaguely conceived or represent a 180 degree change in the artist's practice (without any explanation) are doomed for failure. Also, financial need or quickly approaching deadlines are never a good reason to apply for a grant.

2. Make sure to have the most recent application form and guidelines well in advance of the deadline

Granting agencies are in the habit of constantly adapting or changing program policies, procedures, deadlines and forms to reflect the needs of the arts community. Since these revisions might require unexpected information or support material, the wise applicant does not procrastinate until the last moment to obtain the necessary documents.

3. Read the fine print

Application forms come with pages and pages of text that give directions on how to complete the document. While going through fine print in bureaucratese can prove painful for free spirits, it is of the utmost importance that grant seekers are aware of the requirements for a complete grant proposal and understand why. For this reason the successful applicant reads the guidelines carefully at least twice to assure that he or she meets the professional requirements, that the nature of the proposed project falls within the eligibility criteria, the required support material is on hand and that all the information necessary to fill out a credible budget page has been gathered. Should the grant writer require additional questions, he/she phones the officer responsible for the program for clarification.

One more point. Successful applicants always read the guidelines from beginning to end), even if they applied to the program before and believe that they probably know what is in them; reading the document more than once is recommended.

4. Write a clear grant proposal

The purpose of the written grant proposal text is to persuade the members of an assessment committee, who might have never heard of the applicant, to get excited about the proposed project and to want to support it. With this in mind, they appreciate to know what the grant writer has done in the past, is doing now and wants to do should the grant be allocated. They are looking for clear, precise language rather than longwinded philosophical essays quoting theoretical issues. Peer juries also have to be able to read the text – no hand-writing please – and get frustrated with fonts that are equally difficult to decipher. The last thing a successful applicant wants to do is annoy the assessors. And, successful grant writers never claim financial need, ill health or other misfortunes as reason for support.

5. Select the support material carefully

Support material is exactly that: it compliments, and hopefully strengthens, the written grant proposal. In the visual arts, including fine craft, the support material consists of visual images, in slide or digital format, and the curriculum vitae (resume).

Successful grant applicants select visual images that include some earlier pieces to show the jury where he/she is coming from and current work that has some relationship to the grant proposal. Here too, the committee looks for a coherent selection of images that reflect the artist's path of development. Once the images have been decided upon, diligent grant writers pre-view them by projecting them onto a screen or white wall to assure that they are of the best possible quality in very large format.

The curriculum vitae as well, is supposed to tell the peer committee about the grant writer's professional development as an artist and must include pertinent information on education, exhibitions, collections, employment relating to the art practice, awards, publications, and so on. Two to three pages are usually sufficient.

6. Review, verify and seek advice

Once successful applicants have written the grant proposal, selected the support material and fully completed the form, they usually give the whole package a careful last going over. They know that spelling mistakes, exaggerated claims in the c.v. or strange budgets greatly reduce their credibility. On occasion, applicants ask an objective friend to read through the grant proposal for constructive criticism. Lastly, they check the application package to assure that absolutely everything is included.

7. Mail the application package in time

Granting agencies, as a rule, consider applications that are incomplete or received after the competition deadline ineligible. No ifs, buts and because. Successful grant writers know this and mail the whole package several days before the due date.

Well, here it is – no secrets, no formula. I hope that reading through our *Seven Habits* has demystified the grant writing process for you and I wish you
Good luck!

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