



Arts Trust Fundraisers Conference 2018 Everyone's A Critic – Peer Review Session

What did we learn?

At this year's Arts Trust Fundraisers we were able to repeat the popular "Everyone's A Critic" peer review session. This time 7 brave fundraisers volunteered their proposals to be reviewed by their peers and colleagues. Through a series of exercises we looked at the proposals from the point of view of the Grant Manager, considering what worked and what didn't.

Following the session I've summarised some of the most common comments from across the 7 proposals:

10 things that worked

Readers felt proposals were strong when:

- ④ **They could visualise the project** – One of the most important things readers looked for was an ability to visualise the project. What would it look like to see the project delivered? What would it feel like? The best proposals were able to describe the project in a clear, tangible way that left the reader in no doubt what was going to be delivered and what impact it would have for the beneficiaries.
- ④ **They could understand why this project has to happen now** – Most of the proposals talked about the need for the work. The strongest proposals went further than this and showed why there was an urgent need for the project to happen now. This is important in a competitive environment where funders have to decide what to support and what can wait. While using statistics and academic research to demonstrate the need can give you credibility, not everybody likes to receive information in this way. Case studies and human examples can help to communicate the need in a more emotive, compelling way, making the need much more tangible.
- ④ **They could see the organisation's track record** – Having been presented with a need or challenge that needs to be addressed, funders want to know that they can trust the organisation to successfully deliver what they have said they will do and achieve their intended outcomes. Showing your previous track record helps to give funders confidence that you can be trusted to achieve what you have set out to do.
- ④ **They could see that the organisation had learned from previous projects** – a number of the proposals were seeking support from ongoing or repeated projects. In these cases readers wanted to see that the organisation had learned from previous projects. This meant providing an honest overview of what worked, what didn't and what they intend to do differently this time.
- ④ **They could hear real examples of how your work has made a difference** – Case studies and quotes are a powerful way of bringing your project to life. It also helps to address the challenge that our brains struggle to process information about large numbers of people. Framing the need for your work and the impact you can have around a single person can help make it easier

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to visualise and understand. Another advantage is that stories (such as case studies) are often much easier to remember.

- ④ **They were clear what was being asked of them...and what impact it would have** – most of the proposals had a direct ask at some point in the proposal. This means the Trust was asked for a specific amount. (We would recommend always having a specific ask unless the Trust specifically tells you not to). The strongest proposals repeated the ask at least twice (in the summary and at the end). In addition to just asking for a specific amount, it is even stronger if you can link this to a tangible part of the project that closely aligns with the funder's aims.
- ④ **They could see who else had already committed funding** – Having funding on the table helps to give the project momentum, making it more attractive for most funders (not all – some like being the first on board, while others want to be the last piece of the funding puzzle). Seeing that others have already given gives funders greater confidence in your project. They believe that the other funders have done Due Diligence checks and believe your work is worth investing in. This reduces the perceived risk and makes it easier for them to get involved.
- ④ **They could see the page behind the text!** – the white space around your proposal can be just as important to the reader as your words, especially when you are trying to read at speed. Proposals that had narrow margins and huge blocks of texts were flagged as being harder to read. Formatting your proposal in this way can make it seem impenetrable and daunting to read. Bullet points, boxed text, headings and short paragraphs were all picked up as being structural devices that made the proposals feel easier to read.
- ④ **They could sense the passion in the work** – the writing styles of the proposals broadly fell into two groups – “cold, dry and academic” and “warm, friendly and passionate”. Readers preferred the proposals where you could tell that the writer was passionate about the work to be delivered. As well as feeling more welcoming to read, proposals written in this style were more likely to explain the project in the clearest terms.
- ④ **They could follow the structure of the proposal** – a number of the proposals contained comments saying “I wanted to know this sooner!”. Readers preferred proposals which made narrative sense, with the need for the work outlined first, then a description of the project and the intended outcomes. This also included keeping the history of the organisation short, and minimising the amount of time talking about irrelevant projects (i.e. projects that had either already happened or that didn’t relate to the work the Trust was being asked to fund).

10 things that didn't work

Where readers had suggestions for improvements, it was because:

- ④ **They couldn't see the need** – I’ve tried not to include points that have already been covered above but this came up so many times it was worth including again. Fundraising from Trusts and Foundations is a competitive process. (We heard from one trust that receives 2,000 applications a year). If it’s not clear why there is an urgent need for your project to happen now, your proposal is going to find itself at the bottom of the pile. Good proposals will show evidence of the need. Great proposals will express it in an emotive way that compels the reader to act.

- ⌚ **They couldn't visualise the project** – a major issue in arts funding proposals is that fundraisers spend more time talking about the rationale behind their approach rather than actually explaining what it is you are going to do. This leaves the reader unable to picture your work. Proposals need to be clearer in describing what the project will look and feel like.
- ⌚ **They didn't feel anything** – during the session I asked what emotions people had felt while reading the proposals. Beyond “bored” and “overwhelmed”, the proposals did little to generate an emotional response. Grant Managers are people too, and many Trusts are set up to match the personal passions and interests of the trustees. You can't bore someone into giving you money. Proposals need to make the reader feel something if we want them to take action.
- ⌚ **They couldn't understand the language** – The arts sector uses a lot of language that only people in the arts understand. The arts sector also uses a lot of language that nobody understands. None of the Trusts featured in exercise were specialist arts funders. This means that acronyms, words and phrases like NPO, Bridge Organisation and Artsmark are unlikely to mean anything to them. Or, worse, mean something completely different. There is also a tendency to write in an academic style, as if you were writing a dissertation or piece of course work. There's no prize for sentences with the most words or most syllables. In fact, while it might sound impressive in your head, this style of writing is very difficult for Grant Managers to read. Prioritise short, simple words and short, simple sentences. You need plain English, not Artspeak.
- ⌚ **They were given too much irrelevant information** – deciding what to include in a proposal is a difficult balancing act. Funders often want to see evidence that you have a track record of delivering similar work so that they build confidence in your ability to achieve the outcomes you have identified. However, if you spend too much time talking about your previous work the reader can get confused as to what you are actually asking them to fund. Read through the proposal and make sure you can justify every single sentence. If something is not strengthening your case, get rid of it.

- ⌚ **They couldn't understand the budget** – there are two parts to this. The first is where an itemised budget was included. Some of the common problems here were:
 - **The budget didn't add up** – double, triple and quadruple check that your budgets add up, and that total income and expenditure match.
 - **It was unclear what was included** – we've talked above about using clear, simple language and this applies to your budget too. You might need to add a separate notes column to your budget so you can explain clearly what is included and how the budget has been calculated.
 - **Some costs look too high...or too low** – On any budget there will always be costs that jump off the page as looking suspicious. But that doesn't mean they are wrong. Be critical of your budget and add notes to explain why figures are what they are. Check it with people who have not seen the budget to see which figures leap out at them.

The second challenge was for narrative sections about budgets. This is especially important if you are not including a full budget. If you are presenting the budget as part of the text of the proposal you need to make sure it includes all of the information trusts are looking for:

- Total cost of the project
- Amount raised so far, and from where
- Shortfall still to raise
- Plans for raising this funding
- Amount you are requesting from the trustees and any discrete costs you are asking them to cover

- ⌚ **They were concerned about potential risks** – two risks stood out most for readers. The first was the risk in securing the funding needed to deliver the project. A number of proposals showed large gaps between the amount needed and the amount already secured, but gave no information about how this gap would be addressed. Trusts want to see that you have a plan for this, and this often means wanting to see who else you have applied to. For example, a leading grant manager told me that he looks to see £7 worth of applications for every £1 needed because he knows what the average success rate is. Not having a plan to raise the shortfall makes the project look risky.

The second risk that people identified was around wanting to know what will happen to the project after the funding has finished. This mirrors a comment made by Alan Bookbinder during the morning session about not wanting to encourage applicants to become dependent on grant funding. Proposals need to be clear about what the exit strategy is for the project.

- ⌚ **They found spelling mistakes and grammatical errors** – while it might seem like a small thing, spelling mistakes and grammatical errors can make a proposal much harder to read. They can also raise doubts in the mind of the reader as to your professionalism and your competence to deliver the proposed work to a high standard.
- ⌚ **They couldn't see the impact the Trust would have** – being able to see the tangible impact a donation will have is an important part of deciding whether to give or not. Proposal writers need to make it clear what tangible impact a grant will have, framed around the Trust's aims. This is particularly important when you are applying for a “small” grant, relative to the total cost of the project. In addition to identifying the specific elements of a large project a grant could support, another approach is to consider scaling the project. For example, rather than applying for a small grant towards a large, national project, consider applying to support the costs of delivering that project in one specific area or region.
- ⌚ **They couldn't see any mention of the Trust** – the whole purpose of the proposal is to help the grant manager and trustees to see how funding this work will help the trust to achieve its charitable aims. Yet a large number of the proposals failed to mention the trust or their aims at any point. If you can't identify the aims of the Trust from the proposal alone, it is probably not going to achieve the one thing you need it to do.

To download our free resource “**8 Ways to Improve your Funding Proposals**”, visit our website:
www.ApolloFundraising.com/Apollos-Muse

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