

Johnathan O'Brien Grantwriting Q & A

Jonathan O'Brien, author of the award-winning grantwriting manual Right Before You Write, has been a program designer/grantwriter for the past 15 years. To date, his grantwriting program design method has helped nonprofits win more than \$385 million in grant money. One of his educational designs is enshrined in the Smithsonian Institution, and two of the charter schools he helped create are in the top 100 charter schools in the nation.

We asked O'Brien what are the biggest mistakes grantwriters make, the pros and cons of hiring grantwriters, and how to win funding during a recession.

CHARACTER COUNTS!: Federal funding for character education has dried up. How do schools apply for character-development grants now?

Jonathan O'Brien: By making character education a component of whatever grant program for which they seek support. I'm looking down a list of applications I just completed, and character development is embedded in all of them: parent training, fitness education, bullying prevention, after-school programs, cyber etiquette, high school interpersonal skills for the workplace, and an inner-city baseball program.

CC!: Education funding is a Catch-22. Schools need money, so they apply for grants. But they can't afford a grantwriter and can't do it themselves. How can this be resolved?

O'Brien: By realizing you don't need to be or hire a grantwriter. You just need to think like one. I'm also a teacher. Because of this, I know they have many of the skills necessary to write a successful grant application. They're good storytellers, have projects they're passionate about, can communicate on paper, can break down activities into steps, are creative, can create and implement interdisciplinary projects, and can bring diverse groups together to achieve a common goal.

CC!: What are the biggest mistakes grantwriters make?

O'Brien: The number one reason educators don't win grants is because they don't apply. Many think their school isn't worthy of a grant or their idea isn't good enough.

Others think the process will take too much time. This isn't true. Funders have streamlined reporting requirements, and completing an application doesn't take long if you do your homework (by checking the funder's guidelines on its website or application to determine what programs they do and don't fund).

Another mistake is losing the grant before you've written the application. Never begin writing without first thinking strategically about what will make a compelling and fundable proposal.

Still another is devoting too much space on what the program will be and not enough on your need for the support.

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A lot of my time with educators is spent on the concept of "Collaborate or die." Funding agencies frown on applicants who try to make a go of it alone. Applicants are expected to collaborate with new partners in new and creative ways.

Finally, resist viewing grants as financial band-aids. Few grants are awarded to schools that are running out of money, are victims of budget cuts, or are in the red because of financial mismanagement.

CC!: What's the most difficult challenge for grantwriters to overcome?

O'Brien: Determining the elements that will make your concept compelling, competitive, and creative enough to stand out from others. Then matching that to the vision of the organization giving out the money. This is called "program design."

CC!: What about the writing?

O'Brien: Funding agencies expect proposals to be clear, creative, uncluttered, easy-to-follow, concise, compelling, and persuasive. They don't give bonus points for big words or technical jargon. You don't want to sound like a grantwriter.

Like any teacher, I compare the process to something we all know – in my case, movies. Incorporating my screenwriting background, I use what I call Jon's Almost World Famous Seven C's to show how the FUNda-mental principles of storytelling can be applied to grant proposals.

CC!: What have you learned from the grants you didn't get?

O'Brien: Most people say, "The process is a crapshoot." It's only a crapshoot if you write crap. The reality is, there are more good and qualified applicants than there are grant awards available. Final decisions are often based on things you have no control over: geographical considerations, a decision-maker's priorities, what's been previously funded, etc. So even if you have an excellent idea and write an excellent proposal, it may not get funded due to circumstances beyond your control. What you can control is the quality of your applications.

CC!: If our grant proposals are consistently rejected, what should we do?

O'Brien: One: Make a personal contact or connection with the funder or someone associated with the funder. The odds of your grant being funded when you make a personal connection increase from 5% to 60-70%.

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Two: Focus your request. Funders look for a "focused ask." Grants should request a specific amount of money to address a specific problem with a specific solution to help a specific population. For example, instead of asking for general funding for your entire school, ask for specific funding for a children's program within your school.

CC!: What are the pros and cons of hiring a grantwriter? Of doing it yourself?

O'Brien: Districts and schools think grantwriters are expensive and there's no guarantee that the expense will result in a grant. Most grantwriters I know make less than what an elementary school principal makes in a year. That's because they work on a per-project/per-hour basis, charging only for the time they work.

A good grantwriter knows how to put you into the "seriously considered for funding" pile. One way is by looking at your application from the funder's point of view. Grantwriters read lots of grant applications, sifting through what works and what doesn't. They know how to balance passion, persuasiveness, and professionalism in the presentation. And they'll tell you what other applicants (your competition) will likely propose and how to make your proposal stand out from theirs.

The problem with doing it yourself is if you're repeatedly not being awarded grants, you won't know why. Thus, you'll never get better. A decent grantwriter can look at your past applications, see the areas that need improvement, and know how to fix them.

CC!: Should schools do anything differently when grant money is scarcer and competition is greater?

O'Brien: Whether money is scarce or plentiful, it all starts with program design. That never changes. However, money is scarcer these days. Funders are still awarding grants, but they're scrutinizing budgets more carefully.

For that reason, it may help to put up some kind of cash or in-kind match. For example, if you request a grant for a school-based health and nutrition fair and recruit local dentists and doctors to provide free screening services, their time can be valued at \$10,000. That's an in-kind match.

Even during tough economic times, money is out there, is distributed through all areas of the country, and is awarded to all sizes and types of programs. Anyone with a good heart and a good cause can tap into some of the \$500 billion in grant funds awarded each year.

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CC!: That brings up another problem: How can schools find the time to research which one of the thousands of grant-awarding bodies is best for them?

O'Brien: Every area in the country has a community foundation or nonprofit support center. Many educators assume they support only nonprofit or community-service organizations. But schools and districts are nonprofit agencies, too! Hunting for grant sources at these centers is as easy as finding a book in the library. Most have an online database of funding sources, and their staff are eager to help you. All it requires is a one-hour training (most are free) and you'll come away with more funding possibilities than you'll know what to do with.

I can help readers jumpstart their search efforts with my top ten list of grant resources, all of whom will send them weekly announcements of possibilities. Just e-mail me at jobrien@sandypointink.com. I promise no respondent will be put on any mailing list.

CC!: What happens if a grant is awarded but our plans change? Must we still stick to the original proposal?

O'Brien: Just as a script is a blueprint for a movie, a grant's program design is a framework for implementation. Funders understand that the goals of a grantee's program may change and won't always go as planned. It's like the old boxing adage: Every fighter has the perfect strategy – until the first time he gets hit.

If your situation changes, tell the funder. State the problem, why it occurred, and what you plan to do. As long as your changes stay aligned with your goal, there's usually no problem. The only thing frowned on is asking for more money.

CC!: Grant objectives must be measurable, but how can grantees measure changing behaviors in a character-development program?

O'Brien: By understanding the difference between attitudes and behaviors. Where many character-development program grantees fall short is they stop at measuring attitudes, which are subjective. A teacher may indicate in a survey that her students appear to be more respectful and trustworthy because of character education, but that's one person's opinion at one point in time.

To make it more measurable, document the behavior changes. As a result of this perceived change in attitude, how are students demonstrating a change in their behaviors? (Example: a reduction in the number of incident/disciplinary reports filed by classrooms incorporating character development.) Another thing to measure is process. How's the program being implemented? What are the participation rates?

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But this is a complicated area, one I've wrestled with on the federal level for years. Fortunately, evidence-based evaluation criteria related to character education is something you need not worry about with smaller, local grants. For these, a few simple measurements in behavioral changes are all you'll need.

CC!: Speaking of data, how much is needed to evaluate a program?

O'Brien: That depends on variables such as type of grant, size of grant, funding agency's requirements, and budget. If you have a good program design, the evaluation process almost writes itself.

CC!: Should it be written into the proposal?

O'Brien: Some key words will never fail when collecting data. When you devise your program's activities, each one should have a proposed outcome that answers the question: "As measured by when and by what?" For example, if you want your family literacy program to increase the time parents spend reading books with their children, the answer to "As measured by when and by what?" might be: "As measured by increases in the number of books checked out from the library each month."

CC!: Many small organizations can't manage data effectively. Should they hire an external data analyst?

O'Brien: Funding agencies constantly tell grantees not to reinvent the wheel. If a dependable measurement tool exists, use it. For example, increases in student academic performance are already crunched in terms of GPA and state/district test scores. There's no need to create a new measurement tool unless it's to measure specific data not measured by those tools. With more complicated grants, it might be wise to hire an external data analyst to set up a system that's easy to follow.

CC!: What's been your greatest joy as a grantwriter?

O'Brien: I love working with people who are intimidated by the process and then showing them the process can be doable, fun, and creative. The most rewarding feedback has been people who finally realize "I can do this!" – and then go out and win a grant.