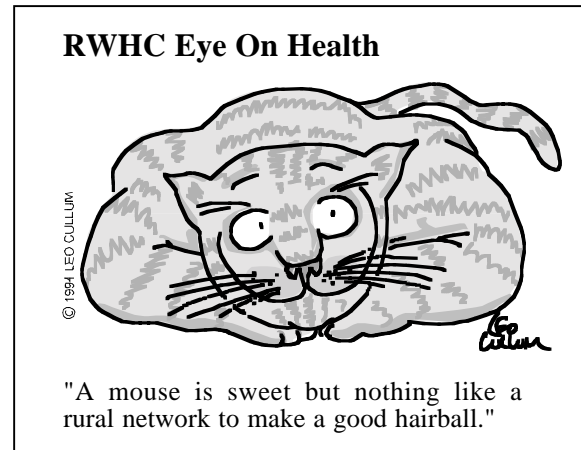


# **Grant Writing: Nine Lessons Learned From Twenty Years Of Writing & Reviewing Grants**

**By Tim Size, Executive Director  
Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative**

**March, 2003**



## **I. RULE #1-THINK IN TERMS OF HOW TO STANDOUT POSITIVELY IN A CROWDED FIELD**

1. Example: I ended up with nine “lessons learned,” I could have made up a tenth but in a panel where all asked to give ten, nine probably stands out. But ten was optional (see III below).
2. Be happy and grateful if funded but not morose if not funded; you increase your odds of being funded by exercising good “grantsmanship” but there is a strong element of good and bad luck; e.g.: mix of competing grants, mix of reviewers, who is lead reviewer on your grant and even order in which the review committee takes up your proposal.

## **II. GOOD GRANTS START WITH GOOD IDEAS THAT FLOW NATURALLY FROM WORK DONE TO DATE**

1. Good grants are first and foremost good “business” plans.
2. They start with an idea that you find exciting and that you would do with your own organizations money if you had any.
3. There needs to be a clear “public purpose” for the requested use of public/foundation funds; this is very important if any of participants are for-profit and particularly if the project is more administrative in nature.
4. They add value--justifying the funder’s investment and reviewers time. Foundation and government staff want to be successful as well and feel that they have made a positive difference.
5. Bold/Innovative is good and characteristic of funded grant. But reviewers as a whole can be conservative so take care to stretch but not break the envelope.

### **III. MAKE YOUR REVIEWER'S JOB EASY, NOT HARD—UNHAPPY REVIEWERS ARE VENGEFUL AND FULL OF MALICE**

1. Follow Guidance Strictly!!! A well written application is easy to review; poorly written grants are a lot of work to review. (This doesn't mean everyone needs a professional writer, applications that read as "canned" are typically scored down.)
2. What you are given as an outline in the instructions or guidance is usually also the outline for scoring by the reviewer(s).
3. Having all the information there but not where it is asked for makes reviewers work a lot harder.
4. If you don't have requested information or the question is not applicable; say so, just don't skip over it.
5. Read instructions three times: before start writing; after rough draft and after final draft.
6. If the guidance "suggests" points to be addressed, address them.
7. Cutting and pasting formats from other applications you made is high risk; if you do it, make sure it isn't obvious.
8. If a substantial amount of the grant dollars are proposed to be subcontracted, you will need to give an amount of information about how those dollars will be spent as if they were being spent directly by the grantee.
9. Call the grant's technical assistance contact if you don't clearly understand a direction.

### **IV. MAKE SURE YOU MEET BASIC ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS**

1. Not meeting basic eligibility requirements can (and should) keep your application from being reviewed if it seems deliberate can effect your application's chances in future funding cycles.

### **V. DON'T ASSUME KNOWLEDGEABLE OR EXPERT REVIEWERS**

1. Hope/pray for reviewers conversant in your area of rural health.
2. As you write, don't abbreviate and add a brief sentence/phrase description of organizations or legislation or tools or concepts that are not known to the "average educated person."
3. For example, HRSA is centralizing the Objective Review Committee process in next cycle. Will standardize a lot of grant review logistics but may further decrease rural or relevant content expertise of reviewers.

## **VI. DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT SUPPLANTING CURRENT FUNDS**

1. Even in a small amount this can kill an application as is seen akin to fraud.

## **VII. DON'T EVADE THE TOUGH SUSTAINABILITY ISSUE**

1. Think this through carefully; should be integral to proposed project.
2. Show a plan for beginning to address and develop starting on day one of the grant, not at end.
3. If grant is providing a service that by definition requires a heavy ongoing subsidy say so and how you intend to fund raise.
4. If it is a service that should be able to pay its own way after the startup phase supported by the grant, show the growth in revenue and decrease in dependence on grant funds.

## **VIII. SEVERAL MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS**

1. Selected use of humor is good, helps reviewer to see the real people on other side of the application; but use sparingly. I actually used the cartoon on page one of handout but in retrospect (given feedback from friends on review committee) it may have been higher risk than I needed. Point is to come across as genuine and grounded with your community or constituents but too "cute" or obscure.
2. Data is important but needs to be relevant; data dumps not appreciated and seen as smoke screen.
3. Meaningful, individual letters about how their facility will be helped by the proposed initiative help a proposal; form letters of support are worse than none at all.