Why Proposals Get Rejected

The Proposal does not meet all technical grant requirements.

Funding agencies reduce the stack by first rejecting any proposal that is deficient in some technical requirement. For example, the National Science Foundation will reject proposals if an entry in the bibliography does not list the names of all authors (“et al.” is not sufficient). Make sure your proposal meets every technical requirement listed in the grant application.

What you can do

If you have a question about a prerequisite, contact a grantor representative and get a clear response. Also, before submission, have some fresh eyes review the proposal specifically against all technical requirements.

The proposal is not responsive to the guidelines.

Funding agencies look for proposals that clearly and demonstrably meet their goals and criteria. Applicants may have a project that is only tangentially related to the funding agency’s goals. Such proposals stand a poor chance of funding.

What you can do

Write down your basic case for funding and review it for soundness. Make sure you can support every argument you plan to make. Also, review the case statement against the proposal review criteria listed in the funding announcement. Even before developing your case statement, it’s a good idea to talk to the funding agency and get their feedback informally before deciding to develop a proposal.
The project or program to be funded is poorly developed.

Programs or projects that are already in place or are modeled after ones that are already in existence and producing results are more likely to be funded because most grant-making organizations wish to fund projects that have a high change of making an impact. Next best are programs that are not in action currently, but have well-thought-out plans, including specific impact areas and budget figures. Such programs can begin quickly and provide results sooner than those with less advance planning. If the resources are not available for such planning, it may not be a good investment to develop the proposal.

What you can do

Take the time to plan and detail your project or program. This requires thought and effort beyond simply writing. We often say that proposal development is primarily a research and planning task and only after that, a writing task.

The proposal is written or organized poorly.

Grants are exercises in persuasion and need to be written in a persuasive fashion, with the primary arguments clearly stated and well supported. While the proposal needs to be detailed, it also needs to be understood by a lay person that may not have a direct knowledge of your industry. And, of course, spelling and grammar really do matter. Any obvious problems show carelessness, which is not a good sign for a prospective grantee.

What you can do

Structure the proposal before you begin writing, and review the text for logical flow and consistency frequently during the process. Make sure several extra pairs of eyes look over the grant application before it is submitted.
The team or resources are inadequate.

Do not undervalue having a competent and qualified team, as well as sufficient resources to implement your project. If members of your team do not have the background needed to perform the work (e.g., using student volunteers to screen for complex medical conditions), your plan is not sound. Any unanswered questions about what resources or equipment you will use to facilitate your project are also negatives.

What you can do

Make sure your team member’s qualifications are made clear in the proposal and are sufficient to carry out the work. Additionally, support from all parties should state in the proposal, with letters of support as appropriate. The budget must be reasonable, and the means to provide facilities, equipment, and other resources should be determined before the proposal is submitted.

The evaluation plan is inadequate.

Most grantors require an evaluation plan as an integral part of the project to ensure the project has measurable results. If your evaluation plan is too vague and does not provide clear methods of evaluation, then it could be a strike against your funding request. Also, if your plan does not truly measure expected outcomes, grantors could be less likely to fund your project. For example, if you want to reduce obesity in youth, you need to measure obesity, not just the number of presentations or other activities held.

What you can do

Spend quality time planning your evaluation plan and how you will track your results. Include baseline measurements and expected results over time. Make sure that your evaluation techniques are sound, and your results can be collected and reported numerically.