

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Bennett, C. J. (2014). Secrets of Successful Grant Writing: Using the Phased Approach in a Small Public Library. *OLA Quarterly*, 6(1), 8-11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1544>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Secrets of Successful Grant Writing: Using the Phased Approach in a Small Public Library

by *Connie J. Bennett, Director*
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Introduction

Granting agencies frequently speak of the grant cycle, and from their point of view it makes sense to divide the year into periods of time when they accept new applications, actively review applications received, or announce grant awards. There is a different rhythm and new slant on the process when the process is seen from the applicant's point of view. This alternative grant cycle goes through a similar series of phases which must intermesh with the granting agency's cycle to achieve success.

When I was invited to share my successful grant writing secrets with other small public libraries, my first thought was to do just precisely that—to pass on to others all my tips and the wisdom I've gleaned through successful and unsuccessful past attempts, using examples from the Silver Falls Library District's current award of a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant to improve Spanish language collection and services, *La Biblioteca de Silver Falls: un programa para la comunidad hispanohablante*. However, as I began thinking about the grant application process, it seemed to me that the actual writing of the grant application was just one phase of the entire process, and that it would be useful to examine the process more holistically. Each phase has its rhythm and its pitfalls; the skills needed and the advice I would proffer depends on a particular library's current perspective.

The Phases

Yes, I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can find his way by moonlight, and see the dawn before the rest of the world. —OSCAR WILDE

I have divided the grant process into four phases. The first phase includes the activities that occur prior to the actual writing of a grant. The second phase begins with the project design and the grant writing process and ends with the successful receipt of the grant; the third phase is management and implementation of the grant. The fourth and final phase consists of those activities which immediately follow the termination of a grant.

Perhaps it should be noted that these phases are linked to the activity of any one particular grant, so if your



Silver Falls Library District director, Connie J. Bennett perusing Spanish language materials at Ediciones Castillo's booth at the Feria Internacional de Libro (FIL) in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. The purchasing trip to FIL (also known as the Guadalajara Book Fair) was paid for with grant funds.

library is juggling multiple grants, the dynamics become quite complex. For example, the Silver Falls Library is currently in phase three of the year 2000 LSTA grant (*La Biblioteca*) featured in this article. We are also in phase three of our third *Schools and Libraries Universal Services* grant for underwriting telephone services, in phase four of a State of Oregon *Ready-to-Read* grant that purchased classic children's books, in phase two of an Oregon Library Association Children's Division summer reading program grant, in phase one of a local program grant to Silverton Together, and in phase two of a new LSTA grant for 2001.

The First Phase: Laying the groundwork

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars. —LES BROWN

The first grant phase includes the activities that must occur prior to the actual writing of a grant. The hallmark of the first phase of grant writing, like the dark phase of the moon, is that while a great deal needs to take place, no grant activities are overtly visible.

The initial steps in grant writing are the identical steps that a library takes to prepare itself for a planned future, whether or not grant funds are involved. This involves "getting your house in order" by making sure your library has a current mission statement, appropriate policies in place, written job descriptions, a current long range plan, active community involvement, and a staff training plan, as well as the basic appropriate and functional daily operations. A self-assessment tool such as the recently developed *Oregon Library Association Standards for Public Libraries—2000*¹ can serve as a checklist for evaluating the current status of your library. The ideal grant will lift you from one sustainable level of library operations to a higher sustainable level; my image is a staircase, with the grant funding serving as the vertical link between two treads.

The purpose of starting a grant writing process with this phase is twofold. The activities of the first phase are critical for clearly differentiating between the library's basic operations (for which grant support is usually not available) and the library's special needs which might be prime targets for grant funding. The other objective in this phase is to deliberately establish the library as a successful, well governed organization with which a granting agency would want to associate.

Creating a statement of need implies that the library has chosen its service goals and pinpointed where local resources are insufficient to achieve them. Once various potential needs have been identified, the next step is to research grant funds available and the goals of the granting organization. You are looking for a match that will enable a granting agency to achieve its own goals by fulfilling the library's identified needs, and this may require some slight tweaking of your original statement of need.

As an example of this process, Silver Falls Library's *La Biblioteca* grant started with a basic identification of need: "We need more materials in Spanish to serve community demand." The grant was funded with Institute of Museum and Library Services funding through the Library Grants to States. One of Oregon's stated goals for this program is LSTA Goal 2, Priority 3, Objective 3.3: "By 2002, plan, develop, and promote programs of library service for those with limited English-speaking proficiency and assist in the development of collections suitable to meet the needs of the limited English-speaking, both for native language materials and English language instructional materials or other instructional materials." There is a high degree of correlation between the library's need and the LSTA program goal, but the differences required the first modification of the need statement, which led us to change it to: "We need materials and services in Spanish to serve community demand."



Silver Falls Library District's new Youth Services Librarian, Janay Mulligan (left) and Juana M. Vega (right) who was hired with LSTA grant funds as the library's Hispanic Outreach Assistant.

Another common grant requirement is that the proposal show innovation. This can be seen as a stumbling block in small public libraries with the same pressing needs as many of their peers. In the case of the *La Biblioteca* grant, a number of other libraries in the state had already received LSTA funding for Spanish materials and services. The challenge became how to make our version of a similar request sufficiently innovative and unique. I have found two techniques particularly useful in developing this aspect of a grant project. One is the idea of building on insufficient past efforts—in our case some tentative and marginally successful excursions into bilingual story hour programming for children. The other is using unique strengths in your community to put a local twist on the proposal. In the *La Biblioteca* proposal we were able to identify a lack of transportation as one key reason that our original bilingual story hour programs were so poorly attended, and to link this hurdle with a LSTA grant component that built on local alliances to provide community transportation. By now our need statement had become: "We need to provide access to new materials and services in Spanish to serve community demand."

This gradual modification of the need statement is a very appropriate part of the first phase of a grant project. Caveats include the danger of allowing the need statement to be so thoroughly modified that the result no longer meets the library's original need and alternatively, allowing the needs revision process to drag on into later phases of the grant process.

To sum up the first phase, the library should identify needs that might be suitable for a grant, locate potential grant programs, revise the need statement to align the library's and the granting agency's goals, and establish the library as a competent recipient. And all this occurs before putting pen to paper—or, more realistically, fingers to keyboard.

The Second Phase: The Grant Application

A new moon teaches gradualness and deliberation and how one gives birth to oneself slowly. —JELALUDDIN RUMI

The second phase begins with the project design, proceeds through the grant writing process, and ends with the successful receipt of the grant. During this phase, the public perception of grant activities gradually waxes to a crescendo at the point of the successful grant award announcement.

You should begin the project design portion of the second phase having already established the library's need in alignment with the funding agency's goals. You should also have already spent some time establishing the library's credibility as a reliable partner. The next step is to design a project so that its success will make both the library and the granting agency look good. The project must be realistic considering your library's resources; both the library and the grant review panel have to believe that its goals are achievable. It also must

be ambitious enough to be worth the time invested in securing and implementing the grant. You will also need to plan how grant funds will boost the library to a new level without producing an unsupportable future need.

It is critical that the library director be involved in the project design, but it is also a good idea to use the ideas and expertise available on your staff and in your community during this step. Another valuable source of assistance is the granting agency staff. For example, when writing an LSTA grant I have asked the Oregon State Library staff to respond to grant concepts and for copies of similar, previously funded grants. Because the LSTA grant application is a two-part process, the library can get valuable information from the readers' comments, and should be sure to review the project design to address any concerns raised in response to the initial proposal. The quality of the project design can make a significant difference when you move into the grant implementation in phase three, and a good project design can make the grant writing process easier as well.

During this second phase it is important to keep returning to the original library need statement that you developed in phase one. The statement should directly generate the project objectives. It should also serve as a touchstone to maintain a balance between conflicting pressures throughout the project design and the writing of the grant application. Project elements need to be probed with a reality check as you visualize how grant elements will actually occur within the context of continuing library operations. It is during the project design that you should be sure that your governing body will support the grant project. Some other caveats for project design include being careful not to underestimate library staff time to implement the grant, being sure to include volunteer time (and benefits) as a match, and to call on the community alliances that you have cultivated for letters of support.

The typical small library director may be wondering at this point how this level of planning can be accomplished while still effectively handling the quotidian responsibilities of providing regular library service to the public. One answer is that up to this point, the timing of the phases is under your own control. For example in the *La Biblioteca* grant, it took more than two years from the initial decision to apply for such a grant before I began to design the project and write the application. And sometimes the library's situation changes enough that abandoning the grant project becomes the better choice. During the grant application process for *La Biblioteca*, another library chose to do just that, and we were able to pick up elements of the abandoned grant to enhance our proposal.²

Once you have found the functional balance of a project design that you think can work, the grant writing process becomes much more mechanical. In a small public library, the actual writing most often falls to the library director, but do not overlook the possibility of



The annual Feria Internacional del Libro (FIL) in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, which is the third largest book fair in the world.

using other staff, a contractor, or even a volunteer to assist you, especially if writing is not your forte. It is easy to overinvest in grant writing. Writing time needs to be balanced with other responsibilities, as well as planned into your calendar to avoid conflicts with other time intensive activities such as budget preparation. Another option is to look at a cooperative grant in which a partner might be able to prepare the grant application. However, you should be aware that partnerships take a lot of time, energy, and patience; you may realize your trade-off is less writing for more meetings.

My tips for this part of the process are the classic ones: read the instructions carefully, follow the instructions precisely, and meet deadlines punctually. If it seems routine, remember that this is part of how you show you can follow through on the grant.

The first opportunity for public celebration comes at that euphoric moment when you find out for sure that your library has received the award. Not only should you provide a press release, but also informational thank-you notes to all those who wrote letters of support. This should get the grant off to a good start in your community.

To sum up the second phase, the library needs to design a grant project to be a success experience, to balance the work load of the writing and planned implementation of the grant with the library's ongoing staff needs, and to prove by precise attention to detail during the application process that the library is capable of handling the grant project. The library also needs to publicly celebrate when the second phase culminates in the grant award.

The Third Phase: Implementation of the Grant Project

The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth, and, at length, the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed with them. —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The third phase is management and implementation of the grant. This phase is by far the most visible to the library's public and peers.

This phase is also replete with potential stumbling blocks. No matter how well you have designed the project, it is now highly visible, it is on an externally imposed time table, and changing external conditions will invariably affect the project. For example, one significant change that occurred early during the *La Biblioteca* grant was the resignation of the Silver Falls Library District's Youth Services Librarian, a key figure in the grant project. Fortunately, granting agencies realize that these things occur and have mechanisms for making adjustments during the implementation phase; in our situation it required adjustments to the operations schedule but did not affect the project objectives.

The primary challenge during the implementation phase of the grant is to strike a balance between sustaining regular library operations and the intense time commitment of an exciting but brief project. This balance must be found in your own use of time, in the library staff's energy and focus, and even in managing the community expectations. We are still in the early part of the third phase of the *La Biblioteca* grant, and one challenge we are facing is communicating to the public that the relatively pathetic amount of Spanish materials they see on the shelves today represents only a small portion of what is planned or on order for the entire project. Another challenge is keeping those staff members not directly involved in the grant enthused about their normal duties as they see some of their coworkers involved in stimulating new activities. In our case, one element of the grant was Spanish language lessons for two pivotal staff members. We have been able to extend that grant section to include several other staff members as they have shown interest.

Another key element of phase three is keeping the project on track. Of the various project management skills you will need in this phase, perhaps the most useful is some type of suspense file, which can be as simple as post-it notes on a calendar. Your activities in this phase will be guided by the requirements



Two Silver Falls Library District staff members, Wanda Jenkins (second from left) and Shelly Brown (far right) were able to join a weekly Spanish language class provided by the City of Silverton.

of the grant contract. You will need to know your granting partner's rules on changing budget items or modifying grant activities; your best resource here is again the granting agency staff. You also need to be sure that you keep meticulous records, including photographs, and that you promptly meet every report and evaluation deadline. The granting agency's perception of the project rests to a great degree on the quality and timeliness of your reports; again this shows that the library is a responsible partner and, perhaps more importantly, it prepares the ground for future proposals.


To sum up the third phase, the library must keep the grant project implementation on track despite the unexpected changes that occur. In addition, staff concerns and public expectations need to be managed while keeping true to the initial statement of the library's need developed in the first phase.

The Fourth Phase: Back to the Real World

...saca tus sueños al sol, que los sueños tienen picos
—ASTOR PIAZZOLLA

The fourth and final phase consists of those activities which immediately follow the termination of a grant. Some forethought should go into the process of how to gracefully ease out of the grant at the end of project. A key element here involves integration of the newly developed grant services into the library's regular range of services. As you have already planned for the resources needed to maintain the new collections or services, this becomes primarily an issue of staff work flow and public perception.

The fourth phase is also the time to take advantage of the grant's effect of making the library more visible within the community, and to put some effort into retaining the new patrons attracted to the library during the third phase. You should also continue to invest in the community partnerships that you relied on during the earlier phases. It is essential to give public credit to the vital role played by the granting agency as well. At its best, a successful grant project will give the entire community a brighter, broader vision of your library.

To sum up the fourth phase, the library needs to integrate the new grant collections and services seamlessly into its full range of offerings. Efforts must be made to appreciate and retain the new patrons and community partnerships developed during the grant. Appropriate credit should be given to the granting agency for your library's success. And finally, you must prepare to repeat the phases with your next grant project! 

¹<http://www.olaweb.org/pld/index.html>

² *This became an electronic element, with the moderated discussion list SOL: Spanish in Our Libraries. List moderator: Bruce Jensen; the SOL site: <http://skipper.gseis.ucla.edu/students/bjensen/html/sol.htm>*