

# RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the  
Fletcher Group Rural Center Of Excellence*



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## HOW TO WRITE WINNING GRANTS

*by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher*

Webinars and newsletters pose unique challenges. Take our February 2 webinar in which grant-writing expert Pam Baston did her best to squeeze 40 years of experience into a single hour. The newsletter you're reading takes it a step further by reducing Pam's hour to a mere ten minutes (the approximate time it takes to read this longer-than-usual six-page issue).

But the take-home from both is the same: With rural communities in desperate need of funding to support recovery housing and recovery services, it's more important than ever to know how to write winning grants and proposals.

We hope that reading this or watching a video of the webinar (you can do so by [clicking here](#)) may help you find the funds to optimize and sustain your good work. We hope also that you'll share this newsletter and video link with others so they can do the same.

## WHAT TO SAY

Don't try it alone, says grant-writing expert Pam Baston. "It's almost impossible for one person to do it all—the writing, the budgeting, the letters of support, and the front pages. That's why I focus only on the narrative."

And the secret to that? The age-old art of story-telling.

"I've learned so much working with Native Americans," says Baston, "especially the power of story. To me, that's what a good proposal is. Just like a movie or novel, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And the more it's tied together by one voice—using the same terminology, tone, and cadence—the better it will be."

Fortunately, grant applications reward well-constructed narratives. "The good news is that grant applications are predictable," says Baston. "The narrative section, in particular, almost always follows the same format."

**1. Statement of Need:** "This is where, in one to three pages, you make the case for what your residence, your county, your tribe, or your school needs," says Baston.

**2. Proposed Approach:** "This is what you'll do to meet that need. It typically runs from two to ten pages and gets the most points toward winning a grant."

**3. Goals, Objectives, and Timeline:** "This is usually its own category, but may sometimes appear in the evaluation section."

**4. Organizational Capacity, Staff, and Relevant Experience:** "This is where you convince the funder you have the bandwidth and expertise to do the job."

**5. Data Collection and Performance Measurement:** "This is where you describe how you'll measure and document outcomes against your promised performance."

Once Baston finds a funding opportunity, she opens the online application, locates the narrative section, and reviews the questions, giving particular attention to the scoring criteria. That allows her to write at greater length and provide more detail when answering the questions that can gain the most points. She then copies and pastes previously assembled info into the five categories and starts writing. If she has questions, she'll inquire with her official "Point of Contact" or POC. If unsure about the submission process, she'll reach out to the Help Desk.



Baston tries to use the same terms and acronyms that appear in the application directions plus some well-chosen jargon. "Referral pipeline' is a great one when you're talking about how you'll enlist participants in your program," says Baston, "because it makes it sound like you've got all these referrals coming in. Another great term is 'barrier reduction strategy.' That's how you're going to retain participants in your program. After all, just because you've got 'em in doesn't mean they'll stay. Remember: funders are taking a chance on you. They've got to show constituents that all this money is serving the greater good. To do that, you need to talk their language."

**Looking for more grant-writing tips? Turn the page!**

## HOW TO SAY IT

"I will never, ever lie in a proposal," says Baston. "But I have no qualms about being creative. Yes, you have to be legitimate. And yes, you have to back up what you claim. But there are lots of different ways to describe the same thing."

Baston uses charts, timelines, quotes, photos and whatever else will help tell her story and make her application stand out. "I'm constantly asking myself: How can I make this more persuasive, more memorable, more powerful, so that it resonates with the reader."

Photos can be especially helpful. "Let's say I'm trying to help a traumatized population that the reviewer has maybe never heard of and is unfamiliar with. Somehow I've got to bring the reviewer into that world. Think about it: I'm asking for a ton of money to help that community. So the first thing I have to do is create an emotional connection with the people I'm helping."

No wonder, then, that Baston's applications read less like white papers and more like day-in-the-life vignettes of real people facing extraordinary challenges. Baston admits that her prime directive is always the same: make it personal.'

"I always do two things," she says. "I write to my points and I write to the reviewer. Unfortunately, we tend to think of funders as impersonal monolithic entities. But the reviewer is an individual who's likely overloaded with a ton of look-alike applications. If you can cut through by communicating more directly and personally, you've got a much better shot at succeeding."

Something else to consider, says Baston: "Humans form impressions quickly. In just seconds they can get a gut feeling about whether you're in or out. That's why I try to hit the home run right off the bat by immediately presenting my most impressive selling point."

But what if your resume isn't as strong as you'd like? What if, for example, you're new to the game and lack the specific experience requested in a grant? Is that a deal-breaker? Baston says no. "If you're new, acknowledge it, but add, if you can, that your staff has, collectively as a team, over 'a hundred years of experience' in the field."



What if you have no direct experience with a particular evidence-based program? Should you apply anyway? "Yes," says Baston, "provided you can point out that your team has a respectable amount of experience with *other* evidence-based programs. That tells them that you know how to implement an evidence-based program, including the structure that's needed, the random fidelity checks that will be conducted, and the kind of feedback you'll need from participants to make mid-project adjustments."

"And what if you've never applied for a federal grant before?" says Baston. "Acknowledge it, but highlight the fact that your staff fully understands the process and is sufficiently familiar with the accountability, reporting, and data management needed to succeed."

# WHEN TO START

Grant-writing expert Pam Baston began her presentation at the Fletcher Group's February webinar by asking participants, "What is the best time to start working on a grant proposal?" Knowing a rhetorical question when they hear one, participants quipped "ASAP" and "Today" before hitting on Baston's favorite answer: "Yesterday."

Early prep is essential because the time between a grant "dropping" (meaning the time when it becomes available) and the filing deadline can be as short as ten days. "If I've had any success it's not because I have a unique skillset," says Baston. "It's because I always—and I mean *always*—prepare *long* in advance."

## But How To Do It?

The key is to jot down daily any and all information that might eventually appear in your proposal. "Let's say your organization needs a van to do mobile outreach," says Baston. "As soon as you sense that need, write it down together with *why* you need it and how much it will cost. Then you'll have that to quickly copy and paste into your proposal when the time comes."

## Helpful Prompts

Baston recommends that you habitually ask the following questions to help you prepare early for any and all funding opportunities that may come your way.

- What would a perfect world look like for your organization?
- How would you implement it?
- What would it cost?
- And what financial support do you already have on hand to support it?

Routinely asking clients the following questions can also help.

- How was your experience with us?
- Were our services effective?
- If not, what were the barriers?
- How could we have made it easier for you to participate?
- If you could change anything in our program, what would it be?
- What was the most helpful thing we did?
- What was the least helpful thing we did?

Asking those kind of questions and filing the answers can help statements like the following: "According to our ongoing Perception of Care Surveys, 72% of clients have a 'significant need' for the services we request funding for."



A sentence like that not only documents your needs, says Baston. It also tells the reviewer that your organization truly cares about the people it serves and that you diligently collect and use data to inform and improve your services.

## Keep the Quotes

Make sure also, says Baston, to file in a predetermined location all favorable quotes from those you work for or with.

"When someone writes you a note saying how you saved a life, helped someone turn their life around or helped someone find a job, file it so that you can quickly insert it later into a grant proposal text box. Nothing will be more effective in convincing a funder that your organization is worth investing in."

## MISTAKES TO AVOID

In 40 years of grant writing, Pam Baston has seen it all—the good, the bad, and the critical mistakes that kill many a proposal. Here's how to avoid them.

**Answer In Detail.** Carefully read every word of the grant, then mimic its tone and terminology while directly addressing each and every request.

**Dating and Simulating Data.** It's always best to use the most current data, but if yours is two or three years old, state clearly that yours is the "latest available data."

There are also ways to simulate missing data, but if you do so disclose it, as in: "Please note that this data was arrived at by applying to our local population a national average rate of six percent."

**Project Management.** "This is where too many applicants drop the ball," says Baston. "It happens to also be why so many federal and state projects run off the road. That's why I always spell out exactly how the project will be managed. For example, I'll say what I'll do if I have a harder time hiring staff than expected or if I unexpectedly lose staff. I'll also provide a timeline of what we plan to have done by certain dates. I may even turn the timeline into a project management chart with the last section showing how we plan to evaluate our performance. This tells the reviewer that our organization has really thought things through and is worthy of investment."

**Show the Cross-Walk.** "I love making charts with the desired outcomes on the left of and our approach on the right," says Baston. "Exhausted reviewers love this because they get to stop reading and see the whole picture at a glance. Think about it: How would you feel if you're reading a 70- or 80-page Fed proposal for the tenth time?"

Baston notes that charts and graphs can be helpful another way. Because they are often allowed to use a smaller font size (ten-point instead of 12-point) they let you squeeze in more info.



**Be Creative.** "In one application we were required to have an advisory committee, but I decided to add a second, "youth leadership" advisory committee. It only took another paragraph or two in the application, but I'm convinced that that's what won the grant for us."

**Spread the Word.** Last but not least, should you win a grant be sure to let everyone know, not just partners and clients. Alert your governor, your tribal chief, your single state authority, potential future funders and anyone else who might directly or indirectly help keep the money flowing. "I love to create Milestones Charts for that," says Baston. "But you know me. I'm always trying to kick everything up a notch."

## HOW TO FIND GRANTS

"Grants.gov is your best source," says Baston. "It may seem overwhelming, but you have to check it out because there's just *so much* money out there. HRSA\*, SAMHSA,\*\* and the Bureau of Justice Assistance are all dropping grants."

Another good option: Google phrases related to your work, such as "grants for drug treatment" and "grants for overdose reversal."

Because each state handles things differently, Baston's recommends calling departments and agencies directly and asking, "Do you have a funding cycle for grant awards?" and "Can I get on a list or can you give me a link?" When you find the notice of funding, says Baston, look carefully for the eligibility section. It will specify the governmental jurisdiction and who qualifies—tribe, nonprofit, university, etc.

### We Can Help, Too!

The Fletcher Group also alerts its partners and clients whenever a Notice of Funding Awards or a Notice of Funding Opportunities drops, particularly when one relates directly to Substance Use Disorders. So be sure to sign up for and read all our email blasts, newsletters and social media feeds.

## HOW TO FIND EVALUATORS

"Start with the funding notice and the description in it of the problem they want to solve and the approach they're asking for," says Baston. "Then use Google to search for researchers or evaluators who work with those topics."

Some states or tribes, however, may require that all monies be spent locally, including fees paid to the evaluator. In that case, you may need to find a local evaluator.

As for fees, Baston recommends using a seasoned evaluator who agrees to be paid only if the grant is approved. The going rate is usually 15 to 20 percent of the total award.

Some funders may constrain the amount an evaluator is paid. In that case, if you have a college or university nearby, ask the departments of social work or health if a graduate student might want to do the job.

\* The U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration  
\*\* The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



### PAMELA BASTON

MPA, MCAP, CPP  
JBS International

Having won over \$100 million in grants from federal, state, and local sources over a six-year period, Pam Baston graciously shared her wealth of experience and expertise with one and all in the Fletcher Group's monthly webinar on February 2. To sign up for future webinars, go to our home page at [fletchergroup.org](http://fletchergroup.org) and click on "Webinars."

**CLICK HERE**



To watch our February webinar hosted by grant-writing expert Pam Baston.