How to apply for grants

A guide to effectively researching, writing, and applying for grants by Creative Capital's Marianna Schaffer. Illustrations by Molly Fairhurst.

Applying for a grant is not only a chance to share your work and have it be seen—it's also a great exercise to put into words what it is that you're seeking to create. Over the past five years, and in my current role as Director of Artist Initiatives with Creative Capital, I've worked with artists and arts organizations to realize many projects and programs across a variety of disciplines and in many different contexts. I've also had the pleasure of sitting on panels as an evaluator, and have read countless grant applications in the process. Through these experiences I've learned a great deal about the needs of individual artists, and about the distinct ways that artists learn to articulate their practices as they pursue funding opportunities.

So, why does this matter? As I see it, every grant is a chance to open up a relationship with a potential funder, curator, or peer—and, you never know who's sitting on a panel, or what opportunities might arise from your application. I know that the process of writing a grant can be overwhelming, but it's my hope that the strategies included in this guide can make the experience much more enjoyable and rewarding for everyone involved.

— Marianna Schaffer

Doing your research

Finding potential grant opportunities can often feel like a difficult hunt, but there are many great resources online where you can learn about programs and upcoming deadlines. A few such organizations with pages dedicated to sharing grants, residency listings, and other opportunities include ResArtis, Residency Unlimited, and NYFA. A few weekly newsletter emails also include regularly updated opportunities, like Listings Project and Words of Mouth. And, Creative Capital shares resources every month in the Tips & Tools section of our blog.

Once you've identified a grant that you're interested in applying for, it's important to make sure you're a good fit for that particular grant before you start working on the application. Not all granting processes are created equal, and applying is not a one-size-fits-all process. Before you go all in on one grant, give yourself time to review many grants in detail to gain a wider perspective on which might be the best fit for you and your work. There are many opportunities out there, and if an organization's mission doesn't nicely align with your work, then don't chase that funding—it'll only create more work for you.

To determine if a grant is right for you, first review all of the FAQs about the application process, and about the grant itself. Ensure that you meet all of the qualifications, as this can often be a good way to weed out programs early on. For instance, some grants are unrestricted and only require a sampling of your work and an artist statement, whereas others, such as Creative Capital's, require that you propose a new project and respond to a series of specific questions. Creative Capital also provides mentorship and advisory services as part of our award, while the organizations behind many other types of grants and opportunities don't engage with artists after they've received funding. It's a good idea to honestly think about what type of grant will best serve you and your work, and plan accordingly.

It's also very important to take a look at the artists an organization has already awarded grants to (if they make that information available), as this can be a great way to tell what types of work the organization tends to support. Many websites have lists of past grant recipients, and many even have a registry of past grantees. For example, to see what kinds of projects Creative Capital has funded over the years, you can visit our archive of awardee projects.

If there's a grant that you're especially excited about, it's always a great idea to attend an in-person information session (if offered). These types of sessions are not only designed to be clarifying—they'll also offer

a good deal of insider information that may be hard to articulate in the more formalized policies that are shared on the organization's website.

Finally, it's often incredibly valuable to talk to someone who has already been awarded the grant you're applying for, especially if they're in your network. Ask about their experience, and see if you can get a sense of how the process went for them.
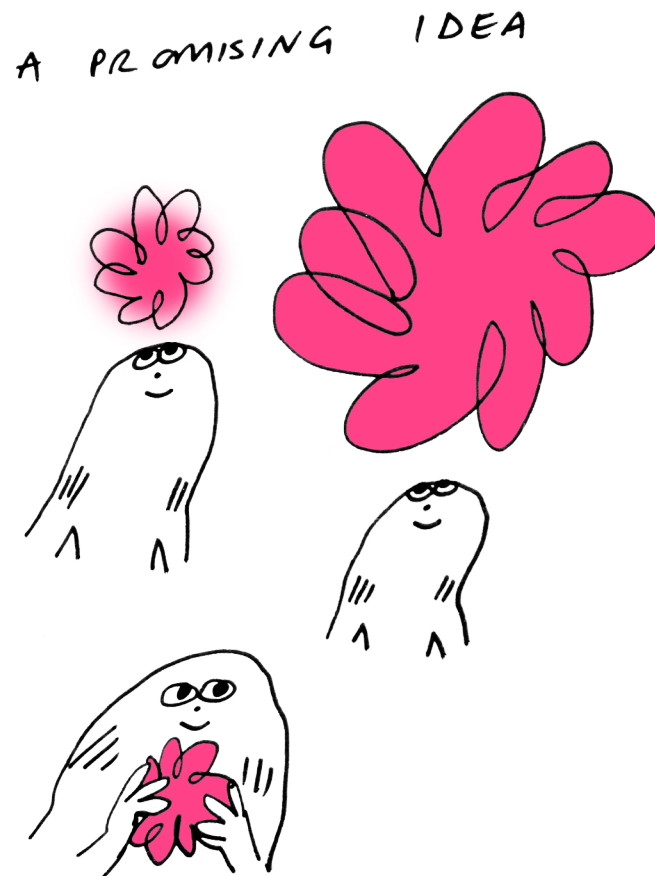
Planning your application

As soon as you've decided that you want to apply for a grant (or, better yet, for several grants), you should create a schedule to manage your time, and to manage the various application deadlines. Be realistic as you're evaluating how much time you have available to complete each application— these things take time, and you don't want to feel rushed. Create a work plan that breaks down the number of hours you'll need to properly respond to the application questions and to compile the required work samples.

As you set a schedule for yourself, aim to submit your work early. Ideally,

you should aim to submit your application several days before the deadline, because you never know what might come up, and you should always allow yourself some flexibility. Similarly, be sure to test any online tools used for the application process well in advance of the submission date. As you work on each application, be sure to have a copy of your work stored for safekeeping, since you don't want to lose what you've written if the application system times out or experiences a bug.

Writing your application

Whenever you start writing an application, keep in mind that your first notes don't have to be definitive. It's best to get all of your ideas down on paper, and then work to distill these notes into a more clarified sense of what your project really is. As you work to clarify your project, ask yourself: What questions will this project ask? What ideas and themes will be central to this work?

After you've identified a few central ideas or questions, begin to organize your ideas into paragraphs and build on the language from there. Remember to be clear and direct, and avoid using dense language so that the panel can easily envision your project and gain a sense of its value. Imagine if you were being told about this project idea for the first time, and then consider the most important things you'd need to know in order to best understand the project.

Another tip: Make sure that you comply with the naming conventions used by the organizations, and use their language to answer the questions they're asking. As you work, be sure to double check all requirements and instructions, as you don't want to be eliminated for missing a simple guideline. Finally, have a friend (or multiple friends) review your application. Ask them to point out any areas in your application that seem confusing, vague, or even overly detailed.
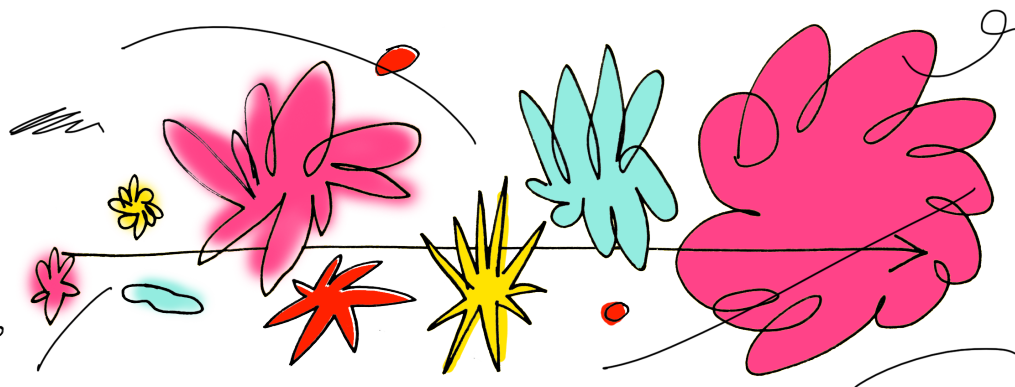
IDEA ARTICULATION

Setting a project budget

Preparing a project budget for a grant application doesn't have to be scary—just think of budgets as another way to tell your story. Be realistic and make sure that you've received quotes or researched pricing ranges for the goods and services you'll need to create your project. Don't estimate, and be prepared to share sources. As you plan your costs, you should also be prepared to share projected income. Income can include donated goods and services provided in-kind to aid in the production of your product, as well as prospective funds to be raised through other funding streams (for example, this could include a crowdfunding campaign, or additional grants you plan to raise in support of the budget).

When you're preparing your budget, remember to pay yourself! You can calculate how much to budget for yourself by tallying up all of your monthly personal expenses (things like rent, bills, food, etc) to figure out your minimum income for one month. Then divide this amount by 160, the number of working hours in a month (i.e. 40 working hours per week x 4 weeks per month). This will give you a minimum hourly rate.

Note: grant money is taxed as income, so be sure to raise your hourly rate to account for the fact that taxes will be taken out. Once you consider the tax implications and adjust your hourly rate accordingly, multiply that rate times the number of hours you plan to work on your proposed project— for instance, if your project requires 20 hours of work a week and will take 6 months to complete, that's 120 hours of your time, for which you should be compensated at your hourly rate. (Editor's note: If you'd like to learn more about budgeting, take a look at TCI's guide to financial planning for artists).

Preparing your CV or artist resume

It's best to keep your CV to around one page, and to focus on the last five years of work. You can include earlier highlights if they're important, but the purpose of a CV is to quickly get a sense of what you've done and which audiences you've engaged, and a longer document can be distracting and cumbersome for the evaluators. If you've acquired important knowledge and experience outside of art-world official channels, you should think of creative ways to include that in your CV. For example, whose teachings have influenced your work, and what other ways have you honed your craft? Use your CV or resume as a space to share the experiences, opportunities, and achievements that tell the story of you and your work in the way you're proud to have it told.

Resources

Finally, here are a few additional resources that may come in handy during the grant-writing process:

- Creative Capital's Budget Tips and Examples
- Planting Seeds: Tracie Holder on Grantwriting (Creative Capital blog)
- Grantwriting for Artists, an online course with Tracie Holder (June 11)

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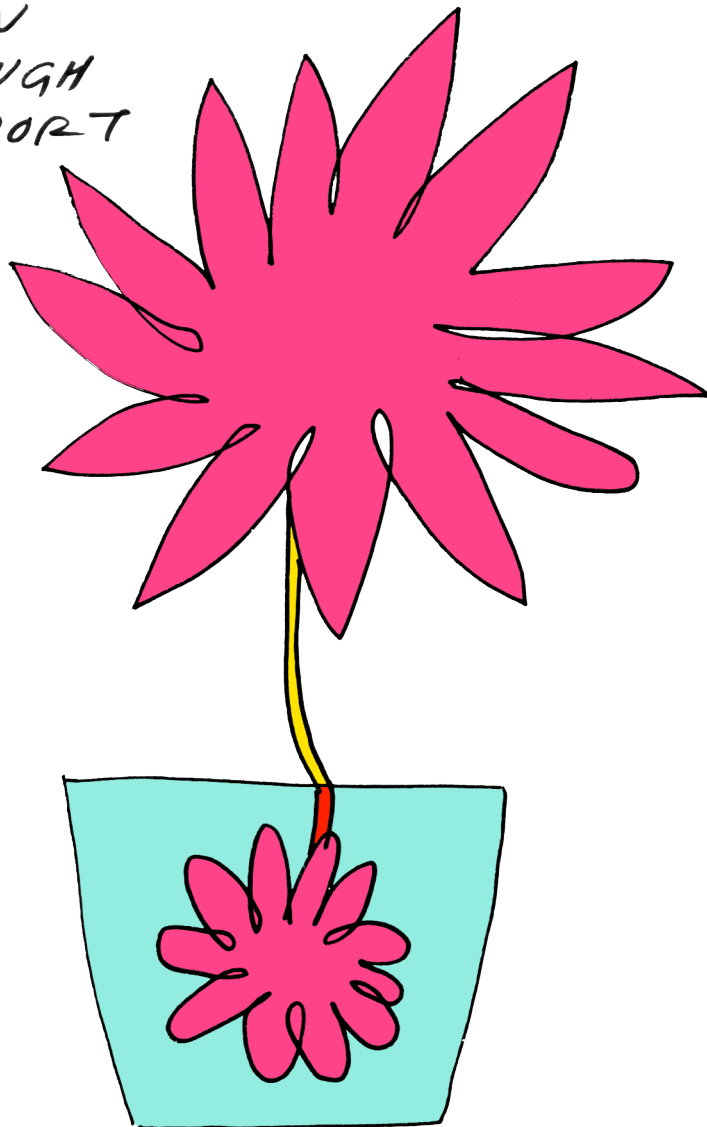
What makes a good application?

Be direct

All strong applications share a clarity of vision and enthusiasm. Articulate what you'd like to do in the present tense, and always strive to deliver your plans using short, clear answers. Focus on describing the project and fold your big ideas into that description. Don't get lost explaining nitty-gritty content or theoretical ideas, and avoid using insider jargon or academic language. Evaluators are often looking through many applications at once (sometimes hundreds), so it's best to be as concise as possible. Remember: this isn't the end of your project, but a seed for a larger line of inquiry. If there are multiple components to your project, focus on the essential part(s)—you can always expand on a project after receiving a grant, and the evaluators don't need to know everything from the very beginning.

Be relevant

Why is this particular funding opportunity relevant to you and your work, and how does it address the funding organization's vision? Why are you the right person at this time? Explain what's interesting, unique, and important about the work. You don't have to display a sense of urgency if it's not true to your project, and the proposal doesn't have to solve a major issue, but it's always helpful if your project is part of a timely conversation. Also, know that the personal context of your application is not always appropriate information to share in a grant application (i.e. you should probably refrain from sharing your life story, unless that story is directly relevant to the grant).

Be considerate

Your early interactions with the staff at a funding organization can say a lot about your character, and it's best to be conscious of your interactions. Many answers to commonly asked questions can be found on an organization's website, but if you can't find a particular piece of information that you need, be considerate in the way that you reach out. Be mindful that most organizations do not have a dedicated help desk, and that staff are usually answering applicants' questions on top of their daily work. If you experience frustration or any bumps in the road with your application, it's fine to provide constructive feedback, but please remember to be courteous. Finally, do not get in touch to ask if you should apply—this is a decision that is unique to your project, and is up to you to determine.

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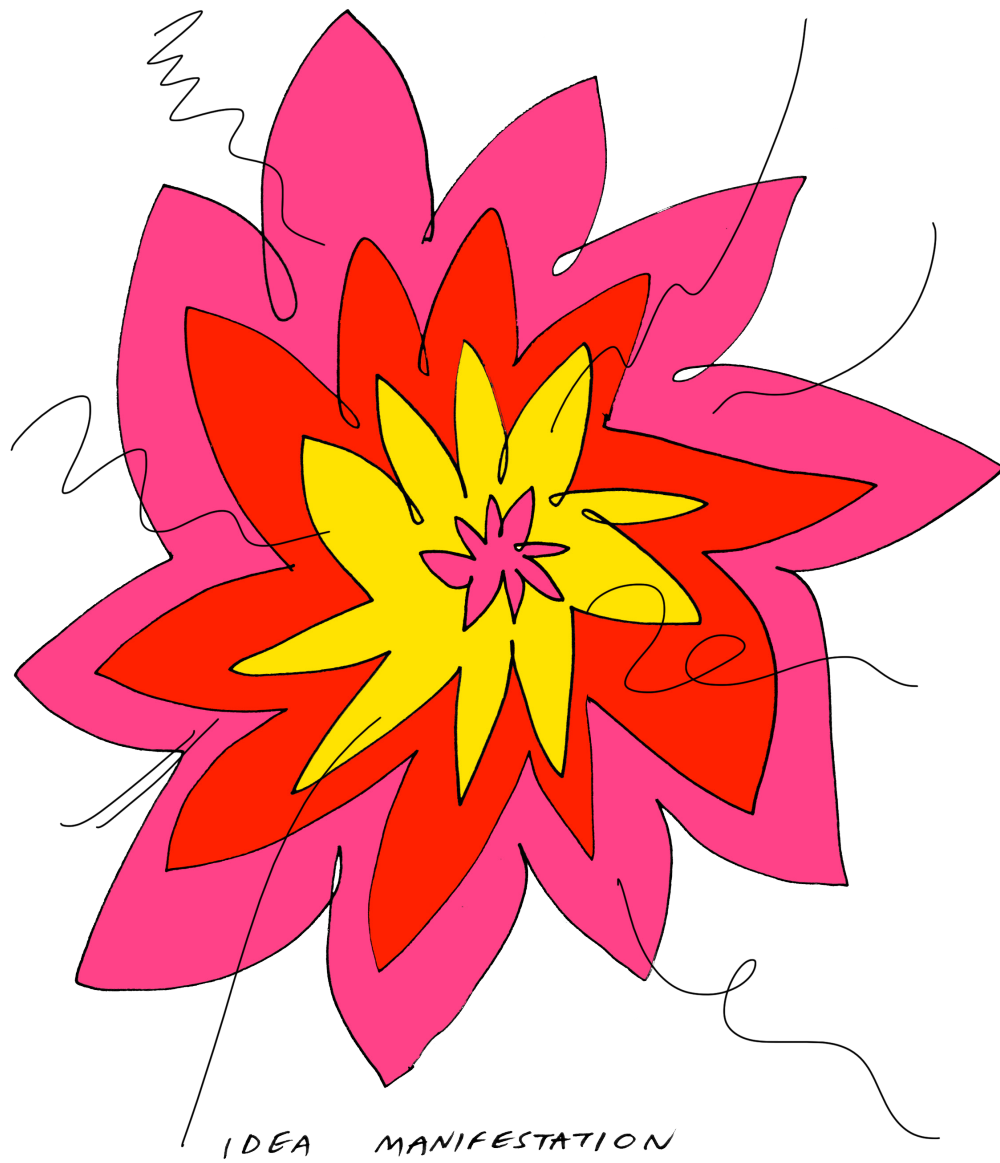
In summary…

As you apply for grants, be kind to yourself. Asking for funding is not an easy process, and without properly scheduling time to prepare, you will likely find yourself overwhelmed and burnt out. Make sure that a grant is the right match for you and your work before you get started—your time is valuable and grant writing is a big commitment. Also, if you don't receive a grant the first time you apply, don't get discouraged or take it personally. Many of Creative Capital's awardees applied multiple times before finally receiving an award. Also, keep in mind that you don't have to apply for everything—it's to your advantage to only focus on grants that fit your unique needs as an artist.

As Director of Artist Initiatives at Creative Capital, Marianna Schaffer serves a key role in cultivating and creating relationships, strategies, outreach, and programs to serve the needs of artists. She has spent over a decade as a leader in the nonprofit and philanthropy sectors in support of American artists and arts institutions dedicated to positive social change. After working as a member of David Rockefeller's philanthropic team for 11 years, Marianna served as a Program Officer at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. There, she helped to empower individual artists and small arts organizations working across the country at the intersection of arts and social justice, primarily through pioneering initiatives such as the Artist as Activist Fellowship and SEED program. She has a Master of International Education from New York University, a B.A. in Social & Global Studies from Antioch College, and is an active member of her Harlem community.