Collaborative Grant Writing: Four Steps to a Better Process and Stronger Grant Proposal

Some things are inherently better when done simultaneously by more than one person. Ballroom dancing. Hockey. Street protesting.

But writing? Anyone who’s attempted to corral the writing styles, word preferences, and opinions of many writers into one document surely considers “writing by committee” to be a pathway to disaster.

However, there are times it may be necessary to divide and conquer a grant application, or at least to engage the input of numerous colleagues or outside partners. At these times, when the threat of too many pens looms over your grant writing process, there are steps you can take and decisions to make to avoid chaos and produce a stronger grant proposal:

1. **Appoint a captain**
   It is essential to designate an overall team captain. That way, though different players on the team may be assigned to tackle and write specific sections of the proposal, there is one ultimate project manager to pull it all together.

2. **Set clear deadlines**
   The team should agree on specific deadlines by which drafts are due to the team captain. Map out a timeline starting with the proposal submission deadline and move backwards. Build in time for all needed phases of writing and review, including final approval by the executive staff or board, if required. For example:

   - Thurs, August 25: Online application DUE by 5pm
   - Wed, August 24: Upload and submit (early submission = no last minute disasters)
   - Mon, August 22: Finalized proposal to Executive Director for review and approval
   - Fri, August 19: Team captain to incorporate all edits and finalize proposal
   - Wed, August 17: Revised drafts due to team captain
   - Mon, August 15: Team captain gets edits to writers
   - Mon, August 8: First drafts due to team captain
   - Mon, August 1: Assign sections to writers and get to work!

3. **Make smart use of collaborative technology**
   Passing drafts of Microsoft Word documents back and forth can get confusing (“Was this attachment his latest draft?”). You might instead consider using Microsoft OneNote to manage the writing and review process. OneNote acts like your Trapper Keeper from high school, with separate tabs for different section, each filled with pages. Let’s say you have a complex grant application with multiple sections, each with questions to assign to different writers. Set up a OneNote “notebook” to mimic the proposal:
• Create a section for each section of the application: in this hypothetical case, “Organization Overview,” “Project Description,” “Outcomes,” and “Attachments.”
• Within each section, create a page for each question: the questions in the “Organizational Overview” section might be “Mission and Vision,” “Organization History,” and “Population Served.”
• Assign a writer to each section. One way to do this is to put the designated writer’s name or initials in parentheses after each page name, for example: “Population Served (Meredith).”
• Documents and files can be inserted directly into the notebook, so the team can organize and review all proposal attachments in one place.
• Set up an “Instructions” page where you can provide notes, proposal guidelines, and deadlines that writers need to know, eliminating the need to scroll back through emails or meeting notes to find pertinent decisions and details about the process.

The OneNote notebook can be shared with all users. Users on a shared Microsoft 365 account will have full functionality using the desktop version of OneNote, but even users in different organizations on different networks will be able to collaborate via OneNote Online.

Automatic synchronization means changes to the notebook are available to all in real time. No one will need to manually share drafts, since the team captain can go into the notebook to review progress and make notes or revisions directly on the page. OneNote even displays which user added copy to the notebook, so writers can easily pick out the team captain’s changes.

All word processing functions aren’t available in OneNote, like character counts and some formatting features, so the team captain will ultimately want to compile and transfer copy to Microsoft Word for final polishing of the master document.

If you’re not ready for OneNote, other tools like Dropbox and Google Docs allow users to collaborate without passing files back and forth. If the team is uncomfortable with anything other than Microsoft Word, decide on a file naming protocol that will make it easy to discern what stage of revision a document is in (for example, “Q7 draft 8.17.16”).

4. Control the editing process
Even if the team captain eventually involves others in the review process (such as program managers to check the accuracy of program details), we recommend keeping other cooks out of the kitchen until the team captain has done a “first pass”:

• Review for punctuation, grammar, and usage and correct any mistakes.
• Revise for consistency in writing style and tone (for example, if one writer has written in the third person and another in first person, make them match).
• Identify “holes,” such as missing details or unconvincing passages, and work with individual writers or others to gather what’s needed to fill them.
• Once this initial review is complete, the team captain can alert writers to the need for further development and revision. How many rounds of review and rewriting are necessary depends on the complexity of the proposal, the clarity of the program design, and the skill of the writers and editor. Once each section has been sufficiently finessed, the team captain can share a completed master document with whomever needs to give final review and approval.

What’s your plan of attack when it comes to collaborative grant writing? Please leave a comment to tell us about the software or system you use!