



Good Form!

*The manner in which you structure and express your application forms may have a huge bearing on the results of your grants program. CHRIS BORTHWICK outlines some of the considerations.*

# Best practice application forms

*Good form! However much he may have degenerated, Captain Hook still knew that this is all that really matters.*

*J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan*

**GRANTSEEKERS, on the whole**, are best pleased when application forms are simple. What they want to see is something like this.

What is the name of your organisation?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you want a grant?      Yes    No

How much do you want?      \_\_\_\_\_

Are you sure that's enough?    Yes    No

Where do you want it sent?      \_\_\_\_\_

Unfortunately, we live in a world where there are not enough grants to go round, and we may require a more powerful filtering mechanism than this. Application forms are a necessary evil.

Evil, because even the best forms necessarily involve effort – effort that has to be put in to getting things moving, effort that does nothing in itself to serve the ends of either grantmaker or grantseeker. Time spent on filling out the form is time not spent on making the world a better place. Minimising effort without losing focus requires planning.

## PRINCIPLES

The first issue for decision is whether a two-stage procedure is justified, beginning with an

expression of interest, to avoid applicants with little chance of success having to fill out the full catastrophe.

The annual **Grants in Australia** survey has shown that this is a popular option for grantseekers. But what about for grantmakers?

### Use a two-stage procedure when:

- **The grant criteria are clear**  
It only make sense to knock off those who don't meet the criteria if it's possible to tell fairly accurately whether a proposal passes or fails. Any grant that recognises good works generally on an informal and imprecise "I'll-know-it-when-I-see-it" basis might as well make its decision at the first stage.
- **The applicant numbers are large**  
Many grantmakers already have an informal two-stage process in effect, at least for those who are aware of it. If you ring up before submitting your application and ask to discuss it with someone, you'll be given the time to put your case and to get a pretty accurate assessment of your chances. This is a perfectly good filtering system, if it's properly advertised, but when there are hundreds or even thousands of applications coming in such close attention ceases to be feasible.
- **The grant money is significant**  
If the grants are intended to be general – if the grantmaker is providing seed money of a couple of thousand dollars to most applicants – then neither the grantmaker nor the applicants are going to waste very much effort on close assessment of the minutiae of the criteria.

From **Take Two**, *GMQ*, September 2007



The next issue to consider is whether forms are in fact needed. There are situations where an open-ended list of questions is preferable. **Here** is an online example – a copy of a draft application from the Generation Challenge Program (a network of partners from national agricultural research programs collectively working to improve crop productivity in drought-prone environments) seeking project funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In part, the guidelines read:

### Grant Proposal – Narrative

Please follow the outline below, limiting your narrative to 20 pages or less....

#### I. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

- Clearly articulate the problem you are addressing, including the scope, history, and causes of the problem. (Please include data if possible.)
- Provide a summary of the existing efforts in the field; describe how the proposed project relates to the broader context of ongoing activities in the field and how your effort to solve the problem would be unique or complementary to the existing efforts.
- Please describe your [vision of success](#) for solving the problem stated above.
- What are the necessary steps to achieve your vision of success? What assumptions underlie these steps?

#### II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

- Describe the overall [objective\(s\)](#) of the project.
- Describe how achieving these objectives will contribute to reaching your broader vision of success for the field.
- Please specify the measurable [outputs](#) and [outcomes](#) to be accomplished by the project, showing how these relate to specific project objectives and [activities](#).
- For all activities, outputs, and outcomes, please specify the [indicator\(s\)](#) that will be used to measure progress and the [baseline](#) or [counterfactual](#) against which these will be measured.
- Describe how the expected outputs and outcomes will generate knowledge that will move the field forward against the problem.
- Describe how the project will contribute to, yet avoid duplication of, other initiatives in the field.

#### III. PROJECT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

- Please describe the project design and major activities required to achieve the stated objectives.
- Specify the geographic area(s) where the project will take place and number of beneficiaries over time.
- Describe how your project design will test or demonstrate the [scalability](#) of the approach being used.
- Describe how your project design will test or demonstrate the [sustainability](#) of the approach being used.
- Where relevant, describe how your project improves upon current business models, products, processes and/or technologies. Please provide data from any preliminary studies that support the technical feasibility of the proposed work.
- Indicate partners' involvement where relevant by providing the specific details of the collaboration and how each organization's work complements the others.
- Include a clear project timeline, indicating who is responsible for what activity and when it will be implemented.
- Please identify key milestones that will be used to measure progress on the implementation of project activities along the timeline. If the grant is funded, release of subsequent grant payments by the foundation will be based on achieving the specified milestones.

#### IV. POTENTIAL RISKS

- Please articulate the risks that could inhibit the success of the project.
- Describe the strategies your organization will employ to mitigate these risks.

If you get a satisfactory response to all those queries, you will know the issues in depth – but you will have invested a very large amount of your own time and expertise reviewing the project.

Forms are called for when what you want is:

FORMS		OPEN FORMATS
Exact comparability of submissions	rather than	flexibility of size and style
Large numbers of standard entries	rather than	small numbers of different models
Statistics-based reports	rather than	qualitative analysis
Rigid and exact criteria	rather than	fuzzy and loose criteria
Known mechanisms of change	rather than	uncertainty as to what works

In general terms, the more discretion you allow the assessment panel, the less standardisation is required of the applicants, and vice versa.

If you settle on a forms-based submission system, then the best practice principles involved are

- Don't ask for material you're not going to use (preferably, don't ask for material that the applicant can't see the point of)
- Don't ask for material you already have
- Don't use jargon or ambiguous grammar
- Don't ask for more material than your grant money deserves – small grants, short forms
- Separate out the due diligence components to do with the organisation from the evaluation elements to do with the project
- Don't ask the applicant to do work that you could do in your own office ►

### The Pointy End

When we asked a selection of grantmakers for their opinions on what aspect of form-filling applicants most often had trouble with, the leading response was 'the budget'. Applicants don't understand how the GST works, for example, or just don't give enough detail.

*Some applicants provide a very sketchy budget which really can detract from the application. The issue is exacerbated by our system requiring the budget to equal the requested amount, and people often call us wondering why the budget has not been accepted. Grant applicants should have thought through the budget before applying and be able to demonstrate that the funds requested are needed to enable the project to be run. The budget area of the application is the opportunity to do this.*

When we compare these complaints with the responses over the last five years from grantseekers in our annual **Grants in Australia** Survey, however, we see that the problem is possibly structural – what seems like financially responsible caution to the grantmaker seems to the grantseeker to be a demand that they put in all the work required to set up a program (and budgeting is a demanding discipline) without any guarantee that it will be funded. Approve it in principle, the grantseeker says, and then we'll haggle.

Some other problems are more easily bridged. The grantmaker says, for example, "Applicants have a hard time understanding the difference between Outcomes and Outputs"; grantseekers complain that forms use jargon that goes above the heads of amateurs and volunteers. Better communication that explains what's what and why it's important can get round this obstacle.

The open-ended Gates Foundation application form reproduced on page 6 provides hyperlinks throughout to other parts of the form that explain the terminology. This is a simple device you can put in place using the most basic of software.

In Australia today the most advanced grantmaking forms project is undoubtedly that being developed by the New South Wales Premier's Department. The project's **Model Application Form** is an exhaustive (and, at 24 pages, exhausting) attempt to provide "a standard format to allow for a fair comparison of applicants and an objective assessment of their capabilities and the project feasibility against the grants program criteria ... while maintaining a consistent cross government approach to language and information collected." It's designed to cut red tape, reduce duplication and save grantseekers time and frustration.

The Contents page gives an idea of the topics covered. The Project Funding section, for example, includes sections on:

- Title of the project
- Purpose of the project
- Project description
- Meeting the funding program objectives
- Evidence to support the project
- Partnerships the applicant has to undertake the project
- Other projects completed or current that demonstrate relevant or related experience to undertake the project
- Project budget
- Other sources of income/funding for the project
- Budget details
- Capital expenditure, if any, for the project
- Key dates for the project
- Project plan
- Beneficiaries of the project
- Sustaining the project outcomes
- Freedom of information
- Declaration by applicant
- Checklist for applicants

The list above can be seen to overlap considerably, but not entirely, with the topics covered in the open-ended Gates Foundation guidelines on page 6.

Simple measures of form length are perhaps misleading, as much of the space can be taken up by lists of rapidly completed check boxes, such as in the NSW model form –

Please tick one box only to identify the legal status of the organisation

- Incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act, 1984
- Cooperative registered with the NSW Commissioner for Fair Trading under the Cooperatives Act, 1992
- Aboriginal organisation registered with the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations under the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act, 1976
- Incorporated by Act of Parliament
- Local Government authority operating under the Local Government Act, 1993
- NSW State Government department or authority Trust
- Company limited by guarantee
- Company limited by shares
- Other (give details)

This example shows, too, that considerable technical work has been invested to make sure that the respondent can alter only the parts of the form that are required. The provision of forms online is now becoming a basic requirement of good grantmaking, but not all grantmakers have yet taken on board the considerable technical resources that are needed to carry this out properly.

Crucially, considering that one of the basic principles listed above is that the size of the form should be proportionate to the size of the grant, there are provisions in the NSW system for the granting agency to **modify the form** without losing either its technical excellence or its general commonality.

**SmartyGrants**, the AIGM's best practice grants management system, provides an easy way to build application forms, both large and small, that will allow you to receive applications online.

The development of SmartyGrants has been informed by years of interaction with grantmakers and grantseekers, as well as careful attention to the demands of auditors – ensuring it is much more than just an IT solution.

The system reflects contemporary best practices in administration, accessibility and accountability. A full audit trail is created, while the system also drives best practices in standardisation of language and forms.

SmartyGrants also creates substantial time-savings for grantmakers – reducing data input, putting in place automatic acknowledgements and reminders, and automatically populating key fields such as the applicant organisation's tax status.

To learn more about SmartyGrants or to try it for free visit

[www.smartygrants.com.au](http://www.smartygrants.com.au)

In the final analysis, the gold standard for forms is encapsulated in the words of Albert Einstein, who once said "Everything should be made as simple as possible, *but no simpler.*" The fact that this maxim is a good deal more complicated than it at first appears may represent a good introduction to the mixture of science and art that goes in to drawing up a satisfactory grantmaking application form. ✖