

Are You a “Grant Writer”?

Do you write grants? Well, if you’re a grantmaker, maybe. But if you’re trying to get grant funding, then you’re not a “grant writer.” You’re a grant proposal writer, a grant developer, a grant specialist, a development specialist, a grant professional, or something else. But not a “grant writer.”

Who cares? Why bother with this language? Because we know words matter, affecting how we think and ultimately impacting what we do.

The field of grant development, formally initiated in 1972 with the first training by The Grantsmanship Center, has grown, evolved, and become more complex, touching a vast number of lives. We get it, “grant writer” is shorthand, an abbreviation used by people who are busy moving mountains to make the world better. Here’s why we care about changing this terminology:

It’s incorrect.

Most of the time when “grant writer” is used, it’s inaccurate. Grantmakers write grants.

It’s a misdirect.

“Grant writing” confines this complex process to the “grant” (or money) and “writing,” as if that sums it all up. This language can inadvertently trigger chasing the money—counterproductive and dangerous. And it’s also misleading because, when done right, developing a successful grant proposal is much more than writing.

What matters more than the money is what your program will accomplish—the results—the outcomes you’re proposing. Sure, money’s a factor, just not the most important ingredient.

Funders decline requests that don’t include critical thinking, logic, data, and a sense of humanity. They cringe when reading faulty assumptions and bloviated claims.

Yes, writing is certainly part of the process but, when effective, it’s the *culmination* of a more complex thinking and planning process. “Grant writer” suggests that people simply put words on a page to get a grant—like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. It doesn’t work that way.

It shortchanges people and the process.

You’d never intentionally disrespect colleagues or the people you serve, right? Of course not. But this terminology does just that. It does not recognize nor honor the totality of the work.

Successful grant proposal development relies on solid program planning, research, and teamwork. It’s the result of understanding the community, its needs, and the causes of the problems it faces. It’s a thoughtful process, which at its best is logical, culturally sensitive and inspired by a drive to help others.

Funders will ask: “What about the beneficiaries? Did you engage them in planning?” Beneficiaries are the most important people in this process. When their vision, voices, and experience are ignored, a project is usually doomed.

What about program staff? Ever heard the wails after a successful grant award when the program staff, who were not consulted, ask, “You want us to do *what?*”

Don’t forget about the admin staff and your board who will feel blindsided if left out, possibly jeopardizing the work. Plus you risk losing valuable insight, guidance, and muscle if they aren’t included. Other community leaders and organizations also have a stake in your work. Coordinating with their energy and knowledge will benefit the entire community.

Whatever your job title—proposal writer, program planner, development director, executive director, grant professional, board member, volunteer, or something else—we want to thank you for what you accomplish every day, knowing that your hours are often long as you work for vital change in your community. We wish you great success and satisfaction!