money, money, money: taking the pain out of grant writing

The old cliché about not reinventing the wheel is especially apropos concerning the grant writing process. It has been my experience that grant writing is equal parts form and substance. The "trick" is to discover a successful formula that can be used repeatedly to secure different grants. While every grant underwriting organization has its own reasons and qualifications for awarding educational grants, many share commonalities that once discovered make grant writing much easier. The goal of this article is to share some of the tricks of the grant writing trade that lead to successfully securing grant funds.

This article focuses on obtaining smaller, classroom-size grants under $10,000. While school and system-wide grants are desirable, these usually require a committee or full-time professional grant writer to handle the paperwork and level of evaluation often necessary to succeed. The grant-writing techniques herein are for individuals or small groups of teachers who wish to obtain money for their classroom or grade-level needs. Managing grants, evaluation of programs, and follow-up procedures are also covered.

I have worked in the field of education for twenty years serving as a teacher, teacher-librarian, university professor, educational consultant, and speaker. Currently, I am a teacher-librarian for Memphis City Schools in Memphis, Tennessee. The school I serve is a center city, community-based public school that primarily consists of students from a low socio-economic background.

Eight years ago I wrote my first educational grant for $250 to acquire computer software. Since then I have written, co-authored, and edited grants worth nearly $100,000 for my classroom and school. In addition to software, the grants have been used to purchase computers, school supplies, books, student incentives, and even to pay for university courses and additional education certifications.

GRANT WRITING SKILLS

I have attended numerous grant writing seminars and workshops over the years. My experience has been that most of these classes were boring, tedious, and of little help to educators desiring to write small grants. Much of the information offered in these presentations was too vague and general in nature to be of much use. This article will seek to electrify the grant writing process by presenting tried-and-true methods that teacher-librarians and classroom teachers can use to obtain money for their classroom needs.

FINDING THE MONEY

There is nothing like the joy on the face of my 3-year-old son when he finds a penny on the ground. I have seen the same look on the faces of seasoned...
As a teacher-librarian, the first place I would recommend starting is at a public or university library. Locate the periodical section of the library and peruse education, teaching, and related magazines. Professional magazines and journals often contain regular departments listing grants and awards. In this way you will quickly compile a list of grant information sources. A few examples are Instructor in the “Contests, Giveaways & Grants” section, Teaching K-8 in “Education Newswatch,” Teacher Magazine in “Grants,” Technology & Learning in “Grants, Contests, Etc.,” Cable in the Classroom in “Cable in the Classroom News,” and on the Teacher Librarian web site (www.teacherlibrarian.com) link Conferences/Grants in the Toolkit! section under Professional Development (ProD).

The Internet has become one of the best ways to locate grant opportunities. As Belinda Hollbrook (2001) warns, while the Internet offers a legion of possibilities, one needs to develop a coherent strategy for searching for these grant web sites. If you are not familiar with the addresses (URLs) of online grant offerings, keyword searching is a great way to start. Using a search engine such as Google (www.google.com) type in keywords such as “school grants,” “education grants,” “library grants,” “library resource center grants,” and similar phrases. To narrow the focus of the search even further, include words such as elementary, secondary, teacher, math, or K-12. For specific grants, see “Online Grant Opportunities,” at left, for web sites that offer direct links to many different sources. Some web sites (e.g., www.schoolgrants.org and granthelp.clarityconnect.com) offer grant writing tips, tutorials, sample proposals, and other helpful information.

A third way to seek funding is to query corporations, nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies asking if they offer educational grants. A good place to start this search is at the local school board. School boards receive a tremendous amount of material from a wide variety of organizations. Many school boards compile a list of grants that teachers can obtain by request (e.g., Memphis City Schools “Educational Resources” at www.memphis-schools.k12.tn.us). Newspapers, television news, brochures, and mailings often contain mention of grants and funding opportunities. Otherwise, one can contact local organizations and businesses by e-mail, letter, or phone. Briefly explain who you are, describe the school, and tactfully inquire if they are an educational grant-giving organization. If the organization offers grants, request the name of the contact person, grant information, guidelines, application forms, and deadlines.

AS A TESTIMONIAL, I HAVE RECEIVED GRANTS FROM ALL TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS – JUNIOR LEAGUES, SOFTWARE CORPORATIONS, STATE AGENCIES, PARENT-TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS, PAPER COMPANIES, AND THE LIST GOES ON.

As a testimonial, I have received grants from all types of organizations – junior leagues, software corporations, state agencies, parent-teacher associations, paper companies, and the list goes on. For example, I received a $2000 grant from an insurance company that I found out about in a brochure trying to sell me a life insurance policy! Another of my favorite methods for locating grants is to look in newspapers, magazines, or on the television news congratulating other educators for receiving a grant or award. When these appear, write down the name of the grant-giving organization, contact them concerning the grant, and request an application. If they have given away money to other educators, they will most likely be offering more funding in the future.

CHASING THE MONEY

After developing a list of available grants and having received the applications, it is time to winnow the choices. As seasoned grant writer Cynthia Anderson (2003) suggests, “it is wise to start small” (p. 44). Sort through the grants to find two or three that seem to most closely fit your needs. For example, if you need software, look for technology grants; if you need a classroom library, look for grants that support reading and literacy. Some grants are very specific in what they will or will not fund. Do not make the mistake of applying for materials that the grant disallows; doing so is a sure way of getting a grant application discarded.

After selecting the grants to apply for, it is time to select an existing program or develop a new one to be funded. Write
the program;
5. A time table for implementation and completion;
6. Length of the program;
7. Method of analysis and evaluation; and
8. A plan for reflection and program modification.

The narrative needs to clearly define the program, describing it in terms that the grant-writing organization can easily understand.

The list should include both expendable and reusable materials. Expendable materials include items such as glue, paper, printer cartridges, markers, etc. Reusable items are equipment, software, furniture, books, and other more permanent materials. Each of these items needs to be priced-out, including the vendors name, quantity, cost per unit, extended price, and shipping and handling charges. Prices can be obtained through local businesses, vendor catalogs, and online stores. Do not round off costs; make sure to include both dollars and cents. Using dollars and cents shows the grantor that you did the required work to determine actual costs rather than just making an educated guess. Finally, do not exceed the amount of money the grant-giving organization has specified. Failure to follow this advice will often get a grant rejected.

DRESSING-UP FOR THE MONEY

Now it is time to format the grant. Grant underwriters usually provide a form or specific layout for how grants should be formatted. Make sure to follow these instructions explicitly. If possible, word process the application. Make sure to use the appropriate software to produce clean, sharp graphics where needed (such as for the timeline). Also, be aware that some grant applications have not been placed online nor provide for a software option. These must be typed if possible or handwritten if necessary. Remember that neatness makes a positive first impression. Make every effort to complete the forms in an attractive manner.

Whatever the format, it is essential to eliminate spelling and grammatical errors. After completing the application, set it aside for a day to gain a fresh perspective before rereading and editing. If you are
completing the application online, realize
that spelling and grammar checks do not
catch all errors. The human touch is still
required for proper editing. It is a good
idea to have an English-adept colleague
proofread the application, making neces-
sary changes.

Finally, develop a cover letter that gives
potential donors insight into your world
(Maxwell, 2003). It should be concise, not to
exceed one page. Use the cover letter to
introduce yourself, the school, and the pro-
gram to potential grantors. Succinctly
describe the uniqueness of the program and
the student needs addressed. Thank the
grant-giving organization by name, telling
them how much you appreciate this oppor-
tunity. Patronization never hurts, plus it is
free. Inform the grantors that they can con-
tact you for additional information, clarifica-
tion, or with any questions they have. Close
with the proper salutation and include your
name, title, school name, e-mail and snail
mail addresses, phone and fax numbers.

Before mailing your grant make sure
you have all of the necessary approvals.
Give your principal a copy for approval
and to put on file in the school office.
The board of education may also require
that teachers receive their approval. Check
with the central office and grant depart-
ment for proper procedures before sub-
mitting grants.

SPENDING THE MONEY

Grant recipients are usually notified in a
congratulatory letter. Following the letter
will be the check and a set of contrac-
tual papers to sign. These papers state
that the grant money will be spent as stip-
ulated and that you agree to provide all
required documentation. Once these are
signed, the grant is officially yours.

Request that the school financial secre-
tary set up an account in which to deposit
the grant money and to provide you with
either checks or purchase order numbers
that can be used to spend the funds. Create
a file folder in which to store all documen-
tation connected with the grant. Make pho-
tocopies of all purchases and orders,
and keep the receipts. These will be in-
cluded with the final report. Progress and final
reports are almost always required of grant
recipients (see Memphis City Schools:
Teachers and International Paper Partnernership

Depending upon the nature of the pro-
gram, some form of evaluation will need to
be conducted. Evaluation can be as simple
as teacher observations or as complex as
pre- and posttesting with accompanying
statistical analysis. Make sure your evalu-
ation methods comply with what you stated
in your narrative as well as with grantor
stipulations. For most grants, photographs,
samples of student work, newspaper articles,
or letters are all acceptable documentary
materials. Make sure to send in the evalu-
ative materials in a timely manner. Failure to
do so may result in being denied future
grants from this organization. Lastly, it is
common for the grant-giving organizations
to request a site visit to see how the money
was spent. This is nothing to be nervous
about. Simply schedule a day, arrange a dis-
play showing the outcomes of the program,
and have several participating students

MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOLS:
TEACHERS AND INTERNATIONAL PAPER PARTNERSHIP (TIPP) GRANT
QUARTERLY REPORT

Title of Project: “Project Pizzazz: Giving Plain-Jane Books a Make-Over”

School: Hamilton Elementary School

Principal: Michael Hawkins

Teacher Contact: D. Jackson Maxwell, Ed.D.

Project Summary: “Project Pizzazz: Giving Plain-Jane Books a Make-Over” integrates
reading, writing, art, public speaking, and technology into a holistic program designed to
accelerate learning for all students in the area of reading comprehension. Students select
a plain-covered rebound library book; read it; complete a Think Sheet; present and
discuss the book; write a critical review; word process the review; and using computer graphics/Internet clip art create a picture to be affixed to the book by community volunteers.
The evaluative measures will include student surveys, circulation tallies, teacher observa-
tion, classroom reading test scores, and the Terra Nova reading scores. Expected outcomes
include increased student performance on standardized reading comprehension tests,
increased library use, increased student interest in “treated” books, and an increase in
library circulation statistics.

MCS standards addressed: 3–5 English/Language Arts: Standard #1 (5, 6); standard #2
(2); Standard #3 (1, 2), 3–5 Arts-Visual: Standard #1 (3); Standard #2 (1).

Project Evaluation: “Project Pizzazz” is currently on the projected implementation sched-
ule. Maxwell completed the professional development course on authoring software at the
University of Memphis in July. In August, requisitions for hardware, software, supplies,
and reimbursements were sent to the Board of Education for approval and disposition.
The materials, software, and hardware were received and installed by late October.

In phase two, four classes were selected as the pilot groups. Overall, twenty students
were selected by the teachers to participate. Of the initial twenty, ten have so far suc-
cessfully completed the program. Preliminary assessment of the program involved teacher
observations, IP created Likert scale evaluations, and informal student interviews con-
ducted by teachers and the library staff. Seven IP evaluations were mailed to the MCS
Board of Education in November.

Modifications to the program will be made in December in an attempt to have a high-
er on-time student completion rate. Full-scale implementation of “Project Pizzazz”
should begin in January.

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available to describe their experiences. These meetings are usually a formality.

GETTING THE MOST BANG FOR THE BUCK

Advertise your success. After receiving a grant, write a short press release to send to the school board and local media. In the release, include your name, the school name, the grant funding organization, amount funded, the project name, a brief description of the project, and how the project will positively impact students (see Press Release below). The media are always looking for stories, so give them a positive story. The

PRESS RELEASE

School: Hamilton Elementary School
1378 Ethlyn Avenue
Memphis, TN 38106
(901) 775-7826 Fax: (901) 775-7526

Contact: Dr. D. Jackson Maxwell
maxwell@01@ten-nash.ten.k12.tn.us

Information:

Hamilton Elementary School is no longer in the business of just educating children; through a new initiative parents and community members can now attend classes too. Beginning in February, twice a week Hamilton community adults can take a course to learn how to use technology. The course will last 6 weeks.

Dr. D. Jackson Maxwell, the Hamilton Elementary School Library Media Specialist, is teaching the classes. The classes are being taught in the school’s computer lab and can accommodate up to 40 adults. The first courses are for beginners. The focus of these courses is on basic computer use and Internet searching. The goal of the program is to help parents to become more computer literate in order that they can use technology for themselves and to help their children. Intermediate and advanced computer courses will be added in the future.

The technology courses are a part of the Homeroom.com pilot program at Hamilton Elementary School. Homeroom.com is an online program that provides educators, parents, and students with a wealth of resources to enhance learning. Located at www.homeroom.com, the web site offers an online Encarta encyclopedia and dictionary, lesson plans and activities, as well as links to thousands of other educational sites.

Homeroom.com offers teachers and parents tips on test-taking strategies for grades 3-12. Sample tests and test preparatory literature are available. Finally, locations and dates of educational conferences, online teacher training, and other professional development opportunities are listed for those interested.

“The response has been incredible,” says Maxwell. “We took a survey of parents and over 100 were interested in taking computer classes at the school. This program is wonderful in that we are teaching our community’s parents how to help their children. This is a win-win-win situation. The parents win by learning computing skills, the children win by having technologically literate parents, and the school wins by further integrating itself into the heart of the community by helping everyone become more successful. Needless to say, I am very excited about this program.”

Principal Michael Hawkins arranged for Hamilton to be a pilot site for the Homeroom.com program. The computer classes are free for parents and community members. They have been funded through money awarded by Homeroom.com and Title I. Dr. Maxwell is an experienced teacher and trainer having taught parents, teachers, students, and area residents computer literacy at the University of Memphis, Hamilton Elementary School, and Memphis Public Library for over 12 years.
increased visibility of the program will often bring about unforeseen benefits such as increased local support, additional sponsors, and volunteers (Engelfried & Reynolds, 2002).

Again with success for the rest of your life. An important thing to remember is that there are hundreds if not thousands of organizations out there looking to fund your educational endeavors. When applying for grants follow the prescribed format closely. Give your program a “catchy” name. Finally, do not be dejected if your application is rejected; instead modify, rewrite, and reapply. Almost every reasonable grant has a good chance to be funded. The goal is to match your idea with the proper grant-giving organization. Master these tricks and soon you will be in the money.

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CONCLUSION

Grant writing is a combination of art, form, and substance. By using the suggestions above as a guide, you can become a successful grant writer. If success does not come on the first attempt, then rewrite the proposal, modify, and reapply for another grant. The majority of rejections are not due to poor ideas, but instead there is simply not enough money to go around. Further, in most cases one can resubmit previously successful grant ideas to other grant-giving organizations in order to receive additional funding to extend or expand a program.

Grant writing is like riding a bike; once you get the hang of it you can do it over and over again with success for the rest of your life. An important thing to remember is that there are hundreds if not thousands of organizations out there looking to fund your educational endeavors. When applying for grants follow the prescribed format closely. Give your program a “catchy” name. Finally, do not be dejected if your application is rejected; instead modify, rewrite, and reapply. Almost every reasonable grant has a good chance to be funded. The goal is to match your idea with the proper grant-giving organization. Master these tricks and soon you will be in the money.

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