

Telling Your Story in the Grant Proposal Budget

by Diane H. Leonard, GPC

There has been a great deal of discussion about storytelling and its importance in a successful fundraising effort by nonprofits in recent years. You can catch up on some [Great Storytelling Tips](#) from Kirsten Bullock and better understand how [Storytelling is for fundraising NOT for nonprofit marketing](#) from Marc A. Pitman.

The role of storytelling in fundraising includes grant seeking. In fact, Cheryl Clarke wrote [Storytelling for Grant Seekers](#) to help grant writers and grant professionals better understand the concept.

I can see you nodding along in agreement. Lots of authority figures in fundraising including Marc and Kirsten agree that storytelling is a powerful aspect of fundraising for nonprofits and nonprofits across the globe are experiencing their own success stories as a result. I won't step onto the general storytelling in fundraising and grant seeking soapbox. Rather, I will take the conversation about storytelling a bit deeper, and ask you to **consider the role that a budget plays in a grant proposal and the overall story the grant proposal tells.**

Budgets are not an afterthought

Sadly, the budget often feels like a step-child to the proposal itself. Often the formatting is different than the rest of the proposal and, unbelievably, there are often inconsistencies between the budget and the proposal itself that leave grant reviewers scratching their heads. Rather than having a grant budget that appears to be a stand-alone attachment or an afterthought within your proposal, focus on making your budget an integrated part of your proposal and a supporting component of your storytelling efforts.

Great grant budgets tell your story by:

- Being consistent with all aspects of the grant narrative including work plans and logic models
- Showing calculations when appropriate
- Explaining components of fringe benefit rates
- Outlining detail of travel expenses
- Defining generic "supplies" or "program materials"

Some other characteristics of great grant budgets are:

- Great grant budgets only contain expenses that are related and allowed by the grant maker.
- Great grant budgets tell your story regardless of the format required by the grant maker.
- Great grant budgets tell your story of how else the program or project will be funded beyond the requested grant funded.
- Great grant budgets contain budget justifications/narratives when allowable within the grant maker's format.

I can see everyone nodding along in agreement again, but can hear the questions in the back of your mind, "How do we do these things in a grant proposal when a grant budget is not required within a proposal or no format is provided or a budget justification/narrative is not a required portion of the proposal?" All good questions!

How do we incorporate a grant budget into a grant proposal when a budget isn't required?

When a grant budget isn't a required component of a grant proposal, you still need to let the grant maker know not only how much you are requesting, but also how you plan to spend their funds. If allowable, including a budget form that you developed is an optimal solution. If not allowable, within the narrative you should include at least a few sentences about how much you are requesting and how much the total project expenses will be over the upcoming twelve months. You should also let the funder know if you are looking to use their funds specifically for one line item of the project budget such as new computers for the program or supplies. Finally, you should narratively also let the funder know what other funding sources are already committed to funding the project, and at what amount, as well as what other funding sources have requests pending to fund the project, and at what amount.

What format should we use when one isn't provided?

Using a standard budget format such as the budget form in the Council of Michigan Foundation's common grant application [found here](#), or any other common grant applications from funding associations as linked to on [the Foundation Center's website](#) are always a good option for budget forms. These forms are ideal as they show a total project expense and allow you to delineate which line items and how much in each line you are requesting from the specific funder. The majority of the forms also provide you the space to show what other revenue sources will be used to fund the project and whether they are committed or pending. The revenue portion of the budget is just important as the expense side as it shows how likely the program in its full design is to occur and how diverse your other committed funds are as a possibility for future project sustainability.

The next time that you write a grant application and finalize the budget component, use the following list to confirm that your grant budget is indeed helping to tell a complete and competitive story to your potential grant maker:

1. **Review your proposal:** What aspect of your nonprofit's story are you trying to communicate to the grant maker?
2. **Review your budget:** If a funder only reads your budget, will they see and understand the same story, values, and goals?
3. **Realign as necessary:** If the story of your proposal and budget are misaligned upon review go back to the editing phase. Look at consistency in headings, staff titles, project name, and expense categories. Bring in a trusted colleague to assist with providing constructive feedback to ensure alignment between the stories the two sections of the proposal tell.

Have you tried other methods for ensuring your budget within a grant proposal tells the same story to the grant maker as your narrative? We would love to hear what approach has worked for you! Let us know in the comments!