

The 5 most common mistakes in preparing and drafting grant proposals

By Remco van der Zouw, Senior Consultant at GRANTfinder

In this article, GRANTfinder Senior Consultant Remco van der Zouw describes what he's learned over years of working in grants consultancy and management.

In my career as a grants consultant, I have supported all kinds of organisations and funding programmes on many different subjects. Over this 10+ year period, I have often seen people make the same mistakes in preparing, writing and submitting grant proposals.

Here are the top 5 mistakes I come across the most.

- 1. Starting too late** – This is by far the most frequently made mistake. People tend to underestimate the amount of work involved and make all kinds of mistakes through time pressure. Starting too late leads to little or no preparation on either the structure of the content or the guidelines for that specific grant scheme - both of which lead to either non-funded or ineligible proposals. So, what is 'on time'? Depending on which grant scheme you are dealing with, I would recommend anywhere between 3 to 6 months for EU schemes, and 2 to 4 months for national schemes. The more partners and the larger the proposal budget, the earlier you should start.
- 2. Not reading the guidelines** – If you do not read the guidelines you risk becoming ineligible. I was recently told about an organisation applying for an Innovate UK Grant and misinterpreting the concept of a 'collaborative' project. Instead of proposing a project with partners they proposed a project for their own organisation but indicated they would involve subcontractors. Needless to say, their proposal was declared ineligible. This anecdote shows how not thoroughly reading the guidelines can put the hours spent on preparing a proposal to waste. Take your time to read the guidelines and ask someone else in your organisation to read them, discuss any uncertainties you have among each other, and ask the funding body by email when something is not clear.



3. Copy pasting and recycling of proposals –

Although it seems an ‘easy fix’ to recycle proposals through the copy and paste function, it’s not. Often, a 1:1 copy paste will result in below-par proposals due to differing proposal formats and other policy frames. An investigator-driven scheme, for example, will have a format not comparable to one driven by societal impact. If you do want to reuse information, start the new proposal from the ground up - building a framework for the proposal (understanding the type of grant scheme you are dealing with) and then completing it with elements from a previous proposal. Always check if the style of writing is congruent if you are combining sections of a previous proposal with work written by other people.

4. Not understanding the policy background –

Grants are a policy instrument aimed at influencing a certain group of people or organisations to move in a certain desirable societal direction. This means that every grant scheme is part of a larger policy goal. Do your research about that policy and what it is trying to achieve. This will help you ‘frame’ your own proposal both concerning the policy as well as the use of certain policy ‘keywords’.

5. Using too much jargon and too many abbreviations –

In the end, your proposal should be readable so write out every abbreviation you use the first time you use it. It is quite a simple recommendation, but I run into this problem time and time again. The same goes for jargon. An

evaluator is not always a super expert, so don’t assume they are. Write your proposal for an audience of educated, informed laypeople. In other words, take the evaluator by the hand through the proposal. Explain the thought steps you are taking in clear factual language. Don’t assume anything! In the case of too much jargon and abbreviations, you risk ‘losing’ both the evaluator of your proposal and the funding you are trying to secure!

Knowing the top 5 frequently made mistakes certainly sets you on the road to good bid writing practice. But there is so much more you need to consider when formulating a winning proposal – finding and selecting the most appropriate partners, accurate budgeting, determining communication and dissemination strategies, evaluation and measuring impact. The list goes on! But with the right methodology and with guidance from those with experience and expertise, success will undoubtedly follow.

[Contact us](#) to find out more about how the [GRANTfinder](#) consultancy team can support your applications.

[Remco van der Zouw](#) has over 10 years’ experience in grants consultancy and management for several European R&D projects and funding programmes. He focusses on innovative SMEs, universities, and regional economic development in the UK. Remco is a member of the pan-European grants team of Idox with operational bases in the UK, the Netherlands, Brussels and Berlin.



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