Script – Grant Writing: Getting Started

Slide 1 - Welcome to this presentation on grant writing basics. I'm Audrey Shifflett with the Grants Program at the South Carolina Department of Education. This presentation is designed to help you begin to respond to a funding opportunity…

Slide 2 - ... – either a grant or subgrant opportunity - offered by our agency…

Slide 3 - …as presented on our Grants Opportunities website.

Slide 4 - This brief presentation will give you some guidance on how to get started with preparing an application. I will share strategies for responding to the instructions in the Request for Proposals – or RFP - or other application instructions. It's important to understand that the opportunities available on the SCDE's Grant Opportunities web site are discretionary funding opportunities,…

Slide 5 - … This means that they are competitive. A discretionary funding opportunity means that you're competing for an award and that your application will be scored. The request for proposals, or RFP, contains the instructions that you need to follow to complete your application, and it will also list the Selection criteria or the standards by which reviewers will score your application. There is also a firm deadline for submitting applications. This is a timed exercise, and while there is no such thing as a "perfect application," it is important that you do your best to respond with a competitive application, because your application is the first impression that the program office has of how well you follow instructions. If you follow instructions to the letter in your application, the program office will be confident that you can follow their instructions when carrying out a grant-funded project.

Slide 6 – So, once you've identified an opportunity that you want to pursue, how do you get started?

Slide 7 - Your first step should always be to read the request for proposals or RFP thoroughly and carefully. These five tips will also help you get started. When you read the RFP, pay attention to the language used. Are items required or is the word "must" used? If so, create a list of those items and where they are referenced in the RFP. Note that Part I of our agency's RFP will detail the program requirements including applicable laws and regulations. Be sure to list any items required for your organization to be able to carry out a grant-funded program. Part II of the RFP contains application requirements and it is a good practice to list all the required items for a complete application and determine what you'll need help with. A timeline for developing the application ahead of the deadline for submission can be a useful tool to help you plan for steady work toward the deadline. Also, because grant writing is time consuming and meticulous, it is not a one-person job. Create a writing team and collaborate with colleagues who share your understanding of the need for the program you want to propose. Include a good writer on your team. And be sure that each member of the team had a copy of the RFP and reads it. And above all, be sure to follow the instructions to the letter. I'll give you a strategy to help you follow instructions in a minute, but first, let's look at where important instructions are located in the RFP.

Slide 8 - When you're applying for a discretionary grant or subgrant offered by the South Carolina Department of Education, Part II of the RFP contains the specific application instructions that you must follow for writing and compiling a complete application. This includes the narrative or written components, such as an abstract or summary statement, the application narrative, the application budget, and also any appendices that are required. Part II also includes information about the application deadline and the procedures for submitting your application. This section includes screenshots of the online application forms along with instructions for accessing and using those forms to successfully submit your application. Note that the other parts of the RFP are equally important, but for this presentation we're going to focus on four components…

Slide 9 - …of Part II of the RFP – the abstract or summary, the application narrative, the application budget, and the appendices. Let's look quickly at how you can get started on your response to the instructions for each of these components of an application.

Slide 10 - It's likely that the RFP you're responding to includes directions for a proposal abstract or summary. This will be an overall statement about the project you're proposing. Be sure to read the instructions for this statement carefully. Pay attention to the specific language used. This slide contains examples of the types of items that may be requested in this section of the application. It is important to provide every item that is requested. And because the abstract or summary should be a snapshot of the overall proposed project, a good strategy is to draft this component as you're working on your application narrative and then revise it as the last step before you submit your application, after you have finalized your application narrative. This will help you ensure that the statement accurately reflects the proposed project.

Slide 11 - For an application narrative, there are two types of instructions – formatting instructions and content instruction. Formatting instructions include things like the required page margins, whether the application narrative should be double spaced or single spaces, and the page limit for the narrative. Content instructions include the specific directions for what is required in each part of the narrative.

Slide 12 - A basic application narrative include these sections. There is usually a section about the need for the project that involves a needs assessment or a statement of the problem that the proposed project is aiming to address. This is typically followed by project design sections, such as goals and objectives for the proposed project, strategies and activities that will be carried out, a management plan that indicates who will manage the project and how the project fits into the organization, an evaluation plan that indicates what will be assessed to determine progress, and a timeline of activities that indicates when activities start, who is responsible for them, and when they end. Please note however, that the request for proposals or RFP that you're responding to may be structured differently, and you will need to respond specifically to those directions. So,…

Slide 13 - Read the instructions for the narrative carefully. This slide presents standard language from our agency's RFPs. When the instruction directs you to write the narrative and organize it into sections following the sequence presented in the instructions, that means that you should use

the same headings presented in the instructions, organize those headings in the same order as they appear in the RFP, and provide your application narrative for each section in order. An instruction such as "do not combine sections," means just that and your narrative will not receive a good score if you combine narrative sections. And be aware that sometimes a formatting instruction, such as save the completed narrative as one PDF document, may appear as part of the narrative instructions.

Slide 14 - So at this point, I want to give you a tried and true strategy for drafting your application narrative with each response in order. First, you should copy the application narrative instructions in order and use the headings provided. Then, under each heading, convert the instructions into questions to be answered. For example, the first instruction in this slide under 1.a, is to describe the population to be served. Turning that instruction into a question may result in a question like "What population will we serve with this project?" And then you just answer that question to get started on writing a narrative response to 1.a. You can apply this strategy to each section of the application narrative to keep organized and to ensure that you're addressing each item that is requested.

Slide 15 - And just a bit about the timeline of activities if you're asked to provide one. Be sure the timeline is chronological for the project from when it starts to when it ends. Within each line item activity of the timeline, include the start and end date for the activity, any interim benchmarks that may be applicable to the activity, the staff person responsible, and the project objective that the activity is connected to fulfilling. If the program office provides a template, a format, or a form for the timeline in the RFP, use it.

Slide 16 - All applications will require a budget narrative where you explain in financial terms how the project will operate using the grant funds that you are requesting in the application. Typical budget items include the salaries and fringe benefits of personnel carrying out the project, travel for the project, and any equipment, supplies, and other items, such as contracts with vendors that are needed for the project.

Slide 17 - Be sure to follow the instructions for developing the application budget. This may mean that you develop a both a budget narrative and a corresponding budget summary. Use a spreadsheet, such as Excel to develop the budget narrative and include all the details and specifications of the budget item – what it is, how you estimated the cost –including your calculations. An example is provided here for a budget estimate for travel by car for 15 teachers to take two trips for professional development. Often a funder will want you to include the calculations in you budget narrative to that they can see your reasoning, and test your math. Be sure to use the budget categories of costs presented in the instructions. One strategy for getting started on drafting your application budget…

Slide 18 - …is to begin with each of the activities that you're including in your application narrative. Take an activity and ask questions to determine what is needed to achieve that activity. For example, who is responsible for carrying out the activity? And are grant funds needed for that person? Is so, include salary and fringe benefits for that person. What happens to achieve the activity? What resources are needed? Then assign costs based on what is needed and necessary to achieve the activity. The internet is a useful tool for researching costs and developing

estimates. Be sure to include your calculations in your draft budget. This will help other members of your team see exactly how you developed the cost estimate; you will also then have draft calculations that you can revise and develop further for the budget narrative.

Slide 19 - Follow the instruction in the RFP for developing your application budget and if a format or form is provided for the budget narrative, use it. Get other members of your team to review and check the line item totals in the budget throughout the process of developing your application as items in the budget may change. Before you finalize the budget for submission, always be sure that the totals in the budget narrative equal the totals in the budget summary.

Slide 20 – Grant and subgrant applications will require appendices to be submitted with the application narrative and budgets. This slide lists some common appendix items for applications to our agency's programs. Be sure to follow the instructions both for the required item and how it should be submitted. For example, some programs will require that appendices be combined together into one document for submission. Other programs want appendix items submitted separately. The RFP will provide all the details so be sure to…

Slide 21 - … follow the instructions and read the RFP carefully and list the items you'll need for the appendices. If you need help from others, note who you need to work with and set a timeframe for getting the needed information and items well ahead of the application submission deadline. If signatures are needed on forms, include time to work with those signatories so that they understand what they are signing and why. You'll want to have an interim deadline for appendix items so that you have time to address any issues that may arise well before the deadline for submitting the application.

Slide 22 - In conclusion, l want to give you some additional suggestions as you begin preparing your grant application.

Slide 23 - When writing your application narrative, take it one section at a time and write in drafts. Your first draft will help you get your thoughts on paper, but be sure to revise and refine that draft. Re-read the application instructions for that section of the narrative and revise your draft to clearly address what is being requested. Think about the person who will review your application as someone who does not know your organization and your proposed project. Write and revise your narrative so that you're explaining the project clearly and concisely.

Slide 24 - Remember that by submitting a grant application, you're competing for funding — and to prepare to compete successfully, it's important that you stay organized and use your time wisely. It's also important that you pay attention to details in the instructions and as they say, "sweat the small stuff." Some best practices are to…

Slide 25 - …manage your time and your writing team's time so that you have a full revised draft that other people can review and give you some feedback on before the application is due. That can help you ensure that you're submitting a very competitive application. Also, write a strong abstract or project summary that accurately reflects your proposed project. Be sure that your budget numbers and any other numbers, such as data that you're referencing, are accurate and correct. And time your activities so that you can begin submitting your application well ahead of

deadline to prevent deadline day headaches. Above all, stay positive. You *can* submit a competitive application and win funding for your project.

Slide 26 - I hope this information helps you as you begin to prepare your application. I'm Audrey Shifflett, and this presentation is a production of the Grants Program at the South Carolina Department of Education. Visit our website for more information.