

What Story Do Your Grant Budget Numbers Tell?

It might start with an innocent question: *“How much should we put in the budget for mileage?”* with a well-intentioned answer like *“Let’s put in \$750, that feels like the right amount.”*

But why \$750? How does a mileage budget of \$750 fit in with the narrative story of your program design? Why would staff need to travel that much if the program is all offered on-site? Or travel so little if it is a monthly home-visit based program?

Your grant budget tells the story of your project or program all on its own, whether you intend for it to or not. Grant budgets are about crunching the numbers. Ensuring each row and column add. But they are also about telling your story. Do you know what story your grant budget numbers tell?

The need to have your own blank budget templates and check-sheets to fall back on when developing a budget for a new grant application. By having trusted detailed templates and check-sheets to validate your numbers, templates that require the deeper level of detail from you, when you click on submit on an LOI or pre-proposal, or even a full proposal, you will do with confidence that the budget you have submitted will tell the reviewer the same story as your well-crafted narrative.

Budgets are not an afterthought

Sadly, the budget often feels like a stepchild to the proposal itself. Often the formatting is different than the rest of the proposal and, unbelievably, there are often inconsistencies between the budget and the proposal itself that leave grant reviewers scratching their heads. Rather than having a grant budget that appears to be a stand-alone attachment or an afterthought within your proposal, focus on making your budget an integrated part of your proposal and a supporting component of your storytelling efforts.

Great grant budgets tell your story by:

- Being consistent with all aspects of the grant narrative including work plans and logic models
- Showing calculations when appropriate
- Explaining components of fringe benefit rates
- Outlining detail of travel expenses
- Defining generic “supplies” or “program materials”

Some other characteristics of great grant budgets are:

- Great grant budgets only contain expenses that are related and allowed by the grant maker.
- Great grant budgets tell your story regardless of the format required by the grant maker.
- Great grant budgets tell your story of how else the program or project will be funded beyond the requested grant funded.



- Great grant budgets contain budget justifications/narratives when allowable within the grant maker's format.

How do we incorporate a grant budget into a grant proposal when a budget isn't required?

When a grant budget isn't a required component of a grant proposal, you still need to let the grant maker know not only how much you are requesting, but also how you plan to spend their funds. If allowable, including a budget form that you developed is an optimal solution. If not allowable, within the narrative you should include at least a few sentences about how much you are requesting and how much the total project expenses will be over the upcoming twelve months. You should also let the funder know if you are looking to use their funds specifically for one-line item of the project budget such as new computers for the program or supplies. Finally, you should narratively also let the funder know what other funding sources are already committed to funding the project, and at what amount, as well as what other funding sources have requests pending to fund the project, and at what amount.

What format should we use when one isn't provided?

Using a standard budget format such as the budget form (attached) or the form grant as from funding associations as linked are always a good option for budget forms. These forms are ideal as they show a total project expense and allow you to delineate which line items and how much in each line you are requesting from the specific funder. The majority of the forms also provide you the space to show what other revenue sources will be used to fund the project and whether they are committed or pending. The revenue portion of the budget is just important as the expense side as it shows how likely the program in its full design is to occur and how diverse your other committed funds are as a possibility for future project sustainability.

The next time that you write a grant application and finalize the budget component, use the following list to confirm that your grant budget is indeed helping to tell a complete and competitive story to your potential grant maker:

1. **Review your proposal:** What aspect of your nonprofit's story are you trying to communicate to the grant maker?
2. **Review your budget:** If a funder only reads your budget, will they see and understand the same story, values, and goals?
3. **Realign as necessary:** If the story of your proposal and budget are misaligned upon review go back to the editing phase. Look at consistency in headings, staff titles, project name, and expense categories. Bring in a trusted colleague to assist with providing constructive feedback to ensure alignment between the stories the two sections of the proposal tell.