Core Elements of a Grant Application – Part I

Learning Objectives

Not every grant application, whether for a government agency or a philanthropic foundation, includes the same elements or asks the same questions. However, many grant applications share common components. Understand the purpose of each component or the required sections of a grant application before you address them.

The grant application you are completing may include some or all of the following parts. They are not listed in any particular order and may be labeled differently, depending on the solicitation.

Part I

1. Executive Summary
2. Project Title
3. Statement of Need
4. Project Narrative
    a. Goals and Objectives
    b. Project Activities or Work Plan
    c. Project Timeline
    d. Project Deliverables (Outcomes and Outputs)

Part II is covered in a separate chapter.

The Budget and Budget Justification are discussed in a separate chapter.

1. The Executive Summary

Think of an Executive Summary as the 30-second elevator speech for your grant application. An Executive Summary should succinctly state what you are proposing to the funding agency or a foundation, why it matters, and to whom. Writing the Executive Summary can be the most difficult part of writing a grant application because it requires you to briefly describe your project's purpose, goals and objectives, the strategy you will employ to achieve your goals and objectives, and the results or outcomes you will achieve if your project is funded. Writing should be at a very high level, reserving the nuts and bolts of your proposal to the Project Description or Narrative. Application instructions usually restrict an Executive Summary to one page. Unless you have thoroughly fleshed out your entire grant application before writing it, write the Executive Summary last.

The "Cs" of an Executive Summary

- Concise yet comprehensive
- Clear and crisp
- Captivating enough to capture the reader's attention and compel their interest

The Executive Summary must be concise yet comprehensive enough to explain your idea, written in tight, crisp language, and captivating enough to compel reviewers to read your entire proposal. If your Executive Summary isn't understandable in a few short paragraphs, if your writing is dull or disorganized, or if you include extraneous information or unnecessary descriptive language, you risk losing the reviewer's interest before they read your entire application. A well-written Executive Summary should set the tone for the rest of your application.

What you should include in the Executive Summary

1) Project Title

Your title should be clear and descriptive and capture the essence of your proposal. Avoid using catchy phrases.

2) Organization Overview

Briefly introduce your organization. State the relevance of the proposed project in relation to your organization's purpose. Demonstrate that your project aligns with the mission of the agency or foundation offering the grant and the purpose of the grant program. Establish your reputation, credibility, and experience.

3) Problem Statement

Craft a concise description of the issue, challenge, or need that your initiative addresses. Emphasize your project's significance and why it deserves funding.

4) Goals and Objectives

Captivate the reader's attention with your proposed project by identifying at least three goals and objectives that you will achieve within a given timeline. Don't make the reviewer have to re-read your Summary more than once to fully understand your project and be intrigued by your idea and approach.

5) Funding Request

Specify the amount of funding you seek for your project budget.

6) Impact Statement

Describe the expected results and impact of your initiative, emphasizing its significance and to whom, restating how it aligns with the priorities of the funding agency or foundation.

Tip: Write the Executive Summary last, not first

The Executive Summary of your grant applications should always be written last, not first, even though most grant solicitations will require that the summary be the very first section of your application. It's a mistake to try to write your summary before you develop the full grant proposal. You will find that as you develop your proposal, ideas and other considerations will begin to take shape. Don't try to summarize what you are planning to do and how you will do it before your entire proposal is finished.

2. Core Element: Project Title

Develop a clear, concise title that captures the essence of your project. The title of your project should, to the extent possible, reflect the need for your project. State the title in as few words as possible. If it is too short, you risk leaving the reader guessing what you want to do. If it is too long or overly complex, the reader may struggle to understand what you are proposing.

Avoid acronyms. Don't abbreviate important words into a string of letters because you think it will grab the reader's attention. A reviewer may find an acronym annoying because you are expecting them to remember what it stands for every time you use it. They won't. Remember, reviewers are likely to have more proposals to read than just yours. A short title that packs a punch in a few clear words is more impactful than a string of letters forming an acronym that may mean something to you but not necessarily everyone else. A project title doesn't need to be creative, but it should clearly convey your project's purpose or goal in a way everyone can understand, not just you. For example, will the reader remember your proposal as "STOP" or Stop Teenage Overdosing Problems? What is more informative for a reviewer: "Project TEACH" or Teaching, Engaging, and Advancing Child Health?

Exception: It is generally acceptable to title scientific, medical, or technical proposals (engineering or IT) using scientific, medical, or technical terms. Research proposals often have long titles. Consider the title of a scientific research grant application in veterinary medicine: *Evaluation of Novel Biomarkers for Early Detection*

of Chronic Kidney Disease Driven by Chronic Tubulointerstitial Nephritis and Interstitial Fibrosis in Domestic Feline Populations. While complex, reviewers are likely veterinarians who will understand the meaning.

Tip: Consider Using a Two-Part Format

A two-part proposal title combines a “hook” with a project description. The first phrase is the hook that captures the reader’s attention. The second phrase explains the core work that your project will accomplish or the outcome you hope to achieve.

Examples:

"Teaching Resiliency: Post-Release Support for the Formerly Incarcerated.”

“Empowering the Factory Floor Workforce: Bridging the AI Literacy Divide with Tools of Technology.”

“Transforming Lives: Connecting Rural Communities with Virtual Healthcare Access through Satellite Broadband.”

The first word is an action verb that creates engagement and a sense of purpose between the proposer and the project's beneficiaries. The phrase after the colon highlights the project's benefits. The title is concise but informative. Avoid vague jargon and acronyms. In a few words, capture the reviewer’s interest in your proposal, motivating them to want to learn more.

3. Statement of Need

A Statement of Need is the most critical section of your proposal. A well-written, well-defended statement of need explains the problem your grant project will address, who is affected, why the issue matters, what gap the proposed project will fill, and the consequences if the need goes unmet. It should unequivocally make the case that your proposed project is worthy of the funder’s investment, whether the funder is a foundation

awarding corporate or community contributions or a government agency allocating taxpayer monies. Remember, you are asking to spend other people's money. The need should match the ask.

Unless you clearly establish the need for your proposed project and show that it aligns with the priorities of the funding agency or foundation, nothing else you say will matter as much. Without clear

understanding of the problems or challenges you seek to impact, reviewers may not be convinced your project is worthwhile. As a result, your application could be poorly scored and rejected.

A compelling and substantiated Statement of Need should leave no doubt in the reviewer's mind about the answers to the following questions:

1) What is the issue? Clearly identify the problem.

Use precise, unambiguous words to convey exactly what you want to do so the reader does not have to read an entire paragraph or several paragraphs to understand your project. Your very first sentence should tell the reader exactly what needs, problems, or challenges your project proposes to address. Keep your wording concise and avoid unnecessary descriptive language. Fluff or filler text serves no purpose, even if it sounds good (to you).

For example, avoid ambiguous words like "poor, underprivileged, or inadequate." These words are a judgment call and can sound dramatic. Instead, make factual statements that you can back up with verifiable data such as "income beneath the poverty line, lack of access to proper nutrition, or unaffordable housing."

Clearly Stated Example of the Issue, Problem, or Challenge

Wheatland Community College, located 72 miles from Wheatland City, the nearest town, does not have on-campus housing or food services for non-commuter students without a car, who typically number between 60 and 85 people in any given semester. As a result, potential learners lack access to a campus-based postsecondary education.

2) Who has a need or problem, and where does the issue exist?

Your proposal is unlikely to address the needs of every individual that you might want to target or reach. Because the funder has a finite amount of money and your project is likely not the only one that could be funded, narrow your target audience to a realistic number of project

beneficiaries for the geographic area you plan to reach. A citywide effort is much narrower than a regional or a statewide effort. The number of people served by your project should be relative to its geographic scope.

Also consider the period of time that your project will take. A 12-month project cannot possibly engage the same number of people as a 24-month or 36-month project. Applicants tend to overestimate, thinking that large numbers will impress the funder. This is a mistake. If you overestimate the need and propose serving too many people, a reviewer may think you are overpromising and inexperienced. Similarly, if you understate the need and propose that too few people will be impacted by your project while asking for a large budget, a reviewer may question your experience. It is wiser to determine the number of people you can realistically serve or impact. You may need to narrow the need you originally identified.

Foundations and funding agencies want assurance that the funding you are awarded matches the need you have identified. The more realistic you are in terms of the number of people engaged with or impacted by the project, the more attainable your proposal will seem to a reviewer. Don’t over-propose. Otherwise, you are less likely to convince the funder of your impact on a reasonable number of people or the circumstances that created the need you want to change.

Example

Consider a Needs Statement that proposes to address poor third-grade reading comprehension scores within a school district. While commendable, it is far too broad. Grant funding likely won't be enough to raise the reading scores of every third-grade student, and it's unclear why this is a problem in the first place. Instead, consider a narrower approach. Refine the problem and state something like this: “Seventy-nine out of an average of 240 non-English-speaking third graders attending three of the school district’s ten lowest-performing elementary schools consistently score in the lowest percentile of reading comprehension over a three-year testing period, 2021-2024. As a result, the students of Willow Elementary, Hastings Branch Elementary, and Olivia Mercado Elementary are unprepared to successfully matriculate into the fourth grade.”

3) Why is this a need or problem? What will happen if the need or problem is not addressed?

Grant applicants should be able to defend their funding request by explaining why an issue matters and to whom. Be careful not to impose your own bias as to why the problem

matters; instead, cite why the issue matters in a broader context and who says so. In other words, cite credible sources. Don't rely on your own reasoning, even if you have the credentials to do so. Demonstrate that credible sources support your assessment of the problem, issue, or challenge.

Using the example above, "as a result, these third-grade students are unprepared to successfully matriculate into the fourth grade," expand why unsuccessful matriculation matters. It is more convincing and impactful to say that, according to a recent study published by The Hechinger Report in March of 2025, *Reading Comprehension Loses Out in the Classroom,* elementary students lacking reading comprehension skills are 80 percent less likely to ask questions about what they have read and determine if the information is true. As a result, they lack the fundamental tools that are needed to fully participate in fourth-grade or later science lessons. Their interest in science may be dampened before it even has a chance to begin. A 2021 study published by Minnesota State University indicates that if reading comprehension skills are poor to non-existent in early childhood education, students are more likely to fail their coursework through the 12th grade."

4) How do you know the need exists in the community you are proposing to benefit from grant funding? What is your evidence?

The Needs Statement should state credible evidence for any statements you make.

Your statement should cite key data points or metrics that substantiate the need and show your data is accurate, current, and verifiable. Be sure to cite your data sources. For example, is your Statement of Need based on institutional data… a survey… research results… case studies… interviews… an Economic or Environmental Impact Analysis… or anecdotal information?

If you need assistance with data or metrics, consult your college's Office of Institutional Research. If you don't have this resource, consult with a faculty member or other expert. Use a librarian's expertise to identify valid research papers or relevant publications.

Under no circumstances should you rely on "Dr. Google" or Artificial Intelligence platforms like ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini, Perplexity, or Microsoft Copilot for supporting data without verifying that the information is correct and citable. In its present form, AI-generated

content cannot be listed as an author. See Purdue University's Library Guide for the rules on citing AI-generated content. https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=1371380&p=10135074

5) Consequences if the need is not addressed.

Clearly explain the repercussions of not addressing the need. This information helps funders understand the potential impact of their investment and highlights the importance of timely action (and timely funding). Ask yourself the same question that a reviewer is likely to ask as they consider your funding request: *is the need urgent or not*? If your proposed project is important (to you) but can wait several months, be honest and explain why. Philanthropic organizations may not fund your project in the first round, but if you can delay funding, they may be willing to wait for a worthwhile project in the next round.

Common Mistakes to Avoid When Developing a Statement of Need

- **Vague, Irrelevant Language**

  Don't use broad statements or generalizations. Don't fill the page with unimportant words. The more precise your language, the easier it is for the reviewer to understand your project quickly.

- **Lack of Evidence**

Omitting solid evidence can diminish the credibility of your claims. Never assume that the people scoring your application are familiar with the problem or the need your proposal addresses.

- **Ignoring the Funder's Priorities**

  Tailor your message to resonate with the specific interests and priorities of the funder. A generic approach, including a copy-and-paste from a different grant application, will likely fail because it does not reflect the perspective of the organization providing the grant.

- **Technical Terms, Jargon, and Acronyms**

  Don't assume that your readers will automatically understand any technical terms, acronyms, or abbreviations that you might use. Ensure your Needs Statement is easy to understand, including for those who may not share your understanding or perspective of the need you are presenting.

- **Neglecting to Highlight Impact**

  A Statement of Need should emphasize the positive outcomes that funding will facilitate, and not just the problem at hand. Clearly articulate how you will create meaningful change. In other words, balance the negative (the need) with the positive (your solution).

Tip: Engage the Reader/Reviewer Early and Often

Begin the Statement of Need with a powerful anecdote or statistic to immediately capture the reader's attention and illustrate the need. Capture the reviewer's attention early, not halfway down the page. Introduce a second impactful data point or anecdote to keep their attention. The reader may not remember everything you write, but after reading your Needs Statement, they should be able to remember at least two or three things that support the need.

Examples of Statements of Need

Reading Comprehension

In the last three academic years, end-of-year reading comprehension test scores for 80% of the Anoka School District's ninth-grade students averaged below a grade of D. 12% of this cohort ranked with a grade of C; 5% ranked a B; and only 3% earned an A. Compared to the state's eight other rural-based school districts with fewer than 1,000 students per district, these scores place Anoka in the bottom tier, ranked #8. As a result, Anoka's kids are significantly underprepared to succeed in their freshman year of high school and, according to the State's Dept. of Education, are more likely to drop out by the 11th grade. *Correcting the Crisis in Reading Comprehension: An Instructional Intervention for Middle School Students* is designed to address and correct reading-skills gaps beginning in seventh grade and continuing through all three years of middle school. Developed by the University of Missouri School of Education, the intervention shows a 65% improvement rate for 600 ninth graders over the past five years. Anoka's students need to read to succeed in school, in their career path, and in life. Without the intervention, this is unlikely to happen.

Community Health Initiative

In rural Dakota County, 80% of residents lack access to affordable healthcare services. Uninsured preventable health-related issues cost an average of $21,043 per person per year. This financial burden has increased rates of preventable diseases, particularly among Native families. Notably, while lung cancer incidence and mortality rates have fallen since 2000 among adults ages 45 to 65, rates increased by 60% among younger adults ages 18 to 30, highlighting the urgent need for accessible healthcare. LifeLine aims to establish a mobile health clinic to provide essential, accessible, and affordable services to rural Dakotans.

Youth Mentoring Program

Research from the University of Wisconsin School of Educational Policy and Teacher Preparation (2021–2025) indicates that 50% of at-risk youth in Wakosha Springs (742 young men and women ages 12 to 18) lack access

to any academic or personal mentorship programs. This lack of support correlates with higher high school dropout rates (an average of 75% year-over-year) and engagement in risky behaviors that often result in juvenile detention. Juvenile detention has risen steadily by 7% each year since 2022. Our proposed mentoring program, based on "Buddy Up: A National Youth Intervention Program Model," seeks to connect our youth with positive role models, fostering personal and academic growth that can significantly alter their life trajectories. Based on the success of other districts that have adopted this program (Brownsville, LaQuoya Reservation, and Northeast Milwaukee), we predict lowering dropout rates by up to 25% in three years and detention rates by 3% over the same period.

Educational Access

In the Manning School District, 40% of fifth- and sixth-grade students come from low-income families with annual incomes of $35,000 or less. District teachers observe limited access to essential school supplies, including notebooks, pencils, pens, and backpacks. Compared with students who have access to these resources, students without basic school supplies are significantly affected in their academic performance and engagement. In aiming to create a more equitable educational space where less fortunate children have the basic tools to succeed, the Manning Parent Association Foundation seeks financial support to provide 132 needy students with School Starter Kits that consist of a backpack, water bottle, snacks, notebooks, pen and paper, and other supplies like a calculator, ruler, and school lunch vouchers. Our initiative, We've Got Your Back," successfully builds on similar efforts that the Lemon Foundation has funded in Towhee, MI, and Ely, Nevada. We believe their need justifies a request of $98 per student, for a total of $13,800, which includes a small administrative fee of $864 to cover the costs of managing the grant award and preparing the backpacks by school personnel after their regular workday.

Sample Letter

Consider explaining your need to the Program Officer of a Corporate, Community, or Family Foundation before you complete a grant application to gauge whether your Statement of Need interests them. An example is provided on the next page.

[use organization letterhead]

123 Aspen Lane
Chatam, WY12345
July 10, 2025

Laurel Branch
Program Officer
The Giving Foundation
689 Avenida Blanca
Torres, NM 67532

RE: [title of your project]

Dear Ms. Branch,

In [community/location], [describe the problem in one sentence]. Currently, [X number] of individuals are affected by [specific issue], leading to [negative impact]. Despite existing efforts, [highlight gap in current solutions].

According to [source], [statistic or key finding]. Additionally, research from [reliable organization] shows that [supporting data]. These figures highlight the growing need for immediate action to address [specific problem].

The primary reasons for this issue include [list key causes, such as lack of resources, systemic barriers, or economic factors]. Without intervention, these challenges will continue to worsen, affecting even more individuals in [target community].

Please allow me to share the story of [name]. [very brief example of someone you have helped or will be helping.]

If no action is taken, [describe potential adverse outcomes], leading to [larger-scale social, economic, or health impact]. This makes it crucial to implement sustainable solutions now.

Our mission at [organization] is to [state mission]. This aligns with [name of foundation]'s commitment to [funder's goal or mission], making this partnership an ideal opportunity to create meaningful change.

Through [program name or initiative], we will provide [services/resources] to [target population]. Our approach includes [key strategies], which have been proven to [impact/outcome].

With the support of [name of foundation], we can take meaningful steps toward solving [problem]. This funding will help us [specific action, e.g., expand services, reach more people, improve resources] and create lasting change for [beneficiaries of the proposed project]. We look forward to the opportunity to work together and make a real impact.

Respectfully,

[signature]

4. Project Narrative

Grant applications usually require applicants to respond to a series of questions. An application may be an online fillable form with a wide range of questions, often imposing a character limit per question or per section. Or an application may have multiple sections and subsections, each with various questions, and may also be constrained by word or character limits. The latter is common to federal agency grants but may also be used by foundations. If your application includes multiple sections, you will be more successful if you understand the meaning and purpose of these sections before you write. As an example, a common error is confusing goals with objectives. They have different meanings, and the reviewer will expect you to know the difference.

The project narrative section of a grant application often includes multiple sections and many questions within each section. Four common subsections of a Project Narrative are Goals and Objectives, Project Activities, Project Timeline, and Project Deliverables. These subsections are described below.

4a. Project Goals and Objectives

Almost all grant opportunities require the applicant to state the goals and objectives of their proposed project. The two terms mean very different things. To be competitive, understand the differences between your project's goals and objectives and reflect this distinction in your narrative. This section of a grant application should accomplish three critical things:

- Understand and clearly distinguish between the project's goals and objectives.
- Align your goals and objectives with the funder's goals and objectives.
- Ensure that your goals and objectives are reasonable and attainable given the budget you are proposing and the period of performance that the funder is allowing.

The table shown on the following page compares the distinguishing features between goals and objectives. Keep it handy as a Quick Reference Guide when developing your application.

Goals versus Objectives

Key Factors	Project Goals	Project Objectives
Definition	• Goals reflect your priorities. • Are the end results that you wish to achieve. • Are determined on the basis of facts and figures.	• Objectives are smaller, specific, and measurable shorter-term steps that need to be taken to achieve the larger goal. • Multiple objectives make up one goal. • The concrete tasks that need to be executed to attain the end result or goals. • Determined on the basis of ideas and innovative thoughts.
Time Duration	• Are broad, longer-term, accomplished over an extended time period.	• Are more concrete and specific. • Are short to mid-term achievements, usually implemented on a daily basis.
Measurability	• Difficult to measure. • Do not have any criteria or set way to be properly measured	• Relatively easy to measure. • Have set criteria that can be taken into account to measure whether project objectives were met successfully.
Structure	• More generic, vague, and abstract in nature.	• Very specific in nature. • Highly structured.
Types	1. Time-bound goals focus on *when* ○ Driven by deadlines and target dates ○ Connected to a specific timeline 2. Outcome-oriented goals focus on *what* ○ Focused on the end result above all else. 3. Process-oriented goals focus on *how* ○ Focus on improving systems and processes	1. Strategic objectives ○ Purpose-driven, helping to create the overall vision of a project. 2. Tactical objectives ○ Focused on short-term deliverables and the result of those tasks. 3. Operational objectives ○ Short-term and action-oriented. ○ Contribute to daily, weekly, and monthly goals

Goals: Your “North Star”

Think about goals as the changes you want to achieve, whereas objectives are the steps to achieve them.

Goals are broad, overarching destinations to aim for. They are higher-level, aspirational statements that are qualitative in nature and set the vision for what you want to accomplish. They articulate your desired outcomes, making them inspirational but not always quantifiable or time-constrained. Because of their broad scope, goals might not be immediately measurable or time-bound, but they serve as a guiding star for efforts and strategies. They provide a sense of direction and purpose.

Objectives: The steps you take to achieve your goals

Objectives are the steps you take to achieve your goals in specific, actionable, and measurable ways. They are the milestones that mark your progress towards your goal. Objectives convert your vision (goals) into a series of actionable, tangible tasks. You should be able to track and measure them.

S.M.A.R.T. Objectives

SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. SMART objectives will help you create a clear roadmap for achieving your goals. Applying the SMART criteria ensures that each step towards achieving a goal is practical. Develop SMART objectives and communicate them clearly.

- **Specific**
  Objectives should clearly define what you aim to achieve.
- **Measurable**
  Include a way to assess progress and know when you've met the objective.
- **Achievable**
  Objectives should be realistic, given your resources and constraints and the amount of funding you may be awarded.
- **Relevant**
  Each objective should contribute directly to the overarching goal, ensuring that all efforts are aligned.
- **Time-bound**
  Objectives should have a defined timeline for achievement.

Example

The example below illustrates a project goal and SMART objectives for a grant application to fund a community computer lab.

Project Goal

To bridge the digital divide by establishing a fully equipped, accessible community computer lab that provides free access to online computer classes, enhances digital literacy skills, and improves workforce readiness opportunities for Anoka's low-income residents.

S.M.A.R.T. Project Objectives

Objective 1:

Procure, install, and network 15 high-speed desktop computers, two printers, and relevant educational software in the Anoka community center by the end of Year One, Month 6 of the grant period.

Objective 2:

Enroll at least 120 community members in Introduction to Basic Computer Literacy and four job-search workshops within the first 12 months of the lab's operation.

Objective 3:

Provide weekly after-school digital tutoring, including basic keyboarding, AI, and internet navigating sessions for at least 45 local middle and high school students throughout the academic year and summer break.

Objective 4:

Achieve a minimum 80% completion and satisfaction rate among participants as measured by pre- and post-program assessments administered at the end of each training cycle.

4b. Project Activities or Work Plan

What is a Work Plan?

The activities or tasks you propose to accomplish during the grant's period of performance are often referred to as a Work Plan or Scope of Work. Think of these activities as a roadmap showing what, when, and by whom you will turn your project's goals and objectives into tangible results (which may also be called milestones or deliverables) during the grant's period of performance. Your proposed activities should directly support the grant program's goals and objectives; nothing more, nothing less. Too many activities could be considered extraneous and unnecessary, even if they sound good to you.

Your job is to convince reviewers that the Work Plan or Scope of Work is realistic, well thought out, organized, and feasible. Reviewers are often wary of program activities that "pad" the proposer's application and application budget, especially if these activities seem unnecessary or excessive. A common grant-writing mistake is proposing too many activities to convince the reviewer that your approach is comprehensive. Avoid setting unrealistic, grandiose goals or timelines you cannot possibly achieve with your available resources (money, people, time). A better strategy is to avoid overpromising and underdelivering. Only include activities that you and your team and any partners can reasonably accomplish within the period of performance—and do so well. Quality is more important than quantity.

Recommended Strategy

Grant activities are sometimes expressed in a Logic Model or Gantt Chart. Both models serve their purpose but can be overly complicated. A narrative format using a bulleted list is another option but can quickly become lengthy. Unless the funder requires a Logic Model or Gantt Chart, a simpler approach is to present your Work Plan activities as a table, organized by goals and objectives.

Clearly identify Year 1 activities if it is a 12-month project. If funding is for 24 months, distinguish between Year 1 and Year 2 activities. If funding is for 36 months, identify Year 1, Year 2, and Year 3 activities. The same logic applies to four-year and five-year awards.

Another common error is providing too much detail for every proposed activity. Reviewers need to see the Big Picture without being burdened by reading through all the minutiae.

Avoid boxing yourself in by committing to ongoing weekly or monthly activities unless specific tasks must be completed weekly or monthly to satisfy a particular objective.

Work Plans are commonly presented as a matrix or table rather than a narrative. A table format organizes project activities better and is much easier for reviewers to read.

Even if application guidelines require a 12-point font, confirm with the Program Officer whether you may use an 11-point or smaller font and present the Work Plan table in landscape rather than portrait view.

An example is shown below.

Work Plan Example for Connections: Overcoming the Digital Divide: Enhancing Computer Literacy for Rural Community College Students

Project Goal	Objective	Key Activities/Tasks	Timeline: Years 1-2	Responsibility	Deliverables/Milestones
Goal 1: Establish a fully equipped computer lab to reduce technology gaps for low-income and non-traditional community college students.	**Objective 1:** Reconfigure existing campus space to accommodate a 50-station computer lab within 60 days of Notice of Award.	**Activity 1:** Identify usable campus space. **Activity 2:** Bid procurement of 50 modern workstations and software. **Activity 3:** Acquire equipment and software.	**Year One** 60 days: Feb.- March 2027 90 days: March-May 2027 60 days: June-July 2027	• Campus Facilities Manager • Campus IT Director • Campus Procurement Manager	**Milestone 1:** Within 6 months of the Board executing a Grant Award Agreement, Lakota Community & Tribal College will have a new computer lab.
	Objective 2: Complete the physical and digital setup of the computer lab within 180 days of Notice of Award.	**Activity 1:** Install necessary electrical and fiber connections. **Activity 2:** Complete installation. **Activity 3:** Test equipment and internet.	**Year One** 45 days: May-June 2027 30 days: July 2027 30 days: July 2027	• Certified Electrical Contractor • Certified Satellite Contractor • Campus IT Team	**Milestone 2:** By the beginning of the Fall semester (August 24, 2027), Lakota students will have 50 new computer stations, software, and internet access.
Goal 2: Design and deliver a digital literacy certification curriculum that equips rural students with essential office, cybersecurity, and data navigation skills.	**Objective 1:** 4 key college faculty will participate in professional development to design a standardized curriculum that meets the requirements for IC3 Digital Literacy Certification by CertiPort.	**Activity 1:** Lakota faculty will attend a 3-week CertiPort Training Academy to learn how to prepare students. **Activity 2:** Faculty will meet with other CertiPort-certified instructors to adopt Best Practices.	**Year One** April 2027 April-August 2027	• Two IT faculty • One Adult Basic Ed faculty • One Curriculum & Instructional Design faculty	**Milestone 3:** Lakota College will publish an IC3 Digital Literacy Certification in the Winter 2028 catalog. **Milestone 4:** Lakota students will be able to enroll in IC3 Certification courses by Dec. 2028.
	Objective 2: 4 faculty will contextualize the IC3 Certificate to Advanced Manufacturing.	**Activity 1:** Faculty will collaborate with key industry partners for feedback.	**Year One** April- August 2027	•Faculty from IT, Adult Basic Ed, Curriculum Design •Ford Motor Co. and Maco Industries reps	**Milestone 5:** Lakota's IC3 Certification will be fully contextualized to Advanced Manufacturing.
Goal 3: Promote and provide opportunities for virtual entry-level job training skills and industry certification to increase employment opportunities for Lakota students.	**Objective 1:** Premiere the new lab to students, community and tribal members, social media platforms, and local industry.	**Activity 1:** Host on-site and virtual Open Houses to showcase the facility. **Activity 2:** Highlight new facility with virtual online tours on college website.	**Years One-Two** September – December 2027, continuing through February 2028	• College IT faculty • Ford Motor Co. and Maco Industries reps	**Milestone 6:** By the end of Spring semester, May 23, 2028, 60 % of Lakota College students will have fulfilled the requirement to use the lab.
	Objective 2: Award 45 IC3 Certifications by August 2028.	**Activity 1:** Require all enrolled FT students to use the lab at least 20 hours per semester.	**Years One-Two** September – December 2027, continuing through February 2028	• College faculty and Student Support Services staff • College Web Designer	**Milestone 7:** By the end of Fall semester, December 2028, 90% of Lakota students will have used the lab.

4c. Developing a Project Timeline

What is the purpose of a Project Timeline?

A Project Timeline, usually incorporated into the Work Plan and represented as a table, Gantt Chart, Logic Model, or as a narrative, helps the reviewer evaluate how thoroughly and realistically you have conceptualized your project. Most grant applicants significantly underestimate the time required to complete their proposed project activities. This misjudgment is one of the most common reasons grant reviewers reject proposals, as it signals a lack of project readiness or a failure to understand the operational realities of the work. If you do your timeline well, it should convince the granting agency or foundation that your project has a viable execution plan and that you know what you are doing.

Developing a viable timeline is one of the most challenging aspects of grant writing because it requires the applicant to think through the entire project, from notice of award to award closeout, month to month and year to year. Everyone's role and responsibilities must be considered, including project staff, partners and stakeholders, subrecipients and contractors, and project participants or beneficiaries. The longer the period of performance, whether 24, 36, or 48 months, the more complex and challenging the timeline is.

Consider what makes a grant proposal timeline poorly executed to avoid a negative review and a low score:

- Improbable Workload
  Packing too many complex tasks, data collection, evaluation, or major deliverables into an impossibly short window.
- Overlooking Dependent Tasks
  Failing to show which tasks must finish before others can start or ignoring logical sequencing.
- Vague Milestones
  Listing broad phases ("work on project") instead of concrete, trackable benchmarks and deliverables.
- Budget Mismatch
  Outlining a timeline of activities that do not match the requested budget periods, personnel allocations, or funder period. For example, front-loading expenses in the first or second quarters when most activities don't start until later in the year.
- No Accountability: Omitting which position is specifically responsible for each task or not accounting for project setbacks or unplanned delays. Include time for these in your timeline.

Consider what makes a grant proposal timeline well executed to earn a positive review and a high score:

- Visual Representation
  Unless instructed to submit a Gantt chart or Logic Model, use a clean, easy-to-read table.
- Logical Time Increments
  Break the project down into realistic units like months 1–3 or Quarter 1, 2, etc. (Q1, Q2).
- Scan Time
  Ensure a reviewer can quickly scan the timeline and understand the project's full lifecycle.
- Direct Match with Project Narrative
  Every major objective, activity, and method mentioned in your proposal's Project Narrative must appear chronologically in the timeline.
- Personnel Assignment
  Explicitly state who is responsible for each task ("Project Director," "Data Analyst") to prove you have the necessary personnel capacity. This includes subrecipients, contractors, and partners.
- Task Dependencies
  Show a logical flow where sequential tasks rely on previous ones. You cannot analyze test scores before participants actually take the test.
- Measurable Milestones
  Include specific, verifiable markers of progress (test scores, progress reports submitted).
- Project Monitoring and Evaluation
  Include when you will monitor program performance and financials, and your final project evaluation plan, to demonstrate accountability.
- Buffer Time
  Build in realistic padding for common bottlenecks (hiring project personnel, replacing project personnel, bidding procurements, recruiting, holidays and vacations, legal issues).
- Feasibility
  Ensure the workload presented is realistic. Experienced reviewers can easily spot timelines that try to compress two years' worth of activities into a single year.
- Pre- and Post-Award Activities
  Include 30 to 60 days for authorized personnel to review and sign the Grant Award Agreement (Legal Counsel, Board of Directors, College President, Tribal Council). Allow up to 90 days to wind down the project, finalize outstanding remittances, and submit closeout reports to the funder.

4d. Project Deliverables, Outcomes, and Outputs

Milestones versus Deliverables

In a grant application, deliverables are the anticipated accomplishments you expect to achieve through your project or program. Project deliverables differ from milestones in that grant milestones are the positive results of the activities or tasks you are planning throughout the period of performance. Milestones indicate steady progress of your project throughout the life of the award and should contribute to the project's final outcomes. In other words, milestones should help ensure that deliverables get delivered. You cannot have one without the other.

Comparison and Contrast of Grant Deliverables vs. Grant Milestones		
Examples of Anticipated Grant Deliverables		Examples of Planned Grant Milestones
• In Academic Year 2026, Lakota Tribal & Community College will achieve a record 65% retention rate among its 854 first-generation, first-year students.		• By the end of the second fiscal quarter of the first year of the performance period, eight full-time Career Navigators will be hired, onboarded, and actively coaching program participants.
• At the conclusion of its two-year grant program, *Achieving Excellence in STEM Education*, a total of 469 students will successfully complete all four remedial courses in Principles of Biology and Chemistry, Introduction to Physics, Computer Science Basics, and Core Principles of Algebra and Geometry.		• Within four months of award, the College will secure a certified educational professional services contractor to deliver training to 40 faculty members in Best Practices in Adult Basic Learning
• In 2026, 40% of the faculty from Lakota Tribal & Community College will successfully complete 50-hour professional development training from the University of Wisconsin in Best Practices of Contextualized Learning. In 2027, an additional 30% will complete the same training. In two years, 95 faculty will have participated in the training.		• From the end of Year One to the end of Year Two during the three-year period of performance, the College's Contextualized Adult Basic Education Program will increase the participation of adult learners, ages 18 to 26, by a minimum of 35%, from serving 70 participants annually to 95 participants annually.

SMART Refresh

Deliverables, like objectives, should be framed as S.M.A.R.T.

- **S**pecific: Clearly stated and easy to understand.
- **M**easurable: Can be measured and evaluated in quantifiable terms.
- **A**chievable: Can be accomplished through actions taken during the grant period.
- **R**elevant: Directly corresponds to the objectives of the grant program.
- **T**ime-limited: Achievable during the grant's period of performance.

Tip

While both objectives and deliverables should follow the S.M.A.R.T. framework, describe objectives in a broader, more visionary, and more expansive context than deliverables. A program deliverable should be much more granular or specific than an objective. For example, an overall objective of Lakota Tribal & Community College's grant, Achieving Excellence in STEM Education, may be to increase student completion rates in undergraduate science, technology, engineering, and math courses. A more specific program deliverable could be 85 out of 150 first-year students successfully completing two remedial courses in Principles of Biology and Chemistry and Core Principles of Algebra and Geometry. The College met its objective, even if 65 of its first-year students did not successfully complete remedial coursework.

Funding agencies and foundations want to know how close the grantee came to delivering on its intentions or objectives. Be prepared to explain your successes and shortcomings to remain credible.

Outcomes, Outputs

Keep in mind that people writing funding solicitations (NOFOs, NOFAs, RFPs) or grant application instructions are not always clear about what information a funding agency or foundation is looking for. They may mistakenly use the words "milestones," "deliverables," "outcomes," or "outputs" interchangeably. The four terms do not mean the same thing. If you have questions about the use (or misuse) of these terms in the funding announcement or application instructions, consult the Program Officer or Foundation Liaison before you begin writing.

Outcomes (think qualitative)

Outcomes answer the question, "what difference or impact did our grant project or program make?" Outcomes indicate what happened as a result of the grant. Project outcomes describe the broader changes, benefits, or shifts in knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors that occur as a direct consequence of executing your grant award. Did your activities matter? What meaningful, sustainable change did your project make, and for whom?

Outputs (think quantitative)

Outputs answer the question, "how much did you do?" Outputs are the more immediate results of your activities. They measure the volume of work you performed (services) or the tangible products or goods that you delivered during a project.

Side-by-Side Examples

Comparison and Contrast of Grant Outcomes vs. Grant Outputs		
Examples of Grant Outcomes		Examples of Grant Outputs
• At the completion of Year One of its grant award, and as a result of requiring mandatory enrollment in remedial STEM coursework, Lakota Tribal & Community College improved STEM literacy rates among its first-generation, first-year students.		• Pre- and post- standardized assessments show that 65 out of 90 first-gen, first-year students improved their science literacy in Biology and Chemistry on average by 20%; Computer Science literacy by 38%; Physics literacy by 10%; and Math literacy in Geometry and Algebra by 15%.
• At the completion of Year Two of its grant award, and as a result of requiring mandatory enrollment in remedial STEM coursework, Lakota Tribal & Community College increased retention rates among its first-generation, first-year students.		• Retention rates for Cohort #1 (enrolled Academic Years 2025-2026 and 2026-2027), 92 out of 150 of the College's first-generation, first-year students increased by 58%.
• Lakota Tribal & Community College first-generation, first-year students will have greater confidence in their ability to master STEM coursework and graduate with a Certificate of Achievement or Associate's degree in two years.		• After Year Two of the grant award ended, Cohort #1 of Lakota Tribal & Community College's first-generation, first-year students achieved 43 Certificates of Completion as an IT, Materials Testing, or Machining Technician. 52 of the same cohort achieved Associate's degrees in Advanced Manufacturing, Pre-Engineering Transfer, or Laboratory Science.

Reviewing Key Differences

Outcomes (The Impact Factor): What you hope will happen.

- More intangible and descriptive.
- The resulting behavioral changes of program participants or how they benefited from the grant.
- Takes time to materialize (retention, completion, graduation rates).
- Answers whether the grant program made a meaningful difference.

Outputs (The "What Changed" Factor): What actually happened.

- Tangible and quantifiable.
- Direct result of the project's activities.
- Measurable (enrollments, attendance, test scores).
- Answers whether the applicant delivered on their goals and objectives and by how much.

Tip

Before you start to write, plan your responses. Create a table like the one shown below. Jot down your ideas for Project Goals, Project Objectives, Project Activities, Project Milestones, Project Deliverables, Project

Outcomes, and Project Outputs. Use sticky notes on an actual or a shared virtual whiteboard. This strategy will result in a better, more organized proposal that reviewers are likely to score higher.

Grant Planning Template

Goals	Objectives	Activities	Milestones	Deliverables	Outcomes	Outputs
Goal 1	Objective 1	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 2	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 3	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
Goal 2	Objective 1	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 2	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 3	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
Goal 3	Objective 1	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 2	Activity 1 Activity 2	Milestone 1 Milestone 2	Deliverable 1 Deliverable 2	Outcome 1 Outcome 2	Output 1 Output 2
	Objective 3	Activity 1	Milestone 1	Deliverable 1	Outcome 1	Output 1

Part II is covered in a separate chapter and includes the following topics:

5. Project Design or Methodology
6. Organizational Capacity
7. Project Evaluation Plan (Performance Measures)
8. Project Sustainability Plan
9. Partnerships and Stakeholders
10. Letters of Support, Commitment
11. Project Abstract

The Budget and Budget Justification are discussed in a separate chapter.