



HAROLD K.L. CASTLE
FOUNDATION

How to Write a Great Proposal

By Terry George, Vice President and Executive Director, Harold K. L. Castle Foundation
www.castlefoundation.org

In my view, a great proposal is not unlike a great business plan. There should be evidence that the grantseeker understands the customer and the market, that s/he has a great implementation plan, that s/he knows clearly that the returns will justify his/her costs and our investment, and that s/he shows a combination of experience, innovation, and clear-headed realism. Below is a list of the elements I look for.

- A short cover letter briefly summarizing the key elements of the proposal in a couple of paragraphs and signed by the organization's executive director AND the chair of their board.
- A compelling description of the idea or initiative that demonstrates the confluence of need and opportunity, helping to answer the questions, "Why should I care?" and "Why now?" I'm especially swayed by efforts to address the root causes of an issue, rather than merely tackling the symptoms. I also need to see that the initiative has a good match with the funder's principal areas of interest.
- An explanation of the reasons that the organization is qualified to achieve the project's goals.
- A project description, which is usually the guts of the proposal, that describes clearly and concisely:
 1. What the group is trying to achieve, (listing some specific, quantifiable outcomes);
 2. How the group is going to achieve it, and over what time period;
 3. Why they think action X will achieve result Y (sometimes called a "theory of change");
 4. How the group will measure progress and adjust its efforts along the way; and
 5. Who will lead and staff the effort (I like to see a c.v. of the project's and organization's leaders).
- A budget that clearly lays out how the money will be used if granted, what assumptions lay behind each budget line, who else is being approached for funding, and the status of each funding request (e.g., submitted, committed, received, etc.).
- An evaluation plan that explains the basic approach the group will take to assessing and communicating the impact of its project; and
- A description of how the group will sustain its efforts once the grant period is completed.

Truly great proposals will also discuss the risks the organization may face while implementing the project and the plans they have to deal with those risks. I rarely see this in proposals.

An online proposal writing short course can be found on Foundation Center's website, at www.fdncenter.org. From the "Get Started" drop-down menu, go to Learn About Proposal Writing.