Grant Writing without Blowing a Gasket
By Alicia Vandenbroek

WHY SHOULD I FUNDRAISE?
No one woke up this morning asking for a budget cut, but the harsh reality is that in today's economic downturn it is becoming more and more common. Even libraries seen as a vital part of the educational process are subject to reductions because districts are suffering financially. Just as you've been tightening your personal finances, schools face the conundrum of funding exceptional programs with inadequate funding. The answer? Grants. They aren't a perfect solution, but there is a lot of financial support available for those who ask.

Besides the monetary gain, one commonly overlooked reward of grant funding is campus revitalization. This renewal comes in several forms. Other teachers are encouraged by your success and willing to take risks. Sometimes those risks involve using the materials you've acquired through your grant, and sometimes the risks involve funding for their own creative projects. Grants typically allow students access to a unique experience. This experience makes them broader educationally and usually involves a cross-curricular project that develops lifelong learning.

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND
Beginning a grant can seem overwhelming if you don't break it into manageable pieces. Always start with the end in mind. In other words, what do you want? This can be money, supplies, experiences, and so on. Find the best deal by pricing these items in advance. Be honest with vendors so they know you might not actually place an order, but work out a deal that gets you the most value.

After you know exactly what you want, be creative and find a way to use those items or experiences in a student-friendly manner that directly supports curriculum. For the most part grants are geared toward directly impacting education; therefore, your proposal must be educationally sound. Be careful not to over commit yourself; this is the voice of grants not there to over commit you. This is the voice of grants gone badly talking. You don't have to build the space shuttle, just engage and educate your students. Sometimes less really is more. Focus on your strengths or areas you would like to become your strengths. For example, I'm kind of a tech nerd, so a lot of times my grants focus on Web 2.0 tools and projects. If technology scares you (yes, I know you are out there) then focus on a different form of grant until you have had time to increase your technology prowess and feel comfortable taking on more challenging projects.

Check your progress:
- What supplies, projects, or experiences do you hope to gain?
- What classroom/library goals do those supplies, projects, or experiences support?
- Does the grant provide opportunities to be successful or highlight my skills?

THE PERFECT PAIR
I wish I could tell you that there is a magical grant out there with your name on it already... but you know that doesn't even happen in fairy tales. That said the perfect pairing of grant writer to grant funder is actually easier than you might expect. Once you know what outcomes you hope to achieve then you are ready to look for a perfect partnership.

Focus on grant funders whose goals and programs support your desired outcomes. For example, the first grant I ever applied for was a science grant. I submitted an innovative hands-on activity to a company who prides themselves on being cutting edge in their field. I got the grant with no problems. Of course no one is perfect, because recently, I applied for a grant to a very conservative library supporter for a somewhat out-of-the-box after school program. I didn't receive that grant because the proposal did not support the private organization's opinions of what constitutes a strong library program.

After you find a source learn a little more about the company behind the funding. Are they a company with which you would feel proud to have your name/your school's name linked? If not, perhaps you should consider another funding source. All funders evaluate your program and ideas, so you should take time to ensure this is a mutually beneficial partnership.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:
- Is your proposal a good match for the place that I'm applying?
- Is the company one of integrity and financial responsibility?

A NAME SAYS A LOT ABOUT YOU
Think about your own name. Few people are in love or hate. It's not quite the same with grants, but it is pretty close. A grant proposal is only really as good as it can be remembered; this is where a catchy title comes into play. A simple yet unique title will make your grant memorable and can speak volumes about the content of your grant before the reader even begins consideration.

Some easy pitfalls include using titles that say nothing (e.g. Grant Proposal), using titles that say too much (e.g. Grant Proposal to Use Digital Cameras to Teach Habitats on Wikis with Student Involvement and Corresponding Library Resources), or worse, using titles that say something only to people in your field (e.g. Region 11 NKLB Wiki Title I Grant Proposal). The latter is especially important because frequently people in other states or outside of your educational venue view these grants, so bogging them down in jargon distracts from the grant content.

Check your progress:
- Is your title creative (will it stand alone)?
- Is your title clear of buzz words or write expressions?

ESTABLISHING A BUDGET
As you research the items for the grant, make sure you are following district policy. Some items, like technology, must be on an approved bid list, while others need only be from an approved vendor. Keep copies of quotes or catalogues so that when you receive the funding you will know exactly where the money goes. Work with vendors for discounts like free processing or shipping. Buying in bulk often means deeper discounts, so allow time to contact vendors directly. Include an itemized budget in the written proposal. If the grant is only one portion of the funding, be sure to reflect where additional funding sources are provided.

Check your progress:
- Have you followed district guidelines for purchasing?
- Do you have clear records or quotes for reference after you earn your grant?

CREATING A TIMELINE
If you've ever been part of writing a campus plan you understand the importance of an accurate timeline. The timeline must be detailed but loose enough to allow flexibility. Always pad the time, allowing for Mr. Murphy to make his presence known. Build in time for processing, completion, reflection, evaluation, and reporting.
Your timeline should follow the S.M.A.R.T. principles:

- Specific—detailed step by step
- Measurable—results need to be quantifiable
- Achievable—should be accomplished in the designated time
- Realistic—clear expectations that are developmentally and academically appropriate
- Time bound—succinct time structure, can be days or weeks but be consistent

Check your progress:
- Does your timeline cover every important part of the grant?
- Is the timeline flexible enough to allow for changes or difficulty?
- Does your timeline meet the S.M.A.R.T. principles?

WRITE, WRITE, WRITE

If you spent time in the first stages, this should prove to be a fairly easy part of the process. Be sure to refer to the helpful sites listed below for suggestions about where to locate frequently needed information. If a template is provided, you are ready to start compiling the necessary information. If no template is provided, start with subject headings.

To ensure you meet all the guidelines of the grant, look at the directions and write the requirements of each section under the subject heading. Include information relating to word limits, required detail, information of importance, and so on. Once you have this shell you are ready to write. These bullet points will help keep you from getting off track and ensure you address all required items.

There are two schools of thought on writing a grant. Some grant writers suggest you write one section at a time, perfecting it before you go on, and some suggest a more holistic approach to writing the entire grant and then going back to fine tune the details. My suggestion is to do what makes the most sense to you.

Check your progress:
- Have you located a copy of the template or created your own document with subheadings?
- Have you used the directions and rubrics to make notes under each subheading?
- Have you written the necessary narratives adequately answering each item?

TO RUBRIC OR NOT TO RUBRIC—THAT IS AN EASY QUESTION!

Grants always come with a written set of directions and protocols for grant submission. Consider this your primary rubric. In addition to those directions, grants frequently come with a rubric for scoring. If the company provides this type of rubric PLEASE use this valuable tool. Failure to use a rubric is no different than a student not utilizing a rubric you provide for a research paper and then failing because they didn't meet your expectations. Rubrics are the keys that set your grant apart from others and take your proposal from average to exemplary.

If a template is not provided, use the directions of the grant to structure the proposal. After you write the grant, proofread it several times. The first proofread is for grammar and spelling. Second, screen for conceptual problems, and lastly review your rubric and directions, ensuring that you've adequately met the requirements. If time permits, allow a day in between each reading. Mistakes are caught easier with a fresh eye. Ask a colleague to review your work and compare it against the rubric. Frequently, they will catch contextual issues potentially overlooked.

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Check your progress:

☐ Have you located a copy of the complete directions?
☐ Does your grant provide a rubric? If not, have you created your own rubric?
☐ Have you checked your rough draft for spelling?
☐ Have you compared your rough draft to the rubric and directions and made the necessary changes?
☐ Are the word counts at or below the required number?

ADMINISTRATIVE MUSTS

Make sure your principal supports your project. Without administrative support your funding will not be approved. If your project involves collaboration, be sure all parties involved are committed. This can be a double-edged sword. There is strength in numbers and often working with partners provides flexibility; however, there is nothing more frustrating than having participants back out at the very last minute or not carry their portion of the workload.

Every school district has slightly different policies so it is important to adhere to the rules for your district. Typically, you will write a grant and submit it to the grants office for approval. After reviewing their suggestions, you submit the revised grant for the final necessary board approvals.

Check your progress:

☐ Does your principal support your program?
☐ Have you determined if you will work alone or with a partner?
☐ Have you followed the school district grant process?

AFTER THE CELEBRATION

Take a moment to celebrate ... you got grant funding! Remember this feeling, because this satisfaction fuels the desire for future success. But your work has only just begun. This next stage is critical for compliance with grant guidelines. If you apply for more than one grant in a calendar year, consider tracking your commitments using a spreadsheet.

Write down the dates on the timeline on your personal calendar with reminders of due dates a few weeks before required. Also jot down notes about what sort of documentation you will need. Throughout the project take photos for school publicity and photos for funders. Be sure any photos that leave the school do not have faces of students or faculty unless you have written permission from all parties involved. It is also helpful to keep copies of handouts or promotional items. If possible highlight the project using Web 2.0 technology on your school website. Not only will this increase parent support of the library, but potential donors usually take time to preview a school website before donating and it is an easy commercial for effective collaboration.

Check your progress:

☐ Did you actually celebrate?
☐ Does your calendar reflect important upcoming events?

SUBMITTING A WRITTEN REPORT

When you submit your report track, the items you said you would. With that in mind, think about confidentiality of students. Make sure the information collected is aggregated rather than using individual student names. When sending the final report, a thank you goes a long way. This can be from students or just from you, but take a few minutes to thank the people who made your success possible. Before final submission, review the guidelines to ensure complete compliance.

Submit a duplicate copy of the written report to your principal, and set up a meeting to review the success of the grant. Not only will this confirm you've completed the grant requirements, but it also shows administration your commitment to the school's success. Favorable outcomes mean more principal support not only for future grants but good money/supply management encourages the endowment of more funds when they become available.

The last copy goes in your personal portfolio. If you don't have a portfolio, start a simple three-ring binder with copies of reports. This is a great tool when showcasing your classroom or library or when trying to procure additional funding.

Check your progress:

☐ Have you confirmed your written report met all the requirements of the grant?
☐ Are photos of students clear of student faces or do you have appropriate permissions?
☐ Did you review the written report with the principal or other supervisors?
☐ Does your portfolio contain a copy of the final report?
☐ Have you included Web 2.0 representations of the project on the school website?

HELPFUL SITES (JUST A FEW TO GET YOU STARTED)

Grant Writing Sites

www.nguides.org
http://712educators.about.com/od/grantwriting/Grant_Writing.htm
www.libraryspot.com/features/grantsfeature.htm
http://foundationcenter.org
http://librarysupportstaff.com/findS.html

Grant Sites

www.ed.gov/fund/landing.jhtml
http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schroodguide/business/grants.html
www.schoolgrants2009.com

www.grantwrangler.com
www.homerooteacher.com/teacher_grants.html
www.realschooolgardens.org/en
http://librarygrants.blogspot.com
www.technologygrantnews.com
www.schoiastic.com/librarians/programs/grants.htm

General Information

Community Demographics http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.htm?_lang=en
School District ID http://nces.ed.gov/globallocator

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