10 WRITING THE PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This chapter describes the heart of the proposal: the project description is where you help the funder understand what your organization would do with the requested funds and what difference you think your organization's work will make. In addition to explaining each element of the project description, this chapter will cover how to handle common problems that arise in this section of a proposal.

Different funders use different terms to refer to the project description and the elements included in it. Research proposals, which are usually submitted to federal funders, call this the methods section, and the methods seek to solve a problem. In proposals that are submitted to foundations and corporations, this section may be called the project description, program plan, approach, or plan of action, and the project is intended to address a need or opportunity.

A project can be anything from direct client services to an architectural element in a capital campaign to a one-time effort such as a conference or performance or delivery of a truckload of bicycles to a township in Africa. A program is a more general characterization of an organization's work. Each program may have several projects. For example, a school may have a literacy program that comprises several projects with different aims, all of which help to achieve the overall program goal. Projects could include one for students with dyslexia, one for English language learners, and one focused on purchasing books.

Study the Composition of a Project Description

The project description helps the funder understand what your organization plans to do if your proposal gets funding. It should demonstrate that you have considered many options for addressing the stated need (see Chapter 9, on writing the need statement) and have devised a logical, step-by-step approach to achieve your goals, thereby solving the problem or maximizing the opportunity.

If you have done the difficult and time-consuming work of articulating your theory of change as discussed in Chapter 3, this part of the proposal will practically write itself. If you haven't done the critical thinking that will shape your project, funders will be able to tell, because your project description will be less robust and less compelling. A strong, comprehensive project description will include several elements:

- **An introduction or overview:** Your general approach, rationale, and course of action
- **The goals:** What your organization hopes to achieve by doing the project
- **The objectives and activities:** Specifics about how you will reach your goal
- **The participants:** Who or what the project will serve or benefit
- **The work plan:** What will happen when and who will do it
- **The management plan:** How the project will be administered or managed

Length and Format

Private and public funders want the same types of information to be included in this section of your proposal, but private funders typically expect much less detail. Some funders limit project descriptions to just a few paragraphs, for instance, while other funders allow descriptions as long as twenty pages. Both types of funders understand that the information necessary to describe a research project will differ greatly from that needed to describe a training, service, demonstration, or development project.

Good proposal storytelling uses quotes, client profiles, and other real-life examples woven through the technical data to give life to the proposal or "business plan" that you are presenting to a funder.

The requested format for project descriptions will also vary greatly, but since it's such a critical section of any proposal, consider presenting your information in several ways, such as in narrative text, a logic model diagram, a graphic depiction of your theory of change, a work plan, and a timeline. Make it as clear as possible. You're trying to portray a great deal of information concisely.

Figure 10.1 is from the project description in a proposal to a foundation for a CAPITAL GRANT. After an opening section that explained the nature of the organization's services and the reason a new facility was needed for the organization to better serve its clients, the grantwriter included this chart.

FIGURE 10.1 SAMPLE CHART USED TO PRESENT INFORMATION CONCISELY

PROBLEM: Old facility	SOLUTION: New facility
Old building	Newer building
Not near highway	Central to county, near freeway access
Poor general visibility	Good corner visibility
Inadequate parking	40-car parking lot
Outdated mechanical and electrical system	New or improved systems as part of the remodel
No inside van loading or parking	Space for eight vans and for van loading
Small, poorly divided office space	Office division based on program requirements
Lack of good meeting space for trainings and volunteers	Small and large group space for classes and volunteers

Anticipate Challenges

Attempts to predict where obstacles might occur will help you build into the project sufficient time or resources to correct difficulties that arise. When you flag potential problems and acknowledge the potential need for corrective action, you signal to the funder that you have thought through the process painstakingly. Failure to prepare for adjustments may leave your organization vulnerable, as the funding you receive may stipulate that you engage in or produce particular activities that become no longer appropriate or workable.

To avoid having to repeatedly seek approval from the funder for project modifications, suggest in your project description one or more of the following possibilities:

- **Field tests** for all unproven methods, materials, and activities, to provide for necessary revision or refinement
- **Sequential phases** of activities, such that periodic assessment might inform modifications in the remaining steps
- **Scheduled checkpoints**, for the project staff to evaluate data and make decisions about any necessary modifications
- **Periodic consultations** with the funder to discuss necessary changes

You can avoid unnecessary project delays by identifying check-in times and indicating that consultations with the funder will generally be limited to these times.

Write the Necessary Components

The project description, often the longest portion of the proposal, will include many separate kinds of information, and involve technical and sometimes complex material. Here are the elements of a compelling project description:

Introduction

When you write a proposal, you're essentially telling a story, and like any good author, you will want to pay attention to both the flow of the narrative and the construction of the plot. Unlike the storyteller, however, the proposal writer does not want to leave the reader guessing about what will come next or making things up to fill in gaps. Begin your project description with an introductory section to set the stage. Make it easy for the reviewer to see how your description will be structured.

A good introduction or overview will perform the following tasks:

- Introduce the approach to be used in the project, with a brief justification
- Illustrate how the proposed work correlates both to the need and to your organization's mission
- Clarify what outcomes your organization hopes to achieve
- Call attention to the aspects of the project that make it particularly distinctive, e.g., special populations or innovative activities, materials, equipment, or technology

Approach

The project description includes a description of the overall approach or strategy your organization has chosen to carry out the work, the specific activities in which your organization will engage, and your justification for choosing this particular path. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the description of your proposed strategy should cover its relevance to the community, to your organization's mission and goals, and

to the funder. You want to show how the proposed project will build on past efforts and your organization's prior experience and capability. This section of the project description should confirm that your choice of methods and activities was based on research, best practices, and conversations with others in your field.

The section on approach (sometimes called strategy) should do the following:

- Discuss why your approach is significant or innovative, and why you're confident that it's feasible
- Describe the scope of the project
- Discuss why your chosen approach is particularly timely (if appropriate)
- Name any partners who will cooperate or collaborate with you and describe the value they will add
- List the roles of any consultants or advisory bodies, including how they will be selected
- Describe how unexpected events or results will be handled (one paradox of project development is the need to plan for the unanticipated)
- Assure the funder that your plan includes opportunities to monitor progress and adjust course, and that you will seek the funder's approval for such adjustment

Goals, Objectives, and Activities

Grantmakers favor proposals that demonstrate both a plan and a rationale for what will change as a result of your work. Well-crafted project descriptions include a section on GOALS, OBJECTIVES, and ACTIVITIES. These items signal the overall intent of the project, the tangible results to be achieved, and the benefits to those served and the larger community. They also make an explicit connection between the stated need and the results you hope to achieve.

While all parts of a proposal are important, this section of the project description is among the most critical. The goals, objectives, and activities are the fundamental building blocks for the project design. Make sure they are clear and compelling, match the grantmaker's interests, are appropriate to the scale of the project, and are informed by the need statement.

A GOAL STATEMENT is a broad description of the intended results of the project. It helps the funder gain an overall orientation to the longer-term purposes of the project, but does not address the specifics of what will be accomplished or what your organization will be held accountable to produce. Limit the number of goals to what your organization can realistically accomplish.

In the following examples, a nonprofit community development agency is applying to a private foundation for funds to secure safe housing for homeless alcoholics. The project description section of their proposal might have a goal statement like the following:

- To reduce the cost of first response in Jefferson County by building permanent housing for chronic inebriates.

An OBJECTIVE STATEMENT describes a specific and measurable result of the project. Each *individual objective* states specifically, in measurable terms, one thing the project will accomplish.

Each objective should be SMART:

S Specific
M Measurable
A Achievable
R Realistic
T Time-bound

Use the SMART RULE to guide you when you write objectives. Then incorporate the information into your objective statement. For example, an objective statement for the goal above could be this:

- Finance and construct fifty units of subsidized housing in the downtown core over the next three years.

ACTIVITIES STATEMENTS describe the specific tasks and timelines that you will use to reach your goal. They include the who, what, where, when, and how aspects of your project. Activities tell funders exactly what they will be supporting in terms of your day-to-day work. An activities statement for the example above could be this:

- In year one, we will work with lenders, architects, and city planners to plan the facility. In year two, we will work with contractors to build the facility. And in year three, we will create the policies and procedures to manage the building and hire medical, social work, and security staff who will be on duty twenty-four hours a day.

See Figure 10.2 for an example of objectives and activities

Participants

In the section of the project description that describes participants, include a demographic profile of those who will be affected by your project or program, whether as clients, audience members, students, residents, or fish. You should convey why and how this particular population was deemed worthy of attention. Again, as with the goals, you'll want to tie this section of the project description to your need statement. (See Chapter 9 for composing the need statement.)

In this section, describe how participants were or will be identified, recruited, screened, and managed, and how they will be served or affected by the project. Say how long participants will be affiliated with your organization, to what degree they will be involved, and whether they will be charged for participating or not. If there are potential issues related to language, ability, or cultural competency, indicate what you will do to accommodate those issues.

The participants section can include information about groups that will benefit from the project but will not be direct participants. By writing a paragraph about those who might benefit tangentially, you will indicate to the funder that the requested support will be leveraged for even greater results.

Work Plans and Project Timelines

In a subsection of the project description, indicate the dates by which major accomplishments and products will be completed, and show the funder how the activities will be spread throughout the project period. Many proposals include the specific activities and their planned sequence in the subsection on approach. Even so, it is a good idea to summarize plans and timelines in a separate subsection clearly identified by a label such as "Work Plan" or "Project Timeline." Use charts, graphs, or other types of diagrams to present timelines for key activities. Unless the project

FIGURE 10.2 SAMPLE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES, ACTIVITIES

OBJECTIVES	TIMETABLE	ACTIVITIES/RESPONSIBLE PERSON(S)	EVALUATION METHODS AND PERFORMANCE INDICATORS
1. By the end of Year 1, to develop a Leadership Training Seminar (LTS).			
1a. By the end of Year 1, to develop a comprehensive Leadership Training Seminar	Spring semester 2002	Project Director (PD) will select consultant and work with him/her to develop Leadership Training Seminar	Seminar will be created.
1b. To provide 100% of project participants the opportunity to attend at least one LTS.	Fall semester each project year	PD will work with Publications office to create brochures to be sent to each project participant. Posters will be created and hung at each campus. PD will target participants with Campus Pipeline messages. LTS offered 3 times/year at a variety of times and locations PD will take attendance at each seminar. PD will contact any participants who do not attend seminar and advise them of upcoming seminars.	Brochures will be created and mailed to each participant; posters will be noticeably displayed; Campus Pipeline messages will be posted. LTS attendance roster will be created and maintained. Contact with non-attendees will be made.
2. To ensure that 70% of project participants maintain a GPA of at least 2.75 each semester			
2a. To provide tutoring services to 100% of project participants	During each semester of project	PD will meet twice each semester with project faculty to determine tutoring need of project participants. Tutors will be trained each semester and be available for at least 10 hours of tutoring each semester. Tutors will maintain logs of tutoring activities.	Tutoring database will be created and maintained for each participant. Tutor training will be held each semester. Tutor logs will be created and maintained.
2b. To implement probationary status for project participants falling below 2.75 GPA	Spring semester 2002	PD will track students' GPA. Any project participants who do not maintain a 2.75 GPA will be placed on academic probation and be referred for tutoring services.	GPA database will be created and maintained. Students will be tracked and referred as needed.

is very short or has only a few activities, visual elements will be important aids to reviewers who may otherwise become lost in the narrative.

Suggestions for Developing a Work Plan.
There are many ways to present plans and timelines. Read the funder's guidelines or the RFP carefully to determine what is required and how best to present your material. Some common tools that can be adapted to your needs include Gantt charts, PERT charts, and logic models.

A GANTT CHART is a type of bar chart that illustrates a project schedule. Gantt charts are most useful for depicting dates in relation to activities. Some Gantt charts also show the relationships between activities. Gantt charts can be used to show current schedule status using percent-complete shadings and a vertical "Today" line.

A PERT CHART is a project management tool used to schedule, organize, and coordinate tasks within a project. PERT stands for Program Evaluation Review Technique. PERT charts are most useful for showing the intended interrelationships among events. The Critical Path Method (CPM) is a similar methodology developed for project management.

A LOGIC MODEL can be a useful tool for creating work plans too.

See Figure 10.3 for examples of Gantt and PERT charts in use. See the Getting Funded website, www.gettingfundedbook.com, for links to further resources about Gantt charts, PERT charts, and logic models.

Suggestions for Developing a Project Timeline.
To create a project timeline, first write each step in the process in chronological order, then summarize it in a timeline chart or narrative and insert it into your project description.

Consider including the following information:

- The amount of time necessary to negotiate the contract with the funder
- The order in which each activity must be accomplished
- The amount of time necessary to carry out each specific project activity
- The amount of time that will elapse between receiving notification of funding and beginning the project
- The amount of time it will take your organization to set up internal processes for managing the grant funds
- The amount of anticipated project downtime due to holidays, vacations, sick leave, or delays related to managing collaborative work with other organizations

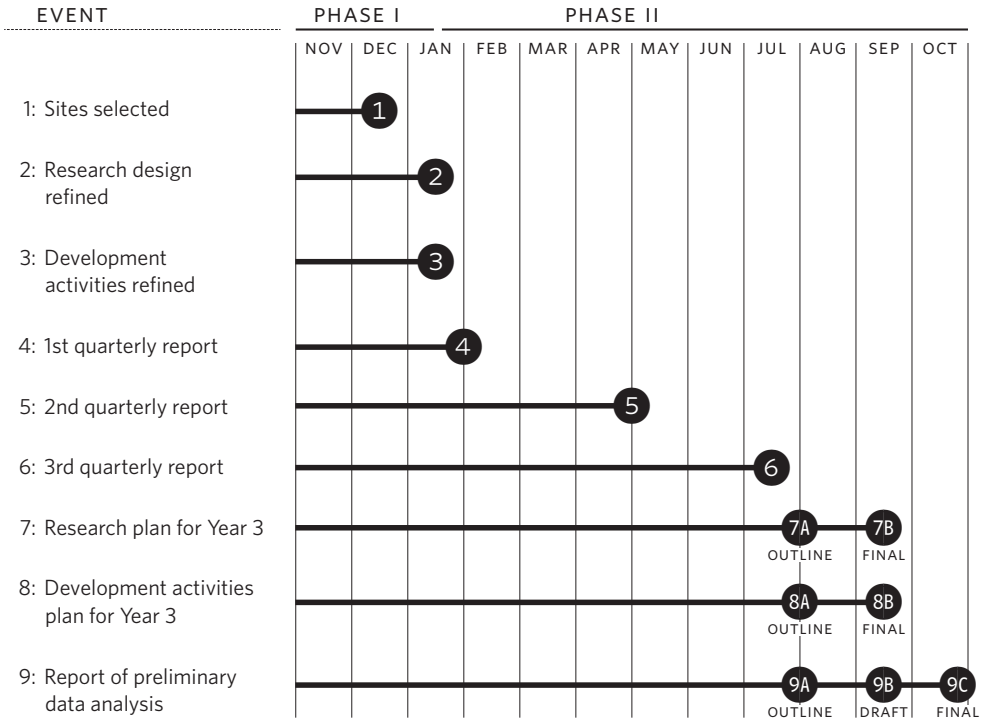
It's better to be realistic than optimistic when it comes to your project timeline. Funders recognize that promising too much work in too little time is a sign of lack of experience with project design. For example, it's unrealistic to suggest that new staff will be hired as soon as the grant is awarded, because it generally takes a month or two to post and fill a new position. Have an experienced colleague review your timelines to ensure that they are realistic.

If after consideration you feel that the projected timeline will exceed the anticipated period of funding, consider modifying your activities. If that seems impossible, you may want to go back and scale down the entire project. Limiting the promised outcomes can help.

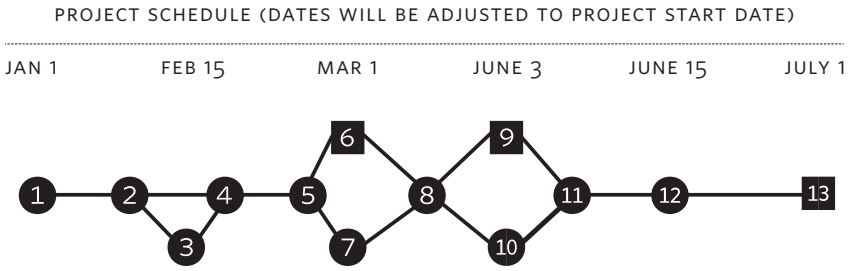
See Figures 10.4 and 10.5 for examples of simple and more complex project timelines.

FIGURE 10.3 SAMPLE WORK PLANS

Sample Gantt chart



Sample Pert chart



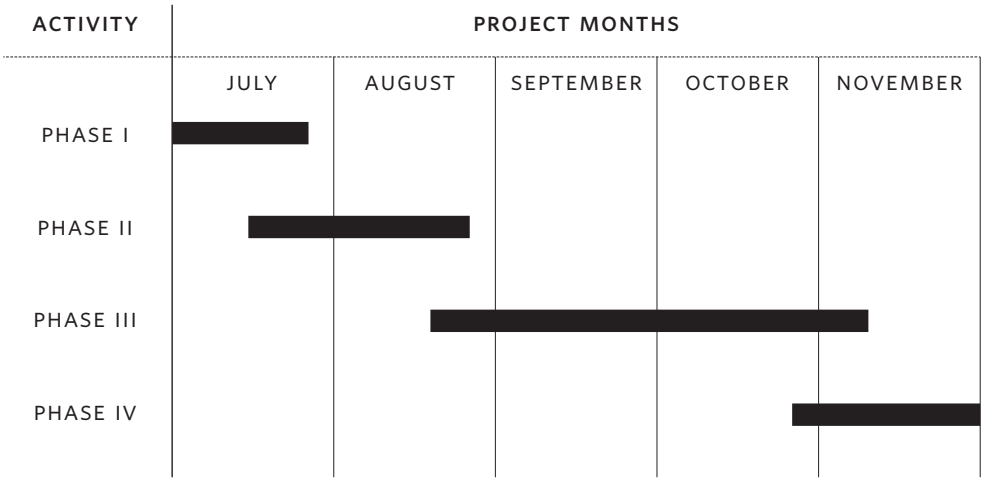
= Begin or end activity

= Milestone

ACTIVITY

1–2 Hire staff
2–3 Secure consultants
2–4 Outline paper content
4–5 Draft position paper
5–6 Forum review of paper
5–7 Conduct literature search
6–8 Synthesize findings/paper
8–9 Review with funding source
8–10 Validate paper with forum members
9–11 Revise paper
11–12 Edit final paper
11–13 Production of final paper

FIGURE 10.4 SAMPLE PROJECT TIMELINE



Deliverables

Promise only what you can produce.

Deliverables are tangible products created during the course of a funded project. Examples of deliverables include manuals, curricula, videos, reports, teaching tools or methods, service delivery models, mobile displays, scripts, and research papers.

Not every project produces deliverables, but if you intend to develop one, include a description of the deliverable near the end of the project description. Check with your organization's legal advisors to determine who will own the copyrights or patents, and include this information in your proposal. If the proceeds from sales of such products will help sustain your work beyond the period of funding being requested, your project will be even more appealing.

Replication

Some projects have the potential to serve as demonstration projects. If a proposed idea works well in one community, it may solve similar problems in other contexts. Research and exploration with other experts in your field can help you determine whether your project has potential for REPLICATION. If you see potential replicability, include this information in your project description along with your rationale and quotes from experts who endorse this potential. You should include responses to the following questions:

What elements of your plan can be copied? If your sexual assault program depends on the cooperation of police, the county health department, the local child protection agency, and school counselors, it's safe to assume that all but the most remote communities will likely have similar entities, making replication of your cooperative model possible.

What products will you create that could be used by others? Perhaps your project will result in print and digital materials useful in prevention education, or a health-promotion curriculum, or a design for a crisis intervention phone system that others could copy or purchase.

FIGURE 10.5 SAMPLE COMPLEX PROJECT TIMELINE

	Year One								Year Two											
	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Mar	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Task 1: Consultations (landowners & agencies)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Task 2: Contracts, Permits, & Plans	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●									
Task 3: Revetment Installations				●	●	●	●	●							●	●	●			
Task 4: Riparian Plantings						●	●						●	●				●	●	
Task 5: Education	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Task 6: Volunteer Recruitment	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Task 7: Reports						●						●						●		●
Task 8: Monitoring			●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Task 9: Project Evaluation					●						●								●	

Who else do you think could benefit from your experience? Perhaps you belong to a regional or national network or association whose members could learn from your project. Government agencies you work with or other organizations working in your field may want to adopt, adapt, or participate in elements of your plan.

Replication, made possible by the dissemination of reports, methods, and lessons learned, is very important to funders. It demonstrates a ripple effect of learning and positive change in society from their investment in your work. This makes funding your work an attractive return on investment.

Dissemination

Funders also want to know that the lessons you learn might be shared with others and have the potential to affect the standard practices in your field. Determine to whom you will disseminate results or findings from your project, and list these groups in your project description. Here are some possibilities:

- Project participants
- Your board, staff, advisors, and key volunteers
- Donors, including individuals and both public and private funders
- Collaborating organizations and agencies
- Local umbrella groups such as United Way, arts councils, church councils, or environmental councils
- Professional associations, networks, or clearinghouses in your field
- Academics in your field
- Regulators in your field
- Policy makers and advocates, e.g., elected officials, lobbyists, and coalition members
- Subscribers to particular trade publications, blogs, or electronic newsletters
- The broader community

Mechanisms for sharing the information might include the following:

- Your organization's or department's electronic or print newsletter
- Your organization's annual report
- Your organization's website, blog, Twitter account, or RSS news feed
- A written or electronic letter to colleagues in related professional associations
- Letters to funders, participants, and partners or collaborators
- Gatherings, e.g., luncheons, focus groups, salons, and forums, in which you share findings with supporters
- Articles in industry magazines, trade publications, or scholarly journals
- News releases to local, regional, or national media
- Webinars, teleconferences, or videos shared electronically
- Presentations at conferences
- Funders' newsletters, websites, or annual reports

Administration

In the project description, you also have the opportunity to explain how your project will be administered. Begin by describing the key staff positions necessary to carry out the project and what their roles will be. Common positions include the

executive director, program manager, and finance chief. Unless the funder has requested a separate section of the proposal called "Personnel" or "Qualifications" (see also Chapter 13), mention your leaders' qualifications here. Most funders will specify whether they want résumés or curricula vitae to be included. The information on key staff, whether presented in the project description or a separate section, serves four purposes:

- To explain clearly who will be responsible for the project and its various activities
- To clarify the hierarchy or chain of command among staff
- To verify that your organization has competent people in charge of the project
- To justify the salary- and benefit-related budget requests

Also report what other project staff will be necessary and how they will be selected. If project staff will be funded by more than one source, detail how their time and tasks will be delineated and how the split was determined. Identify the chain of command and describe how project staff will relate to other units of your organization.

Sustainability

End your project description with a section that describes how you intend to carry on your work after this particular grant has ended. Funders are investing in your project or program, and they want to be assured that it will continue without their support.

Depending on what's appropriate for your organization, you might include some of these options for sustaining your work:

- Inviting other funders to follow this funder's lead
- Convincing a legislative body to include your project in its budget appropriations
- Attracting contributions from individual donors
- Absorbing project costs into the organization's annual operating budget
- Generating earned income from deliverables produced while the project was funded by this grant

These and other ideas for future funding are discussed in Chapter 12, "Developing the Project Budget."

Even if your project is a one-time effort, such as purchasing equipment, constructing a building, or hosting a performance or conference, funders will want to see how you intend to maintain their investment. Describe how your organization will maintain or replace capital items, or keep the influence of the performance or conference alive in the community after the event is over.

> *"I may choose to fund you in subsequent years. I just don't want you to rely on that."*
>
> —Executive Director of a private foundation

Acknowledgments

Whether it's directly requested or not, always include in your proposal, in the project description section or elsewhere, how you plan to acknowledge the funder. You'll find a list of ideas in Chapter 17, "Investing in Ongoing Relationships."

Explore Variations for Specific Project Types

Particular information will be needed in your project description if you are seeking an operating grant, capacity-building grant, or capital grant.

Operating Grants

OPERATING COSTS, also known as OVERHEAD COSTS, INDIRECT COSTS, or ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS, are those costs that are not a direct part of a project. They might support staff salaries, recurring phone bills, building maintenance, or other administrative costs. An OPERATING GRANT funds these costs.

Operating grants can be more difficult to find due to the history of grantmaking itself. When private foundations were becoming more common in the 1960s, partly due to their appeal as tax havens, foundations viewed their role as supporters of innovation through special projects, and perceived rent, utilities, insurance, janitorial services, and other such indirect costs to be the responsibility of the organization. Many private funders still feel that funding general operations makes organizations dependent on foundation support, and therefore isn't sustainable. But doing the work of projects is difficult if there aren't enough resources to nurture the host organization. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, foundations and corporations have become more willing to support general operating costs, and have acknowledged that a continual focus on innovative projects may get in the way of the important work grantseeking organizations are doing on an ongoing basis.

> *"Operating grants are for healthy organizations, not for solving debt problems or saving you from a crisis."*
>
> —Executive Director of a public foundation

Operating grants are intended to support the organization as a whole, so orient your project description toward a general view of your organization rather than specific detail about a project or program. The components of the project description remain the same, as you tell a story, describe a problem, name activities designed to reach a goal, and identify measurable outcomes, all with an external focus on the need your organization will meet. The project description for operating grant proposals should cover the same elements as in a service delivery proposal, including replication and dissemination.

For example, successful operating requests describe how the requested funding will position your organization for growth in an important new direction, or add ballast during rough economic times. Another of many good reasons for operating support is that your organization is engaged in innovative work or inquiry and should be supported as it tries to yield more results.

When you are searching for funding opportunities, make sure you know each funder's attitude about operating costs. Some will fund these costs as part of a program or project request, but many disallow support of operating costs altogether. Government grants usually allow operating expenses as part of a project request, whereas private funders often do not.

From the Funder's Corner

If your organization runs a campaign for general support, you should consider offering a message of change as it relates to what your organization has learned over the past year and how it will apply those lessons next year. Ask yourself, what has changed for us in the past year? What changes will continue to affect us, and what does that mean for how we deliver services? For example, perhaps because of an economic downturn you are seeing people coming to your organization for the first time. In addition to being new to your organization, they are traveling a greater distance. Your organization originally selected its site because historically there was a concentration of need. But now that more people need your help, you also find that they are more geographically dispersed. Whatever those changes are, they can be the kernels for telling compelling stories about what your organization is doing for its community today. —*Ken Ristine*

Capacity-Building Grants

CAPACITY-BUILDING GRANTS, like operating grants, help organizations strengthen their ability to meet needs. Capacity-building grants cover aspects such as creating strategic plans, installing new accounting software, and offering staff or board training. They are used to help organizations address increased client demand or growth in territory or services, or to increase an organization's skills, infrastructure, and reach. Capacity-building grants are generally awarded to healthy organizations, not to bail an organization out of debt or to solve poor planning or leadership.

Sometimes programs and projects can grow so much that they endanger the organization. Capacity-building support may be in order to keep internal operations in proportion to external demand. Capacity building can help an organization reach a new constituency, measure breakthrough results, or overcome barriers to cultural competency. Proposals for capacity-building grants are more likely to succeed with funders who already know your organization and already believe in your organization's cause and constituency.

Project descriptions for capacity-building grants follow the same format as for any other type of proposal. Include a need or problem (identified after a thorough assessment), a proposed strategy, clearly named participants, and measurable outcomes. Remember to maintain an external focus that shows how building your organization's capacity will help you better serve your community. Be prepared to suggest a potential increase in results, such as greater numbers served or more land preserved.

Capital Grants

Capital grants cover the costs of buying durable goods or building or repairing buildings. The goal of project descriptions in capital requests is to show how the building or equipment requested is a means to an end.

Example: The Birchwood Community Hospital is the only hospital in a 500-square-mile area that includes two tribal reservations. Only 5 percent of the Birchwood region's women have had a mammogram, and the incidence of breast cancer is 300 percent higher than the national average. Acquisition of a mobile mammography van will make mammograms accessible in the area's rural communities, where limited transportation, a culture of fear of talking about cancer, and

reluctance to leave livestock deter nonurgent trips to the hospital. The mobile nature of the van will assist with coordination among tribal and nontribal outreach workers as they seek to change the culture of cancer awareness in the region.

In this example you can see why the equipment is needed, but more importantly, what difference it will make. It will help change a culture, offer access, diagnose disease, and promote treatment.

Example: The 220-seat Johnson Auditorium in rural Lincoln will provide a venue for a literary series, for the high school theater and community orchestra, for city hall meetings open to the public, and for an emergency shelter. The community will participate in the building design, the township of Lincoln will donate the land, and the Friends of Johnson Auditorium will spearhead fundraising and management once the building is constructed.

In this situation, the theater represents artistic expression; disaster preparedness and community conversations, learning, and pride. The description demonstrates an external focus, with the auditorium a means to solve community isolation and division.

If you are requesting capital support for a new building, include these project design elements:

- Major benchmarks, e.g., groundbreaking, completing construction, opening for business, with planned dates
- Costs to complete each activity
- Cost per client contact
- Cost per square foot
- Cost of included equipment

These are some additional concepts to keep in mind:

- Funders will compare your budget with the cost of similar projects, so explain any issues that may increase the cost of your building. Costs may be higher due to the special nature of a facility or its location.
- Renovating a building may cost more than constructing a new one, but may also save a special building.
- Cheaper isn't always better, but more expensive isn't always better either.
- Funders often ask for pro forma operating budgets, i.e., budget projections that extend for many years into the operation of new facilities. Consider how much maintenance and repairs in the new building will cost you, or save you.
- New facilities are generally built on the promise that more people or animals will be served. Consider how your organization will support the costs of providing a higher level of service.

Avoid Common Pitfalls

Funders say they see certain common weaknesses in many grantseekers' project descriptions. You can make your proposal stand out by making sure none of these mistakes appear in yours.

Overpromising

The scale of your project design is particularly important. One of the most common problems in proposals is overpromising. It's difficult to strike the proper balance between promising to achieve important results and committing to project

outcomes that really can be achieved given the time, staff, and budget included in your proposal. However, achieving this balance is critical to preparing an effective and feasible proposal. Being honest and reasonable about the scope of your project increases your chances of getting funded.

Internal Focus

Another common problem seen in project descriptions is a focus on problems and benefits internal to the organization rather than external, in the world. You and others in your organization live with organizational needs every day. However, funders are looking for proposals that have an external focus. They're not in the business of supporting organizations, but rather solving problems and improving life in communities.

Example: An organization serving abused children is told after an inspection that it will have to bring its facilities up to code or risk losing accreditation. The organization submits a funding proposal that focuses on its need for accreditation, rather than on its young clients' need to be served in a safe environment.

Even in the case of operating support, and capacity-building and capital grants, the focus must still be on external benefits.

Example: A case worker at a social service agency has an old, slow computer.

- **Internal focus:** The case worker needs a new computer because working on the old one is frustrating.
- **External focus:** A new, fast computer will allow the case worker to perform twice as many new client intakes per week, eliminate the waiting list, and result in one hundred more people getting services each week.

Weak Plan of Action

Sometimes, grantseekers haven't thought through all the steps necessary to implement their proposed project.

Example: An application to a private foundation says that the goal of the project is to open a new food bank. The rest of the proposal is devoted to justifying why hunger is a social problem and why more food banks are needed. It provides no clues about why this specific food bank is necessary, where the food bank will be located, how the facility will be retrofitted, what population it will try to serve, how the food will be obtained and stored, how the availability of the food will be publicized, or how many staff and volunteers will be needed to operate the food bank.

Mismatched Scope

Another common occurrence is for a proposal to describe substantial numbers of people or acres affected by the problem, yet in the project description indicate that only a fraction of that number will be served.

Example: The project description of a health clinic says it will provide health care to thousands of low-income residents, but the project outcomes promise treatment for only a tiny segment of that population and for only one specific malady.

Unsubstantiated or Unproven Claims

Proposals that suggest methods or activities or strategies that haven't been proven effective are likely to raise red flags. Make sure your project description includes the following:

- Evidence of other studies or projects that have used similar procedures, with examples suggesting that the methods will likely achieve the intended results
- Strategies that have been separated into distinct and manageable activities that can be matched to measurable outcomes
- A plan of action with activities arranged in a sequence of logical and complementary phases
- Evidence that your organization is aware of any potential problems with the suggested activities and has some plan in mind for handling these problems

Faulty Alignment

Make sure the budget and the program description tell the same story, mutually reinforcing each other.

The most prevalent weakness in project descriptions is faulty alignment. If you don't pay close attention, it's easy to end up describing need in one way, anticipated outcomes in another way, and evaluation methods in yet another way.

The most common mistake is that the priorities articulated in the project description aren't reflected in the budget.

Example: The stated purpose of a grant proposal is to launch a new type of reading program, but over half of the budget is dedicated to buying new computers and software. The funder may well decide that the real purpose of the request is to upgrade the school's equipment, and thus reject the proposal.

Sometimes grantseekers articulate a clear need, but don't make an explicit connection in the project description between that statement of need and the project being proposed.

Example: A large national group applies to a corporation to underwrite a conference targeting the lack of communication among scientists involved in acid rain research. The proposal devotes several pages to justifying why acid rain is a significant issue. But it provides no justification as to why communication among scientists might be the most important aspect of this problem to address, or why a conference could be expected to make any lasting change.

Sometimes grantseekers articulate a compelling need, but the project description doesn't provide enough information to prove that the plan will be sufficient to meet that need.

Example: A nonprofit organization mentions the high incidence of drug use among teens, and suggests that a teen drop-in center would help. The project description fails to list the activities the center would provide to prevent drug use, and fails to acknowledge that the problem is complex and might require multiple types of programs to be successfully resolved.

Sometimes the stated project objective is contradicted in the details of the project description.

Example: A university proposes a program to encourage public school personnel to become self-sufficient at conducting classroom evaluations. Yet the suggested methods call for producing courses, materials, and models that will always require the involvement of university faculty as trainers or consultants. One part of the proposal offers to create independence, but another part of the proposal simply calls for a new form of long-term dependency.

Often the need is described as a gap in services, while the project description mentions only the acquisition of something—a piece of equipment, a building, or a staff position—without explaining how having that item or person will affect the need.

Example: A rural hospital describes the need in terms of patients not being served in the emergency room. But the proposal is to purchase trauma response equipment for the emergency room, and the project description fails to spell out how purchasing equipment will affect the gap in service. Later, the outcomes and evaluation sections of the proposal promise only the completion of purchase and related construction.

Strive to align your project description with every other element of your proposal. If your statement of need has three main points, repeat those same three points in your project description, in the same order, using the same terms, and referring to the same scope and scale. Then employ the same parallel construction in your evaluation plan. And finally, ensure that all budget items clearly relate to what you've put forth in the project description.

Recognize the Risks

Failure to craft a sound project description can have negative consequences for your organization, even if the project gets funded. If a funded project has been poorly defined, project staff may flounder through the initial several months of the funded period arguing points that should have been settled at the time the proposal was developed. Other negative consequences are also possible:

- The budget or timeline for the project may turn out to be unrealistic.
- Important partners may become frustrated at the confusion and withdraw from future collaborations.
- The project may become embroiled in a political fight in which staff and clients or constituents disagree about what the funds were intended to achieve.
- The delay in clarifying project outcomes may lead to time running out and/or the money being spent with little to show for it.

Summary

The project description, sometimes referred to as methods, program plan, approach, or plan of action, paints a picture for funders of a sound idea that your organization knows how to implement. The project description is often the longest section of a proposal, as it includes many components: what you intend to do and how, why you chose this strategy, who will be served and in what way, what you hope to achieve, how you plan to sustain the work after the grant, and how you intend to share what you've learned with others. A compelling project description focuses on the need you hope to meet and the difference you hope to make among external audiences. Regardless of whether your proposal is for research activities, program funding, capacity building, or capital items, your goals, objectives, and outcomes should mirror the other sections of your proposal, especially your statement of need, your evaluation plan, and your budget. Using a logic model may help you craft clearer project outcomes and a tighter, more compelling project description.

Key Terms

ACTIVITY: A specific step that will be taken so that an organization's methods or tactics work.

ACTIVITIES STATEMENT: A statement of the specific tasks and timelines that will be used to reach the project's goals.

CAPACITY-BUILDING GRANT: An investment in an organization's ability to function more effectively, scale up, or become more self-sustaining.

CAPITAL GRANT: Funding that helps an organization secure land, build or remodel facilities, or acquire equipment.

DISSEMINATION: The process of sharing the lessons learned and the knowledge and results gained by doing a project.

GANTT CHART: A type of bar chart that illustrates a project schedule.

GOAL: One of the overarching targets you hope to achieve through the proposed work.

GOAL STATEMENT: A broad description of the intended results of your project.

LOGIC MODEL: A graphic representation of a project that shows the relationships between what you propose to do and the results you will achieve.

METHOD or TACTIC: The way that an organization implements a project and/or evaluates the results of a project, including the steps taken to achieve project outcomes.

OBJECTIVE: A specific, measurable indication that you are making progress toward your goal. There are at least four types of objectives: behavioral, performance, product, and process.

OBJECTIVE STATEMENT: A specific statement that describes a specific and measurable result that your project will accomplish.

OPERATING COSTS or INDIRECT COSTS or OVERHEAD or ADMINISTRATIVE COSTS: The costs of administering the organization as a whole, so that the organization is in a position to implement the project.

OPERATING GRANT: A grant that supports an organization's operating costs.

OUTCOME: A specific, measurable change in decision making, knowledge, attitude, or behavior resulting from your project's outputs.

OUTCOME STATEMENT: A narrative description of the project's outcomes.

OUTPUT: A quantifiable item or unit of service resulting from the activities you propose.

PERT CHART: A project management tool used to schedule, organize, and coordinate tasks within a project.

REPLICATION: An event in which another organization uses your project as a model to do their own, similar project.

SMART RULE: A list of recommended characteristics for goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

SUSTAINABILITY: A project's ability to continue after the grant funds end.