Practical Advice for Writing Grants

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Introduction

Writing a grant proposal can be a daunting process. Grant writing is a skill and it is not unusual for large conservation organizations to have staff dedicated only to this task. Small non-profit and non-governmental organizations and individuals can also be successful at obtaining grants. Asian Elephant Specialist Group members are diverse and most of us do not have access to professional grant writers.

There are a limited number of foundations and agencies that fund wildlife projects and they often receive proposals far in excess of the number of projects they can fund. Resources are limited. To be considered for funding you must submit a high quality competitive proposal.

This article outlines important key points to consider when writing a grant and lists resources that are available on the internet.

Preparation of your proposal

1. Define your project

Clearly identify what you want to do and what you are hoping to achieve. Make sure your project needs doing.

2. Identify appropriate funding sources

Most funders have very specific guidelines for the types of projects they will fund. Your project must fit the criteria of the funder you are applying to or be subject to immediate rejection. If your project concerns captive elephants, there is no point in applying to a funder that only supports projects for wild elephants. Most funders list projects they have supported in the past and it can be helpful to review these and compare your project. If you are unsure if your project is appropriate, contact the funder for clarification.

A comprehensive discussion of funding sources is beyond the scope of this article but a good starting point is the Terra Viva Grants directory <http://terravivagrants.org>. Terra Viva is a non-profit organization that manages information about grants for agriculture, energy, environment, and natural resources in developing countries. Profiles of about 800 grant programs are organized by subject. You can search their database on-line at no charge or for a small fee you can receive funding alerts for targeted subjects (i.e. biodiversity, conservation, and wildlife) via email. Most posts provide links to the guidelines and application form of the funding agency.

Additional funding sources include the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund <https://www.fws.gov/international/wildlife-without-borders/asian-elephant-conservation-fund.html> and the International Elephant Foundation <https://elephantconservation.org/>.

If you are planning a research project consider Experiment.com <https://experiment.com> a crowdfunding platform for scientific research.

3. Download the proposal guidelines from the agency you have selected

Read them. Then read them again. Guidelines typically include information about eligibility; funding goals and preferences; proposal format; evaluation criteria; submission deadline; and the notification time-frame.

4. Write the proposal

There is no standard application format. Each funding agency develops its own set of criteria and its own application guidelines and questions. Read these thoroughly. Typical components include a statement of need; a project description; goals and objectives; project activities; methods of evaluation; timeline; and budget. Some proposals may require summaries, credentials, documentation of permissions, or other supporting information. Most funding agencies are looking for answers to the questions in the text box below.

Some guidelines ask you to state your goals and objectives. These two terms often cause confusion. The basic difference is that goals are broad and objectives are narrow. Goals are general; objectives are specific. Goals are not specific enough to be measured; objectives are specific and measurable. For example, controlling human-elephant conflict is a goal; conducting a survey to measure human-elephant conflict in a village is an objective.

Structure your proposal according to the specified guidelines, provide clear succinct explanations, and prepare a reasonable budget. Check for grammar and spelling errors. If English is not your first language it can be helpful to have a native English speaker proof your proposal.

Do not exceed specified word limits. Most online applications will prevent you from entering additional text once you have reached the word limit. It is advisable to draft your answers on your computer and then transfer them to the online application. Some online applications will save a draft but not all. Before you start, check if word limits include only characters or characters and spaces.

Start writing your proposal well in advance of the submission deadline. Writing a competitive proposal takes time. If you wait until just before the deadline and then rush to complete your proposal it is unlikely that it will be successful.

5. Prepare the budget

Well-planned budgets reflect carefully thought out projects. Be sure to only include those things the funder is willing to support.

Funders use these factors to assess budgets:
- Can the job be accomplished with this budget?
- Are costs reasonable?
- Is the budget consistent with the proposed activities?
- Is there sufficient budget detail and explanation?

Many funders provide mandatory budget forms that must be submitted with the proposal.

Don't forget to list in-kind and revenues from other sources, where appropriate. In-kind are non-cash contributions. They may be in the form of equipment, supplies, or services that benefit the project that are then assigned a value.

Submit your proposal

The complete proposal must be submitted on time in the requested format. Don't wait until the deadline to submit your proposal. Submit your proposal at least a day or two before the deadline in case there are internet glitches or other problems. Some funders provide a submission checklist. Use this to make sure your submission is complete.

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*Funding Agencies Look for
Answers to These Questions*

➢ What is the problem you are trying to address?
➢ Why is it important?
➢ What is your plan?
➢ Who will benefit and how?
➢ What specific objectives will be accomplished and how?
➢ Who will carry out the project and what are their qualifications?
➢ How will results be measured?

Commonly asked questions

Should I apply to more than one funder at a time? Should I ask each one for the project's entire cost or just a portion?

Few funders want to support a project in its entirety. It is common and you should expect to apply to multiple funders, asking each for partial support. One approach is to have the total of all your funding requests add up to about 200 percent of the money you actually need. This allows for the likelihood that some funders will turn you down or give you less than you requested.

What should I do if my proposal is rejected?

The letter giving you this unhappy news will probably be a form letter or email. Some funders will accept a request for information about why your proposal was rejected but most are too busy and understaffed to do so. If after an objective review of the funder's guidelines you still believe there is a match, apply again. Perhaps they liked your proposal but just ran out of money.

What should I do if my proposal is funded?

If your proposal is funded, you may receive the check with a cover letter or be asked to provide

banking information for a wire transfer. You may get a contract stipulating, among other things, that you must submit a report when the project is done. In all cases, write immediately to acknowledge the gift. If you sign a contract, be sure to read it first and note when and what kinds of reports are due.

Then turn the report in on time. Before preparing a report for a funder, check to see if the funder has specific reporting forms and guidelines. Even if the funder doesn't ask for a report, send one anyway. Show the funder how well you are using their money. If your project generates a news article or other publicity, let them know and send a copy. Acknowledge your funders in any publications that result from your project.

What should I do if I raise some money, but not all I need?

For example, you had budgeted $50,000 for the project but you could only raise $35,000. You could submit another round of proposals to different funders. Or you could decide to downscale the project using the money you have. If you do so, you must write all those who funded the project and explain how you will adapt to the lower budget. If you can't do the project and can't raise additional funds, explain the situation and ask if you can transfer their money to another project (which you describe fully). They might say yes. If not, you must return the money.

Additional resources

Guide for writing a funding proposal:
<http://www.learnerassociates.net/proposal/>

Non-profit guides (detailed info on grant writing and other resources for grant-seekers and a list of grant-makers): <http://www.npguides.org/>

Online grant writing courses (fee-based):
<http://www.distance-education.org/Courses/Grant-Writing-123/>

Writing a successful grant proposal (pdf):
<https://mcf.org/sites/default/files/files/pages/writingagrantproposal.pdf>