JOSSEY-BASS

Grant Proposal Makeover

TRANSFORM YOUR REQUEST

FROM NO TO YES

Cheryl A. Clarke
Susan P. Fox

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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This book is dedicated to Susan's baby granddaughter,
Catherine Santos Fox, born during the gestation of this book,
and to Cheryl's daughter, Hannah Clarke Schwalbe,
who entered her teen years during the same period.
Both are perfect in every way and will never need a makeover.

PREFACE

A makeover craze is sweeping across America. From faces to houses, transformations are taking place, often in front of a TV audience. Although we cannot deny that contemporary culture influenced our book's title, *Grant Proposal Makeover* is actually more seriously rooted. Over the years, we've read a great many books on proposal writing that *tell* the reader what to do and what not to do when drafting a proposal. But resources are scarce when it comes to *showing* the reader what to do and how to do it, especially when it comes to editing proposals. Our book does just that. What we've done, with input from respected program officers from across the country, is identify the most common problems found in grant proposals. The problems identified ranged from those of style to those of substance. They include disorganized proposals; florid writing; abstract, vague, pontificating writing; narratives that are too long; narratives that are too short; proposals that do not fully or adequately describe the problem or need; those packed with irrelevant statistics; and those where the accompanying budget raises more questions than it provides answers. In each chapter, we give you a sample proposal—an "ugly duckling"—that demonstrates one of these specific problems. We point out the flaws, and we explain why funders view the defect as a handicap in awarding funds. We include quotes from the program officers themselves, which shed more light on what they specifically like and don't like in proposal narratives. Then we transform the "ugly duckling" proposal into a "beautiful swan," so you can see how to correct these common mistakes.

By seeing it all—the good, the bad, and the ugly—you should have an easier time editing your own proposals, as well as those written by others, making your submissions easier for grantmakers to understand—and to fund. In other words,

we show you how to transform your requests from *no* to *yes*. That's why you're reading this book in the first place—to increase the likelihood that your proposals will be awarded funding for your agency and its worthwhile programs.

We are aware of the many fine resources—books and workshops—that provide valuable assistance in helping writers construct a proposal from the ground up. Our book differs in that we show you how to successfully "remodel" a flawed proposal. After assessing what's currently in the marketplace, we believe this is a novel approach and one that will benefit the beginning grantwriter as well as the seasoned professional.

THE PROPOSAL: A MEANS TO AN END

We are also aware of and want to emphasize the proper role the proposal plays in the overall grantseeking process. A written request for funding—a proposal—is one key step in the process, but not the *only* step. We do not want to overstate the importance of a proposal, nor do we wish to minimize it.

Some have made the analogy that a grant proposal is similar to a resume. We believe this is a valid comparison. A resume is something every job seeker must have. Much time and energy are appropriately devoted to crafting an effective résumé, one that showcases the job seeker's strengths (namely, skills, knowledge, expertise, and experience) and communicates to the employer that the job seeker is an excellent candidate for the position. Similarly, a proposal presents an agency's strengths by describing its past achievements, discussing its current programs, and demonstrating that it has a plan for future sustainability. Much like a resume, a proposal communicates to the potential funder that the applicant is an excellent candidate, though with a proposal this is for funding rather than a job.

Let's take this analogy a step further. A resume by itself, no matter how strong, is unlikely to secure a job for the applicant. Strategic job seekers will first research potential employers to determine which companies will enable them to best utilize their skills and expertise. Strategic grantseekers do the same thing: they research and identify those funders who are most likely to financially support their agencies. Both types of applicants (that is, those seeking jobs and those seeking funds) may have opportunities to make personal connections with individuals associated with the potential employer or funder. Eventually, a resume or proposal is likely to be submitted.

The proposal, like a resume, is a single step in a larger, more complex process. However, because crafting a strong proposal is such an important step, books have been written and workshops have been presented about how to do the step well. We believe our book adds helpful new information to the field of grantseeking and will be useful to those of you who write proposals and those of you who review them.

WHAT'S AHEAD?

In our first chapter, we use the "short story" of proposal writing—the letter of inquiry—to demonstrate how to establish your agency's "fit" with the prospective funder. Convincing grantmakers that your project fits within their guidelines and funding priorities will have a big impact on your success in winning grants.

In Chapter Two, we transform a disorganized proposal into one that follows a logical order and sequence. The following four chapters mirror that sequence and are ordered in the typical structure of grant proposal. Chapter Three identifies the missing need, and Chapter Four discusses the appropriate use of statistics and data in the Needs Statement. In Chapters Five and Six, we examine the crucial role of evaluations and budgets that accompany proposal narratives.

Our concluding chapters focus on different stylistic challenges that pose problems for grantseekers, such as writing too much or too little, florid prose, writing "by committee," and narratives that are too abstract or academic. We conclude with a chapter on the proper packaging of a proposal and a summary.

As you read this book, pay particular attention to those chapters that describe flaws you may be susceptible to in writing proposals. Our intention is to give you the tools needed to avoid writing "ugly ducklings" when you intended to draft "beautiful swans" and to have the skills to successfully remodel a "fixer-upper" when necessary.

September 2006

Cheryl A. Clarke
Mill Valley, California

Susan P. Fox
San Francisco, California

THE AUTHORS

Cheryl A. Clarke is a fundraising consultant, trainer, and author. She is the author of *Storytelling for Grantseekers: The Guide to Creative Nonprofit Fundraising,* Jossey-Bass, 2001. A self-described "recovering lawyer," Clarke works with nonprofit organizations throughout Northern California to improve their fundraising capacity. Recent clients include: Shanti, St. Mary's Medical Center, the San Francisco International Music Festival, Jesuit Volunteer Corps: Southwest, and the Redwoods Retirement Center.

Clarke also regularly teaches workshops in basic fundraising techniques and grantwriting both locally and nationally. She is a featured trainer at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. Together with coauthor Susan P. Fox, she has co-moderated the highly regarded Reality Grantmaking workshops at local Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) conferences, Craigslist Nonprofit Bootcamp, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services Peninsula and East Bay Funders Fairs, and the Center for Volunteer & Nonprofit Leadership. Clarke and Fox were co-presenters at the 2006 AFP International Conference.

Clarke is a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and served as the Golden Gate Chapter's vice president for education for two years and as a board member for three years. She currently serves on the board of directors of the Development Executives Roundtable and is a member of the American Association of Grant Professionals. Over the years, she has also been active in the community, serving on many boards of directors and volunteering at her daughter's school. In her free time, she writes short fiction and has been published in several literary magazines, including *Potpourri* and *Bust Out Stories.*

Prior to establishing her consulting practice in 1995, Clarke held development positions at The Marine Mammal Center, University of California-San Francisco, and the University of San Francisco School of Law. She has a bachelor of science in journalism from Northwestern University and a law degree from the University of San Francisco School of Law.

Susan P. Fox has worked as an independent fundraising consultant to nonprofit organizations since 1980 and has held the designation of certified fundraising executive (CFRE) since 1995. She has served as development director at Salem Lutheran Home in Oakland, California, and at The Management Center in San Francisco.

As a consultant, she provides services in strategic fundraising, including grantwriting, appeal letter writing, public relations, major donor campaigns, feasibility studies, and development audits, as well as training in major gifts, grantsmanship, annual fund, and planned giving campaigns. Recent clients include the Alameda County Health Care Foundation, the Taproot Foundation, the Lions Center for the Visually Impaired of Diablo Valley, and School-to-School International.

Based in San Francisco, Fox frequently leads workshops on fundraising throughout the United States and Mexico and has been an instructor at University of California-Berkeley Extension, University of San Francisco, and University of Montana. With her colleague Cheryl A. Clarke, she organizes and co-moderates popular Reality Grantmaking workshops at several San Francisco Bay Area conferences. She is also a regular trainer at CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.

Fox is a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and served on the board of its Golden Gate Chapter for two years, including one year as vice president for education. She currently serves on the board of directors of Development Executives Roundtable and is a member of the American Association of Grant Professionals. In her free time, she enjoys reading, gardening, hiking, and spending time with her family.

A fourth-generation native San Franciscan, she holds a bachelor of arts degree in psychology from the University of San Francisco.

Future collaborations by Clarke and Fox include joint consulting engagements, workshops and trainings, and writing projects.

INTRODUCTION

When we began working on this book, we already had a pretty good idea of what issues we would focus on to show the transformation of "ugly duckling" proposals into "beautiful swans." Between us, we have more than forty years of experience in writing and rewriting grant proposals. We've also done quite a bit of teaching on the topic of grantwriting. Over the years, we've seen quite a few proposals that just didn't do an adequate, much less spectacular, job.

But our opinion on what makes the difference between proposals that win grants and those that don't are just that: our opinions. The people whose opinions really count are the grantmakers who read proposals, make funding recommendations, and award grants.

ADVICE FROM THE "OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK"

Over the past several years, we've had a unique opportunity to hear firsthand the comments of grantmakers reviewing proposals through a series of Reality Grantmaking workshops that we organized at various conferences throughout Northern California.

As we prepared to write this book, our editors suggested that we might want to gather more feedback from funders so that we could quote them in our book and validate the advice we were planning to give. We recognized that this was also a way to do a reality check on our own notions about what helps a proposal effectively communicate the case for support to grantmakers and what makes proposals difficult to read and understand.

Our purpose in polling grantmakers was to verify that our ideas for the book's content were valid and to gather some informal feedback on the issues we planned to address. Neither of us has a background in survey methodology, and we weren't envisioning more than a dozen or so e-mails or phone calls to people we knew in the funding world to gather some anecdotal evidence and ideally some good quotes to use in our book.

We started by drawing up a list of questions to ask funders. Some required simple yes-or-no answers and some were multiple choice. We also included a few open-ended questions in order to generate valuable quotes for inclusion in our narrative. We asked funders what bugs them the most in proposals coming in over the transom. We solicited their feedback about different writing styles. We questioned them about specific parts of the typical proposal. We inquired about their preferences for formatting, presentation, attachments, and budgets. We even asked them how they thought proposals should be delivered.

We tried out the survey by e-mailing the questions to a few of our colleagues who are grantmakers. We asked them for feedback on the questionnaire. How long did it take them to complete it? Did they have suggestions for improvements? Who else should we send it to? And most important, were we asking the right questions? We know that grantmakers are busy people, and we wanted to make it as painless as possible for them to give us what we were looking for.

We are very grateful to those "early responders" for the valuable advice they gave and for the dozens of colleagues they suggested we send the survey to. Somewhere in this process, a couple of people mentioned Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and suggested we contact them. When we did, they were gracious enough to circulate the survey via one of their e-mail listserves. The response from grantmakers throughout the country, and even a few from Canada, dramatically improved the geographical scope of the responses.

The size of our survey pool grew to sixty-nine funders and the geographical spread expanded significantly, but the survey results cannot be considered scientific evidence. The opinions we gathered remain anecdotal indications of grantmaker preferences.

MEET THE GRANTMAKERS

Who were the people who responded to our survey? They represent a cross section of the funding world. As we expected, most of them (twenty-five out of sixty-

nine) are based in California, where we work. Of the rest, 20 percent are from the Northeast, 40 percent from the Midwest, 20 percent from the South, and 20 percent from other states in the West.

Respondents represent community foundations, private family foundations, and public charities. Some limit their grantmaking to one field of service, like health or the arts or children. Others make grants across several categories. One only makes grants to individuals, and one awards services and not cash. Respondents reported from one to thirty years of experience in reviewing proposals. More than three-quarters of them have worked for grantseeking nonprofits, and 91 percent have written proposals as grant applicants themselves. Some are executive directors or CEOs. Others are program officers or grants managers. At least one is a foundation trustee.

We are delighted that sixty-nine funders took the time to respond. And we were especially pleased that so many of them commented, sometimes at length, in response to issues we raised. We hope the grantmaker comments we share in the pages ahead are instructive for you.

We give a complete list of those who responded to the survey at the back of the book, in Resource B.

ABOUT THE PROPOSALS

In planning this book, we quickly realized that no grantwriter would willingly put forth for public review their poorly written or disorganized proposals. Given this reality and facing the task of isolating specific proposal problems and then effectively correcting them, we decided we needed to write all the proposal examples—the "ugly ducklings" as well as the "beautiful swans"—presented in this book. They are based on flawed proposals we have encountered in our work, but the organizations, the staffs, and the programs described are all inventions of our imagination. We chose, however, to review these proposals in the third person. This approach enabled us to critique our own work with a more critical eye—with an eye for providing you with the most helpful tools for constructing your own perfect proposals.

chapter
ONE

Demonstrating the Fit

Making First and Lasting Impressions

Stop! Take your fingers off the keyboard and step away from the computer monitor.

Before you write that first word in a letter of inquiry or grant proposal, you must assess whether or not your agency (and the program or project you're seeking funding for) is a good fit with the grantmaker. If you've determined that the fit is solid, then you may return to the computer and begin writing. However, if you're unsure or have doubts, you either don't have a strong match or you'll need to investigate further to determine if you do.

FITNESS IS FOUND IN THE GUIDELINES

Grantmakers want to make it as easy as possible for potential applicants to figure out whether or not they should apply for funding. This is because funders do not want to receive a lot of proposals that are not aligned with their funding priorities and therefore fall outside their guidelines. That's why the majority of grantmakers publish guidelines on their Web sites or in a hard copy format that can be snail-mailed to potential applicants.

It is essential that you obtain a copy of a funder's *most current* guidelines and thoroughly review them before beginning to prepare a grant application. Guidelines will help you determine whether or not your agency (and the program or project for which funding is sought) fits like Cinderella's slipper with a given funder. This is because most guidelines are pretty clear about specifying what the grantmaker will or will not fund.

Before a foundation, corporation, or other grantmaking entity awards its very first grant, the decision makers at the funding agency will have thoughtfully considered, internally debated, and ultimately concluded what types of nonprofit agencies, programs, and projects will be eligible for funding. Decisions can be driven by the interests of the founders or by an awareness of urgent community needs. Even with the very largest grantmakers, it is impractical to open the doors to every type of nonprofit agency anywhere in the world. Instead funders focus. They focus on addressing specific problems or unmet community needs. They set geographical limitations. They limit funding to certain types of financial requests (for example, general operating support, program or project, capital and equipment, endowments, scholarships, and the like). These preferences are almost always specified in a funder's guidelines. "*Fit*" is an alignment with these preferences.

In addition to reading the guidelines, you should also review a list of a funder's current and recent grantees. These grantee agencies already have successfully proven their "fit" with the funding agency. Who and what has been funded in the recent past is an excellent indicator of who and what the grantmaker is likely to support in the near future. Please keep in mind that grantmakers can and do change their funding priorities, which is why we obtain *current* guidelines and review *recent* grantees.

"The proposal writer should take time to investigate the guidelines and look at past grantees to assess the likelihood of consideration," says Lori McGlinchey of the Open Society Institute.

THE FOUR FITNESS FACTORS

Several factors determine fit. The most important are subject matter, geography, type of financial need, and grant amount. When evaluating a foundation, corporation, government agency, or other grantmaker as a potential grantor for your agency, consider the following questions:

1. Is your agency's mission and purpose a funding priority of the grantmaker?
2. Does the grantmaker fund in the geographical area where your agency is located or where it serves its clients?
3. Does the grantmaker make grants for what your agency seeks funding for—for example, general operating support, program or project support, scholarships, endowment, capital improvements, and so forth?

4. Does the dollar amount your agency seeks fall within the range of grants typically awarded by the grantmaker?

If—and only if—you answered yes to each of these questions, then there is an apparent alignment between your agency and the grantmaker. Now you may proceed to approach the funder for support by writing that letter of inquiry or a full proposal. The format of the initial approach, whether a letter of inquiry or formal proposal, depends on the preference of the grantmaker.

Some grantmakers require that a letter of inquiry precede the submission of a formal proposal. Generally, these letters are one to three pages in length and are used by the funder as a screening device. Successful letters of inquiry will be rewarded with an invitation to the nonprofit organization to submit a full proposal. Recipients of unsuccessful letters of inquiry need not apply.

In your initial written submission to a funder, be it in a letter of inquiry or a full proposal, it is essential to demonstrate fit and to make a positive first impression. Then the question becomes this: To what extent should applicants go to demonstrate that their nonprofit organization and program or project is a good fit with a potential funder?

PARROT BACK?

Conventional wisdom may tell us to mirror the language in the funder's guidelines. Parrot back the grantmaker's own words is the advice offered by many trainers of grantwriting workshops and in dozens of books on "how to write successful grant proposals."

This is precisely the advice followed in the following example. Read the guidelines for the fictitious Anderson Family Foundation and then the responding letter of inquiry from the fictitious nonprofit organization, Bridges to Nature. As you read, consider whether the writer has adequately demonstrated the fit and made a positive first impression.

SAMPLE FOUNDATION GUIDELINES

In the pages ahead, the potential grantee is responding to the following guidelines from the fictitious Anderson Family Foundation.

ANDERSON FAMILY FOUNDATION: GUIDELINES FOR APPLICANTS

Who We Are

The Anderson Family Foundation is a small but growing family foundation that strives to make a difference in the local community, which has been home to four generations of Andersons. Our values are expressed in our grantmaking, which emphasizes enlightenment of the mind, empowerment of the individual, nurturing of creativity and expression, and respect for and appreciation of nature and wildlife. To this end, we are dedicated to the well-being of children and youth, with special interest in programs that cultivate a better understanding of the natural world and foster creativity. The Foundation takes an avid interest in safeguarding our environment for future generations. Environmental education is critical if society is to preserve and protect natural resources. We believe that each individual can make a difference, and although society's problems can appear overwhelming, we see great hope in the enthusiasm, creativity, and intelligence of young people. The Foundation seeks opportunities where small and medium-sized grants can have a deep and lasting impact.

What We Fund

- Nonprofit agencies and their programs that (1) benefit children and youth, particularly young people from low-income households and those at risk within the Greater Urban City four-county area (Forest, Hill, Marsh, and River Counties) and (2) provide environmental education to children and youth
- General operating, program, and project support
- Grants in the range of $10,000 to $50,000
- Agencies that do not discriminate against any person or group on the basis of age, race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, national origin, political affiliation, or sexual orientation
- 501(c)(3) organizations or those with a fiscal sponsor

What We Do Not Fund

- Capital campaigns, endowments, scholarships, individuals, films, videos, conferences, or fundraising events
- Multiyear funding requests

What Is Our Process

The Foundation accepts two-page letters of inquiry throughout the year. Those selected will be invited to submit a formal application.

Send letters to:

Judi Smyth
Grants Manager
Anderson Family Foundation
100 Main Street
Suburbia, CA 90000-0001

Letter of Inquiry to the Anderson Family Foundation

January 30, 2006
Ms. Judy Smith
Grants Manager
Anderson Family Foundation
100 Main Street
Suburbia, CA 90000-0001

Dear Ms. Smith:
I am writing this letter of inquiry to the Anderson Family Foundation to tell you about Bridges to Nature, a unique and innovative 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization that serves the Greater Urban City four-county area. Bridges to Nature is a wildlife sanctuary with year-round programming that educates children and youth about our natural world and fosters their creativity. We believe that Bridges to Nature is a good fit with the Anderson Family Foundation because our programs enlighten the mind, empower the individual, nurture creativity and expression, and teach respect for nature and wildlife. If invited to submit a full proposal, we would request grant funding of between $10,000 and $50,000. These funds will have a deep and lasting impact on the at-risk and disenfranchised youth we serve.

At Bridges to Nature, we seek to safeguard nature and wildlife from suburban development, and inspire future generations to preserve and protect our natural resources. Founded in 1985, Bridges to Nature is celebrating our 20th anniversary of providing young people with a better understanding of the natural world. We believe that each individual child can make a difference. While problems such as suburban encroachment and rampart development, and the accompanying loss of wildlife habitat and wildlife itself, can appear overwhelming, we see

great hope in the enthusiasm, creativity and intelligence of young people.

Bridges to Nature needs grant support to underwrite the costs of our educational programs for low-income and at-risk youth. Since our founding, we have opened our sanctuary gates to hundreds of school groups. Schoolchildren visit our beautiful 350-acre site located in forested hills that are populated by dozens of varieties of birds, deer, raccoons, skunks, bobcats, and the occasional mountain lion. Though Bridges to Nature is only a 30-minute drive from Urban City, the majority of low-income and at-risk youth have never experienced it. We introduce these young people to a whole new world that is beyond their daily experience. Our short-term goal is to provide children with an understanding of, and appreciation for, nature that they will cherish all their lives. Our long-term goal is to develop citizens who will help safeguard our environment for future generations.

Severe cuts have had a negative affect on school district budgets, causing many schools to eliminate field trips because bus transportation and related expenses cost too much. Bridges to Nature seeks grant funding so school children in poor and under-funded school districts continue to have opportunities to visit nature. We have to raise at least $10,000 in support to sustain this program in the coming year, as current grant funding is about to run out.

We hope that the Anderson Family Foundation will want to learn more about Bridges to Nature. Please advice us as to whether we should submit a formal grant proposal. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Chiaki Yamamoto-Barron

Chiaki Yamamoto-Barron, Executive Director