

August 5, 2025



Grant Basics Series

The Application

Bonnie Waninger, Project and Funding Specialist

Vermont League of Cities and Towns

VLCT's Municipal Operations Support Team

**Running a Vermont Municipality is Complicated.
We Can Help You Uncomplicate It.**

Find us: <https://www.vlct.org/municipal-operations-support>

Contact us: info@vlct.org or [Ask A Question*](#)

2025 Grant Basics Series



4/9, Session I - Before the Grant

- ✓ Picking the right project
- ✓ Understanding roles
- ✓ Working as a team
- ✓ Assessing capacity
- ✓ Understanding grant readiness

6/3, Session II – Developing and Funding the Project

- ✓ Project development lifecycle
- ✓ Building a funding stack
- ✓ Project budgets
- ✓ Grants and how they work
- ✓ What funders want (and don't want) to see in applications
- ✓ Understanding local match
- ✓ Accessing capacity and filling gaps

8/5, Session III – The Application

- ✓ The grant landscape and how it's changing
- ✓ Grant basics
- ✓ How grants work
- ✓ What funders want (and don't want) to see in applications
- ✓ Tips, tricks, and best practices for grant writing

10/21, Session IV – Grant Management

- ✓ Intro to grant management
- ✓ The grant agreement
- ✓ Grant implementation and management
- ✓ Monitoring and reporting
- ✓ Evaluation
- ✓ Grant closeout
- ✓ Best practices

Recording and slides for the Grant Basics series is posted in the VLCT Resource Library at <https://www.vlct.org/resource-library>.



are
you
ready?

Today's Topics

- The grant landscape and how it's changing
- Grant basics
- How grants work
- What funders want (and don't want) to see in an application
- Tips, tricks, and best practices for grant writing

The recorded training will be posted in the VLCT Resource Library at <https://www.vlct.org/resource-library>



The Grant Landscape

Trends and changes

- New national priorities - Infrastructure and economic development
- Use of technology important
- Impact, not effort
- America First!
- Performance accountability

Increased competition matters more than ever

- Shrinking state and federal funding
- Collaboration with private sector important

Grant Fundamentals

Grant lifecycle

- **Pre-award**

Prepare for and find grants, portal registrations, application writing and submission, tracking applications

- **Award**

Notice of award, meet any conditions, grant agreements, notice to proceed

- **Post Award**

Project work, reporting, financial tracking, award closeout, audit, ongoing obligations

Grant Fundamentals

Parts of a grant application

- **Funding notice**

Your pathway to success

- **Narrative**

Your story and how well it matches the funder's needs

- **Budget**

Your project and grant process in numbers format

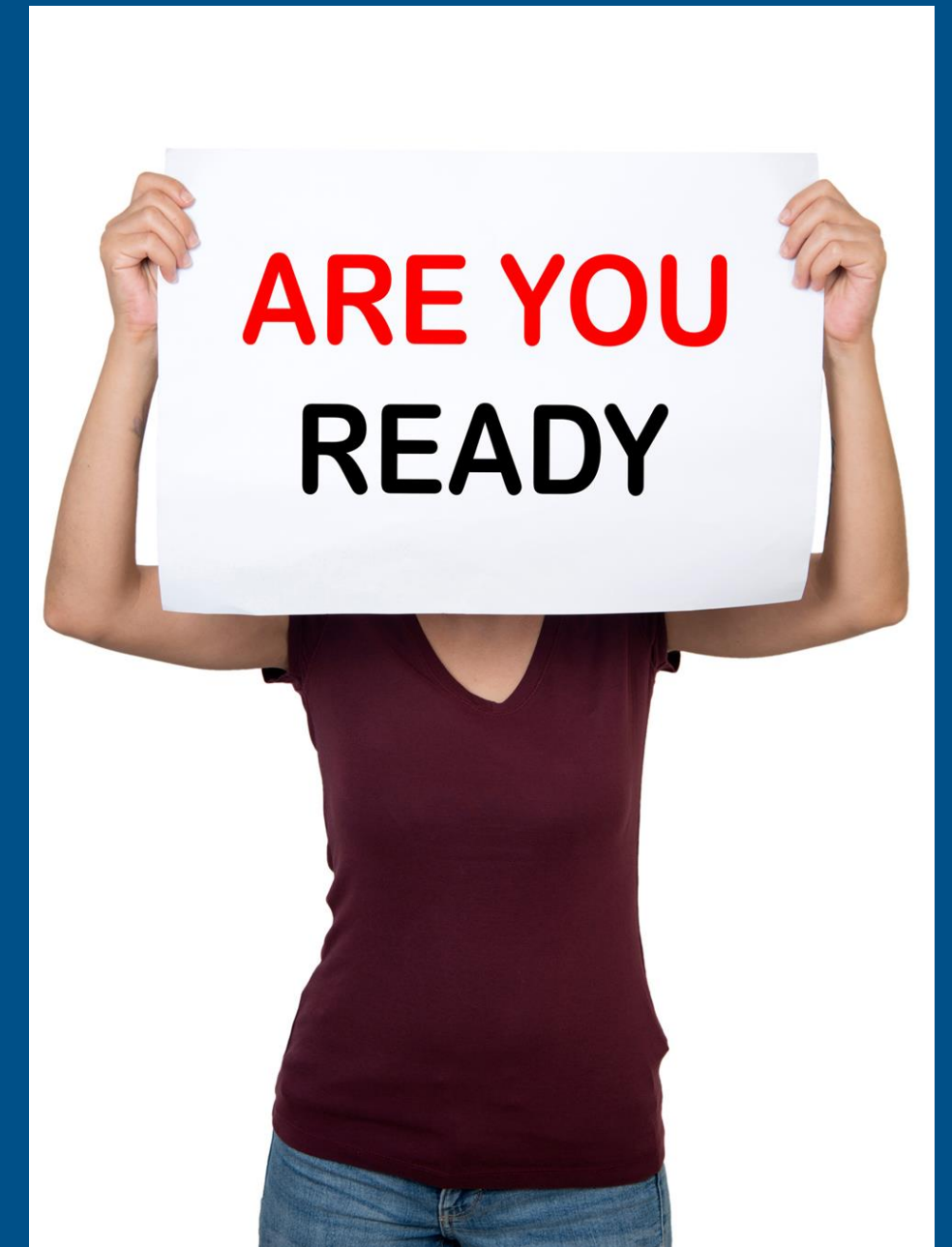
- **Attachments**

Required forms and supporting materials

Grant Fundamentals

Is Your Project Ready for Grants

- **Know where you are in your project's development lifecycle.**
 - Stakeholder engagement – Did it happen during feasibility? Do you need to do more before you apply?
 - Alignment with plans/get in the plan/get on the lists*
 - Have a project delivery schedule
 - Have a current, solid cost estimate
 - Have letters of intent for partner agreements, if applicable
 - Know whether, and what, environmental review and permitting requirements are.
- **Make sure your internal systems are ready to apply for and manage funding.**



* VLCT's website resource, [Seeking Funding? Get Your Project on the Priority List](#), helps you learn about databases, priority project lists, and annual plans required for application or used during application review.

How Grants Work

Advance Notification

- Typically provided 30-90 days before a federal grant opens
- Provides critical information about the funding and requirements, like:
 - Applicant eligibility
 - Project fit (will it be competitive?).
 - If you must attend an application workshop
 - Data needed to support your application (beneficiaries, outcomes, outputs, metrics, etc.)
 - Required and optional supporting documents
 - Public meetings the applicant must hold (and warn appropriately!)
 - If there is a community engagement component
 - Reporting requirements – frequency and complexity
 - And more!



Grant Basics

The Art and Science of Grant Writing

- ✓ Understand the funder
- ✓ Grant guidance as your pathway to success
- ✓ Telling your story through words and numbers
- ✓ Tips and best practices for a competitive proposal
- ✓ Common mistakes to avoid

The Art of Grant Writing

Understand the funder:

Make your search engine your best friend...do your homework.

- What is their mission?
- Who is the evaluation team? (or if private funding, who is their board and staff?)
- What types of projects do they fund?
- How are projects awarded? Is there a selection process and committee?
- What are the goals of the program you will apply for? Does your project meet them?
- Look at past award rounds. What projects were funded? Where are they located?
- Does everything you learned align with your project? If so, then...

Make yourself known.

- Who are the people (staff) administering the program? Get to know them.
- If you are unsure, don't guess. Ask questions if you have them.
- If the funder offers an application workshop, participate in it.
- Develop an elevator pitch for your project and repeat it to everyone

The Science of Grant Writing

Read the Grant Guidance

What are the requirements?

- Are you an eligible applicant?
- What are the deadlines?
- What activities and costs are eligible and ineligible?

What will make an application competitive?

- What does the funder want to achieve (program goals)?
- What are the funding priorities?
- How will applications be scored?
- Which questions have more value?

TIP: Read all linked information. Linked information often informs you about additional requirements or provides more information about the funder's interests.

Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Writing Strategies - Getting Started

Understand the application

- Read the application and guidance more than once.

TIPS:

- Read them 3 times. Print hard copies and mark them up with a highlighter, margin notes and sticky notes!
- Pay attention to both the application requirements, funding use, and award management.
- Pay close attention to how evaluation points are given



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Writing Strategies - Getting Started

If the application is submitted through a portal:

- Register and review the portal immediately.
- Who must submit the application - the municipality's "Authorized Representative"?
- Develop draft of application offline (in a Word doc) and enlist a reviewer.
- Post information into the grant portal and upload information no less than 3 days before the due date. One week in advance is better.



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Writing Strategies - Getting Started

Understand the application

- Details matter. Pay attention to the required fields, elements and attachments.

TIP: Make a checklist, if one isn't already included in the application materials.

- Mark your calendar. If you miss the deadline, you've missed your chance (this time).

TIP: Mark your calendar with multiple reminders and make a schedule for the application process due dates. Don't let them slip. Factor in vacations and holidays.



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Writing Strategies - Start Writing

- Fill in organizational information first (gives you a sense of progress).
- Bullet key points for responses first, then write supporting details. Don't wordsmith the first draft, just mind dump and draft it!
- Answer only the questions asked. Use wording from the question in the application to start your answer.
- Spend most of your time on the questions where the most evaluation points are gained.
- Make your application readable - no tiny text, use formatting



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Writing Strategies - Editing

- Edit, Edit, Edit!!!
- Make sure your responses are concise, to the point, consistent and accurate.
- Acronyms - Should I use them? Maybe, but probably not.
- Avoid jargon and technical terms.
- Don't BS.
- Edit some more.



How Grants Work

The Project Budget

- **What is a project budget?**
 - It is your project scope in a numbers format.
 - It's a plan of financial action.
 - It starts as estimates then gets refined and finalized as details solidify.
- **Is a grant budget different than a project budget?**
Maybe.
 - A grant can fund the entire scope (ex. paving grant)
 - A grant can fund a part of the scope (ex. only the energy or accessibility improvements for a Town Office rehabilitation project)
- Understanding where your project's funding is coming from and what it pays for is critical.
- Check your math (more than once).



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

The Grant Budget

- Budget for all activities mentioned; don't skimp in fear of sticker shock.
- Have a current cost estimate. Estimates more than 6-9 months old are stale.
 - Do not guess!
 - Remember to adjust for inflation and other increases.
 - Include contingencies.
- Budget for funder-required activities

Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

The Grant Budget

- Recoup the cost of fringe benefits for municipal employees (this is not overhead!).
- Have notes for how you determined costs.
- Be aware of unallowable expenses and don't include them.
- Know how/where to present match activities
- Costs must be allowable, reasonable, and allocable

How Grants Work

Understanding Match

- Grant match is your contribution to a funded project
- Types of grant match: cash, in-kind, third-party in-kind
- Match has rules too: [2 CFR 200.306](#)
 - Share the same restrictions as the grant award
 - Must be verifiable, necessary, reasonable, and allowable
 - Must occur during the award period, unless otherwise allowable and approved by the grantor
 - Donations in the form of discounted services are not allowed (conflict of interest)
- Match percentage, sources of match, and other requirements vary from program to program



What Funders Want The Application

DO:

- Follow the grant guidelines.
- Explain your needs in terms of the *funder's* interests.
- Check your math!
 - If your budget numbers are off, you pay, not the funder.
- Use projects that have deep impact, tell a great story, and look good in press releases.

What Funders *Don't* Want The Application

DON'T:

- Ask questions until you've read the guidance
- Be disqualified for simple avoidable errors
- Waste everyone's time on projects that don't meet the criteria
- Make match commitments that you can't keep
- Pretend there are partnerships if the "partner" isn't committing resources to the project

What Funders Want After Grant Award

DO:

- Have a project manager and a single point of contact
- Invite the funder to key project meetings
- Maintain financial accountability
- Keep documentation organized
 - Keep one set of financial files and one project management file, both at the municipal office. These are public records!
- Make the funder's life easy!
 - Keep your commitments.
 - Submit progress financial, and closeout reports on time.
 - Timely notification of project successes and challenges.

What Funders *Don't* Want After Grant Award

DON'T

- Start work until the funder gives you approval - a fully signed agreement or a written notice to begin
- Ignore compliance requirements due to staff or volunteer turnover (or any other reason!)
- Change your scope or modify your budget without required approvals
- Stop communicating with the funder, especially if you encounter a challenge
- Forget your post-closeout responsibilities
 - Final reports, audit, equipment and property tracking

Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Unsuccessful Applications

- Acknowledge the disappointment!
- Seek feedback from the grantor
- Identify areas for improvement
- Perseverance and learning are key

Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Capacity Gaps

- Can you pull together all the required application components?
- Do you have the internal capacity to:
 - Track the grant funds accurately and separately if awarded?
 - Keep thorough and accurate documentation (executed contracts/agreements, design plans, invoices, cancelled checks, project meeting minutes, etc.)?
 - Have the necessary policies adopted, internal controls in place, systems, processes, procedures, etc. in place?
 - Complete regular, required progress reports to the funder?
- Will you need outside assistance, and if so, where will you get it?
- “Is the juice worth the squeeze?”



Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices

Capacity Gaps...and How to Fill Them

- Grants require having capacity not only to write and administer them but also to complete the project and maintain it over time.
- You can add capacity by:
 - Enlisting volunteers to help.
 - Hiring additional staff or sharing a position with another municipality.
 - Working with a service provider.
 - Retain a consultant.

Find ideas for increasing your municipality's capacity for grants: <https://www.vlct.org/resource/increasing-municipal-capacity-grants>.

Final thoughts



Thank you to our Business Alliance Program Sponsors!



Sponsored by [Acrisure](#), VLCT's exclusive broker partner in providing life and disability insurance and health insurance advisory services to participating VLCT members.



ESTABLISHED 1975



NEMRC
FUND ACCOUNTING

Have questions?

LET US KNOW!



Bonnie Waninger, Project and Funding Specialist

bwaninger@vlct.org

802-585-9174

Vermont League of Cities and Towns

VLCT.ORG