

GRANT PROPOSALS THAT DON'T SUCK

Ingredients for funding proposals that don't suck:

#1. Understand guidelines and mission statement. Carefully study the guidelines and mission statement of the funding organization. Many applicants fail to follow the guidelines or ignore the mission statement.

#2. Produce strong written treatment that demonstrates good storytelling. Written treatment should be 1 to 3 pages in length. Spend lots of time revising. Final submitted draft should:

- Convey passion.
- Demonstrate a compelling storyline that offers a fresh perspective on a subject.
- Address: story themes (i.e., what is the underlying point you're trying to make in the story? does it have a universal human concern?); key characters (identify why they matter to the story); structure (i.e., will it be told chronologically?); narrative arc; visuals; point of view; style.
- Convey a sense of drama. Compel the reader (and ultimately the viewer) to stay tuned to discover the outcome of story.
- Demonstrate access to and co-operation of key characters.

Bottom line: Funding organization evaluators will be looking for a story that is strongly conceptualized and articulated. Many filmmakers submit character driven documentaries that employ a traditional three act structure.

Other treatment tips: Address viewing audience. Some funders will expect you to address what audience you hope to reach with documentary – ITVS seeks projects that bring new and underserved audiences to public TV; also seeks programs that appeal to a national viewing audience.

Case study example #1 of a successful proposal

Case study example #2 of a weak proposal

#3 Produce superior tape & production quality. Funders will want to see a work-in-progress (WIP) tape. Like the written treatment, the work-in-progress tape or a full length rough-cut should reflect a fresh story, introduce key characters, and convey emotional impact. The tape should leave the viewer wanting to see more. And it should demonstrate strong production values – i.e., good composition of shots, lighting, sound, pace of edits, and access to characters. Work-in-progress tapes should be at least five minutes long, and typically run between 10 and 20 minutes. The vast majority of tapes submitted to ITVS initiatives are work-in-progress tapes, not full-length rough cuts.

Selecting what to edit onto a work in progress tape depends on the status of project. For those who have just begun shooting and don't have a lot of material yet ... try to show at

least the main character on the tape. Don't be afraid to use onscreen text to help set up a scene; avoid long talking heads.

Common mistake of tapes:

Often too long – keep to 5 – 10 minutes in length.

Case study example #3 of successful work-in-progress tape

#4 Be prepared to address viability of project. Funders will be evaluating a project proposal on its viability. In other words, is the proposed production budget realistic and feasible? Some projects have large budget gaps. Key question asked by funders: can the applicant successfully complete the program given the experience of the filmmaker and the proposed production team? If inexperienced filmmaker, consider signing on a more seasoned filmmaker as a co-producing partner. The bottom line: funders want reassurance that your project will actually be completed – on schedule and on budget.

Other points:

Ask for feedback. If passed over for funding, ask for a feedback session. Many funding institutions don't offer feedback but some (like ITVS) will offer a feedback session by phone. This is an extremely valuable service and often helps filmmakers produce better proposals and documentaries.

Don't give up. Persistence pays off. At ITVS, not unusual for successful applicants to apply 4-6 times before being funded.