Drafting Your Proposal (by Wendi Tilden)
(advice & reminders based on the Common Application Form we provided)

Remember, there are different forms and formats for full funding proposals. Every funder has different guidelines, priorities, deadlines, and timetables. Some will not give you a RFP unless you’ve already submitted a Letter of Intent (LOI) or an online application. However, to make our lives easier, we have decided that the funder you’re applying to will accept a Common Application Form (CAF), which we’ve provided to the class.

As discussed earlier, throughout the proposal drafting process you should keep your reader (potential funder) in the forefront of your mind. You may even want to have their website open to their funding criteria and/or keep your analysis of their funding program beside you as you write. Pay close attention to the needs, concerns and desires of your funder and the particular grant program for which you are applying – you can even reflect back their same language to prove you’re meeting their goals and expectations.

Remember, you are on staff of the organization who’s submitting this proposal. As such, you need to refer to your group as “us” “we” “our” not with words like “their” “they” “them” (or “I” or “me” – if you do have an active role in the project, then refer to yourself in third person as you would any other person specified in your grant). You are not the writer – the organization is the writer. Also remember that proposal writing style is VERY different from most academic writing styles. The idea is to make this as quick and easy a read as possible for your potential funder. This generally translates to shorter words (i.e., “use” not “utilize”), shorter sentences, and shorter paragraphs. (This was a tricky lesson for me to learn – I still draft without regard for language and length, and then force myself to go back and heavily edit paragraph-by-paragraph, then sentence-by-sentence, then word-by-word to see if I can make each more succinct and straightforward.)

Research grants will differ. The language will often reflect the specialized language of the field and paragraphs will be thicker and more developed. However, with this, clear, concise, and direct sentences are still key. When it comes to sentences, topic control from sentence to sentence is even more important since your concepts and paragraphs will be thicker. Refer to our video on style: Ethos, Style, and Proposal Writing (http://wra453.matrix.msu.edu/resources-2/ethos-and-style/).

Components for your full grant package need to include:

1. **Cover Letter**: Write this piece last, so you can pull text chunks directly from your proposal – don’t feel like you have to draft new language. This needs to be in a standard business letter format (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/653/01/) (generally no more than 1 page long), properly addressed to the grant officer where you’re submitting your proposal (foundation or government agency). See pages 91-92 in your book for more details. Remember to thank the funder for their consideration of your proposal and invite them to contact you with any questions (always provide your direct contact information, even though these are printed on your organization’s letterhead).

   [In every nonprofit proposal I’ve ever written, the letter and grant packages is actually presented to the funder as if it were coming directly from the Executive Director of my organization – even though I’ve researched, compiled, and drafted everything. This happens for two reasons: 1) external credibility and 2) internal responsibility. Your ED is most often the “face” of the organization and generally has the best relationships with funders; he/she is also the one ultimately responsible for the organization’s well-being and must know exactly what is being promised to funders because it’s his/her job to see it through.]

2. **Proposal Summary**: Again, you’ll want to compile this piece after you’ve drafted the rest of your proposal text. This is where you provide the funder with an overview of your entire proposal. (Step 10 in your book has great instructions for this section.)

3. **Narrative**: This is where all of your previously drafted pieces come into play, so you should have existing language to draw on. You’ll likely want to label each section of your proposal with
headings/subheads so that readers (a.k.a., potential funders) can easily find information they're looking for and see that you've addressed all of the components that they required in their RFP. It needs to include:

**Needs Statement** – It helps me to think of this as my problem summary (what is the issue or problem that I’m trying to solve or address with the work I'm proposing to do) **(NOT our literacy organization is running out of money BUT illiteracy is a problem in our community).** Remember, this is not about your group’s need for funding. It is about a bigger need for work. It reflects the specific situation, opportunity, problem, issue, and/or need—as well as the target audience or community—that your proposed work (discussed in the subsequent sections) will address.

*Note* the idea that “our group needs funds or we can’t do XX” or “we are running short of funds” should rarely if ever appear in your narrative. You don’t want to make not funding appear as a threat or that your organization is insolvent.

**Program Goal(s) and Objective(s)** – These should be clearly stated in a few sentences and/or bullet points with action verbs. This is the place for a succinct description of what you’re hoping to accomplish with their grant dollars (the proposed project & program activities) – the outcomes in measurable terms and how the work you’re proposing to do matches the funder’s issue interests or program/funding priorities.

*Note: Remember this is the section where the RFP asks you to put in the project description. Makes sense to have the succinct paragraph or two that describes your project as transition from needs into goals and objectives.*

**Methods** – I think of this as the strategy section, where you lay out for the funder exactly how you will accomplish the proposed objectives and goals. This is where you include a rational, direct, chronological description of your proposed project – that is, the specific activities or process you’re planning to use to achieve the outcome you’re anticipating (a.k.a., your accomplishments or deliverables). Graphic representations of your timeline or particular methods (table, chart, or Gantt Chart) can be your friend as part of your methods (but never all your methods).

**Evaluation** – this is where you describe how you’re going to measure whether or not the proposed strategies/activities/processes described in your Methods section were successful in meeting your program objectives and goals. I try to look at each of my proposed activities to discover what will be measurable (quantitatively and/or qualitatively) and what I would define as a success for each one. You’re going to tell the funder exactly how you’ll judge success based on the deliverables you’re planning to achieve. This is also where you’ll address how you are planning to sustain any ongoing activities beyond the life of this grant and/or how the outcomes of this work will live on (or be shared) to benefit others.

*Note: explaining sustainability makes sense in this section; however, it may not make sense for your particular project. Sustainability may appear in several sections.*

4. **Budget/Funding Requirements** – This section is normally put together with the assistance of the fiscal officer or accountant from your organization and generally has two parts:

A detailed narrative (the grant writer almost always drafts this) that explains how much money you’re requesting and how you’re planning to use it. This narrative is also the place to tell the grant-maker about any matching funds your organization is planning commit, as well as how much money other foundations or government agencies have already committed or pledged in support of the work you’re proposing (if that money was earmarked for a particular activity, you’ll tell them that, too). This is also the place to discuss your long-term
funding plan for the work you’ve proposed (remember, most foundations won’t fund long-term, multi-year projects, so they’ll want to know how their initial investment will pay off down the road). This section should help prove to the funder that your organization is fiscally sound and well managed.

A detailed program budget (normally where a fiscal officer or accountant from your organization jumps in to help) in a spreadsheet or table that breaks out line-by-line how much money is needed for each action included in your methods section.

5. **Qualifications** – This is where you provide the funder with information about your organization’s background to help build credibility with the funder and prove that your group has what it takes (a.k.a., the capacity) to complete successfully the work you’re proposing to do. It may include details of where previous funding for your program came from, highlights of the staff’s qualifications or experience relevant to your proposal, discussion of board involvement in program work or related fundraising to sustain critical activities, and/or a summary of key victories or achievements similar in scope to what you’re proposing to do now.

**Note:** this is where you want to use as much as possible from the literature or website of the nonprofit organization you represent. It is not your job as a writer to change the mission, history, or successes of your organization. Again it helps to remember you are not the writer but the organization is the writer. You will need to make cuts, transitions, selections, and smooth out passages. (Oh, and don’t put quotes around the language you borrow unless it is a direct quotation of an individual.)

6. **Conclusion** – You’ll want to wait until you’ve completed all of the other proposal sections before you draft this piece. This is where you provide the funder with a brief, concise summary of your proposal. Reread each of your main sections of the proposal and try to summarize each one in 1-2 sentences to ensure you’re covering all of the key points.

7. **Appendices** – This is where you include any additional attachments required by the funder, such as proof of tax-exempt status, organizational and financial documents, staff/board lists, support/commitment letters. **Note:** You will not need any of this for this practice grant. But know that you will need it.