



Bonus Resource for Readers of

N O N P R O F I T S U N F I L T E R E D

Become a Grant Writer

A Short Guide to Launch Your Career, Understand the Work, and Build From There

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Let's Start With the Truth

Grant writing is one of the few careers where strong communication skills can directly help change lives. Behind nearly every youth program, domestic violence shelter, workforce initiative, arts organization, hospital, and community project is someone responsible for keeping the lights on—and more often than not, that someone is a grant writer.

And yet most people have no idea how to get into the field, what the work actually looks like on a Tuesday afternoon, or what goes on inside organizations before a single proposal is ever written.

Grant writing gets sold online as easy remote income. A quick freelance career. Learn it in a weekend. That narrative isn't just incomplete—it's doing real harm to people who enter the field unprepared and to the organizations that hire them.

The truth is that grant writing can be meaningful, stressful, rewarding, exhausting, and emotionally demanding—sometimes all in the same week. It is part writing, part research, part strategy, part project management, and part relationship management. It requires patience, thick skin, and a genuine interest in how nonprofits actually operate, not just how they present themselves.

This guide was written to give you the more honest version—what grant writers really do, how to build real experience, what nobody warns you about, and how to grow from there. You don't need to know everything before starting. But you do need to understand what the role actually requires.

Two ideas will come up again and again throughout these pages: fit matters more than hype, and systems matter as much as writing. Keep those close as you read.

SECTION ONE

What Grant Writers Actually Do

Most people assume grant writing means sitting down, writing a beautiful proposal, submitting it, and waiting for a check. That image gets it about twenty percent right.

A grant writer helps organizations secure funding from foundations, corporations, government agencies, family philanthropies, community funds, and other institutional funders. But the work stretches far beyond drafting. On any given day, a grant writer may be researching funding opportunities, reviewing eligibility requirements, gathering organizational data, shaping narratives, building or refining budgets, coordinating attachments, tracking deadlines, managing reporting requirements, and communicating with leadership and program staff to keep everything moving.

In many cases, grant writers also help organizations clarify their program goals, define outcomes, strengthen their fundraising strategy, organize internal systems, and improve how they communicate with funders over time. It is connector work. Translation work. Sometimes it is the work of holding an organization together long enough to get a proposal out the door.

A skilled grant writer can improve opportunities. But no grant writer can fix a deeply dysfunctional organization alone.

In others, they are expected to somehow produce revenue inside organizations with inadequate support, outdated data, no infrastructure, and leadership that has never had to think carefully about fundraising strategy. Understanding that difference early will save you considerable frustration.

Grant Writing Is Not Magic

One of the most stubborn misconceptions in the field is the belief that strong writing alone guarantees funding. It does not.

Organizations lose grants for many reasons—poor infrastructure, weak financials, unclear outcomes, unrealistic budgets, leadership instability, incomplete applications, limited capacity, or a simple lack of alignment with what the funder actually cares about. Sometimes organizations are rejected because the competition is intense and someone else just fit better that cycle.

A grant writer may spend days or weeks preparing an application that is never funded. This is normal. Rejection is not a sign that you did something wrong. It is a built-in feature of a field where demand almost always exceeds available dollars.

Strong grant writers learn to improve over time, identify better funding matches, build funder relationships, strengthen organizational positioning, and manage expectations internally so the work stays realistic and sustainable. The work requires resilience. That is not a minor detail—it is one of the most important things you can know going in.

SECTION TWO

The Skills That Actually Matter

Grant writing requires far more than grammar and spelling. Some of the strongest grant writers are excellent communicators not because they write beautiful sentences, but because they know how to organize information clearly, manage pressure with grace, and translate complicated work into language funders can actually follow.

Here is what the work genuinely demands.

Writing and Communication

Grant writers must explain programs clearly and persuasively without exaggeration. Funders read hundreds—sometimes thousands—of applications. Clear communication isn't just nice to have; it is the difference between being read and being skimmed past.

Strong writing in this field is organized, concise, specific, readable, and focused on outcomes rather than empty enthusiasm. The ability to simplify complicated information

is one of the most underrated skills in this profession. If you can take something messy and make it clear, you are already ahead of most people applying for these roles.

Research Skills

Grant writers spend significant time researching funders, guidelines, funding priorities, deadlines, trends, and eligibility requirements—not because they love research, but because chasing the wrong opportunities wastes enormous amounts of everyone's time and energy.

A good grant writer learns how to recognize realistic opportunities, spot poor-fit funders, notice emerging funding areas, and read the institutional priorities that often matter more than what is written in the RFP. Not every grant is worth pursuing. Knowing which ones to pass on is as important as knowing how to write a strong proposal.

Organization and Deadline Management

Grant writing is deadline-driven work. Missing one attachment, one budget document, one required signature, or one upload requirement can disqualify an entire proposal—sometimes even when everything else is exceptional.

Strong grant writers often juggle multiple deadlines, calendars, reporting schedules, attachments, revisions, approvals, and follow-up communication simultaneously. Organization is not optional in this field. It is table stakes.

Relationship Management

This is the part people consistently overlook, and it may be the most important skill of all. Fundraising is still deeply relationship-based—even when the process looks transactional from the outside.

Grant writers regularly communicate with executive directors, finance teams, program staff, board members, funders, consultants, and community partners, sometimes within the same proposal cycle. The ability to communicate professionally under pressure matters enormously. Especially when everyone is stressed, the deadline is tomorrow, and the budget still has a gap.

Budget Awareness

You do not need to become an accountant. But you do need to understand the basics of nonprofit budgets—restricted funding, program costs, indirect costs, matching requirements, and financial narratives—because budgets tell stories too.

Funders often review budgets carefully to assess whether organizations are realistic, stable, and prepared to execute what they're promising.

A program narrative that says one thing and a budget that says something else is a red flag to experienced program officers. Learning to read and construct a basic budget narrative is one of the fastest ways to become a more complete grant writer.

SECTION THREE

Starting From Zero

This is the question I hear most often: *How do I become a grant writer if no one will hire me without experience?*

For me, I started as a volunteer in a totally different area.

I was a journalist volunteering at a group home for girls serving as a positive role model. The Director kept asking me to edit her proposals because I was a writer. When I found out I could use my writing skills to help others, it did not take me long to find my first job as a grant writer.

So the answer will vary: you build experience gradually. Most grant writers do not begin with major, intensive, government proposals. They begin with community-based organizations, small grants, volunteer hours, and the willingness to learn by doing before they are polished.

Volunteer With Smaller Organizations

Many community organizations need fundraising help but cannot afford full-time development staff. That gap is your entry point. Volunteering gives you a real window into how nonprofits actually operate, lets you observe fundraising systems in action, teaches you the language of the sector, gives you material for writing samples, and eventually provides references that matter when you pursue paid work.

Be thoughtful about how long you volunteer without compensation—your time has value, and undervaluing it early can set unhelpful patterns. But early experience matters, and starting somewhere is better than waiting for the perfect first opportunity.

Study How Nonprofits Present Themselves

Many new grant writers struggle not because they cannot write, but because they do not understand nonprofit systems. A fast and genuinely useful way to close that gap is to study the materials organizations already produce: annual reports, Form 990s, strategic plans, websites, grant announcements, and organizational budgets. The more familiar you become with how these pieces fit together—and how they sometimes contradict each other—the stronger and more grounded your writing will be.

Build Sample Materials

You can practice before you are ever hired. Create sample narratives, mock program descriptions, simple logic models, impact statements, and fundraising case language. Building even a small portfolio moves you from saying you are interested in the field to showing that you have already begun doing the work. Those are very different things to a hiring manager.

Learn the Language of the Sector

Grant writing has its own vocabulary. You should become comfortable with concepts like outcomes, outputs, deliverables, capacity building, unrestricted funding, sustainability, stewardship, evaluation, and program impact. Understanding the language of the sector makes it easier to follow conversations, interpret funder guidelines, and write with confidence—even before you have years of experience behind you.

Common Mistakes New Grant Writers Make

Most beginners do not struggle because they lack potential. They struggle because they received incomplete information, unrealistic expectations, or pressure to move too fast. Knowing the most common mistakes early can save you real time and frustration.

The errors that trip people up most are usually simple: beginning to write before truly reading the funder's instructions, chasing grants that are a poor fit, relying on vague language instead of specific outcomes, underestimating the time required for attachments and approvals, recycling old narratives without tailoring them, or assuming that strong writing can compensate for weak program design.

One of the best habits you can build is slowing down long enough to assess fit, gather accurate information, and make sure every part of the application—from the need statement to the budget to the evaluation plan—is telling the same story.

SECTION FOUR

What Nobody Warns You About

Grant writing can be deeply rewarding. It can also become emotionally exhausting in ways that are rarely discussed openly.

Many grant writers work inside organizations serving people experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, addiction, poverty, hunger, educational inequity, and mental health challenges. That reality shapes the emotional texture of the work in ways outsiders often cannot see. Over time, constantly packaging human suffering into funding narratives can affect you. The weight of that work is real, and pretending otherwise does not make it less so.

Unrealistic Expectations

Some organizations believe that hiring one grant writer will instantly solve their financial problems. It will not. Funding depends on far more than one person's effort. It reflects leadership, infrastructure, program quality, relationships, financial systems, board engagement, reputation, and timing—all of which sit far beyond any individual grant writer's control.

Grant writers are often expected to produce immediate results inside organizations with significant structural problems. This dynamic is one of the most common sources of burnout and turnover in the field. Going in with clear eyes about what you can and cannot control is not pessimism—it is professionalism.

Rejection Happens Constantly

Even excellent proposals get rejected. A proposal may fail because funding priorities shifted, another organization had stronger existing relationships with the funder, competition was unusually high, geographic preferences changed, internal politics influenced decisions, or the available funding simply shrank.

Do not measure your value solely by approval rates. Sometimes excellent work is competing inside a genuinely difficult funding environment.

Burnout Is a Real Risk

Development and fundraising positions experience some of the highest turnover rates in the nonprofit sector. Many grant writers are simultaneously managing multiple deadlines, carrying emotional labor, navigating reporting pressure, absorbing unrealistic workloads, and covering gaps left by understaffed teams.

Healthy boundaries are not a luxury in this field—they are a prerequisite for sustainability. You cannot consistently produce strong, thoughtful work while operating in permanent crisis mode. The organizations that burn through grant writers fastest are usually the ones that most need someone who stays.

A Quick Readiness Check

Before you spend hours pursuing an opportunity, it is worth asking an honest question: are you—or the organization you are supporting—actually ready to apply?

Many failed applications are not caused by weak writing. They fail because the project is unclear, the infrastructure is incomplete, or the fit is simply poor. A useful readiness check comes down to a few direct questions. Can you clearly explain the problem your program addresses? Do you have measurable outcomes, or at least a realistic way to track them? Is there a workable budget, even if it still needs refinement? Are your

organizational documents current, your financials in order, and your leadership aligned? And does the opportunity genuinely match your mission, geography, audience, and capacity?

If the answer to several of these is no, the most valuable thing you can do may not be writing—it may be strengthening the foundation first.

SECTION FIVE

AI, Technology, and What's Coming

Technology is changing fundraising rapidly, and it would be dishonest to write a guide in this moment without acknowledging it.

AI tools can help with drafting narratives, summarizing research, editing content, organizing information, brainstorming ideas, and improving efficiency—especially when a writer already understands the work well enough to guide the tool responsibly. Used well, these tools can free up real time for the work that requires human judgment.

What AI cannot replace is strategic judgment, relationship-building, deep organizational understanding, lived experience, ethical storytelling, and the trust that grows between real people over time. Funders fund people and organizations, not prose. The human layer of this work still matters enormously.

The professionals most likely to thrive in the next decade are those who combine strong communication skills, fundraising knowledge, strategic thinking, systems awareness, and enough technological fluency to use new tools without letting those tools flatten the human realities behind the work. That is a high bar. It is also an achievable one if you are willing to keep learning.

SECTION SIX

Building a Career From Here

Grant writing is not a ceiling—it is a starting point. The field can grow into many different directions depending on your interests, strengths, and appetite for risk.

Some professionals move into roles like development director, fundraising consultant, nonprofit executive, prospect researcher, advancement specialist, or philanthropic advisor. Others build independent consulting practices, carving out a niche in youth development, healthcare, arts organizations, education, housing, workforce development, government grants, or corporate giving. The path tends to become clearer once you are actually in the work.

What remains consistent across almost every trajectory is this: over time, relationships and reputation matter more than anything on your resume. People hire grant writers they trust. They refer grant writers they respect. They come back to the ones who delivered not just a proposal, but a partnership.

Freelancing vs. Full-Time Employment

Both paths have real advantages, and the right choice depends entirely on what you value.

Full-time roles typically offer salary stability, benefits, a more consistent workflow, and regular collaboration with a team. That consistency can be genuinely valuable, especially early in your career when you are still building systems and learning the rhythms of the work.

Freelance work may offer more flexibility, a diverse mix of clients, remote opportunities, and greater control over your schedule. But it also requires business development, contracts, invoicing, client management, and the kind of steady networking that does not stop when you close a grant. Many people eventually find ways to combine both, moving between employment and consulting at different points in their careers.

Neither path is inherently better. The question is which structure will let you do your best work without burning you out in the process.

S E C T I O N S E V E N

Where to Begin

If you are just starting out, begin with the basics. Learn nonprofit terminology. Study fundraising fundamentals. Read sample grant proposals—many foundations post funded examples on their websites. Spend time with annual reports and other public-

facing materials so you can hear the language of the sector and understand how organizations present their work to the world.

From there, build experience however you can. Volunteer or intern. Create writing samples. Practice reading budgets. Improve your organizational systems. Pay attention to how deadlines, reporting, and donor communication actually work in real settings—not just in textbooks.

Use technology to support your process, not to replace your judgment. Focus on becoming someone who can think clearly, write honestly, and manage complexity with steadiness. Those qualities are rarer than people think, and they are what separates grant writers who last from the ones who burn out inside two years.

SECTION EIGHT

Where to Find Grant Writing Jobs

Knowing you want to do this work is one thing. Knowing where to actually look for opportunities is another. The good news is that grant writing positions are posted across a wide range of platforms—from nonprofit-specific job boards to general freelance marketplaces. Here is where to start your search, and what each is best suited for.

Nonprofit-Specific Job Boards

These should be your first stop. They are built for the sector, attract serious employers, and tend to surface roles that understand what development work actually involves.

- **Idealist** — <https://www.idealist.org> *One of the most widely used platforms for nonprofit jobs. Search 'grant writer,' 'development associate,' or 'grants manager' to find a strong mix of entry-level and experienced roles.*
- **Nonprofit Jobs (npjobs.com)** — <https://www.npjobs.com> *Focused entirely on the nonprofit sector. Solid for finding positions at established organizations across mission areas.*
- **Work for Good** — <https://www.workforgood.org> *A well-regarded board specifically for nonprofit and social sector careers, with strong filters for role type and location.*

- **Chronicle of Philanthropy Job Board** — <https://jobs.philanthropy.com>
Leans toward more experienced roles and larger organizations, but worth checking regularly—especially for development director and senior grant writer positions.
- **The Bridgespan Group** — <https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/jobs>
Primarily focused on leadership roles at high-impact nonprofits and foundations. Useful once you have built experience and are ready to move up.
- **Nonprofit Jobs on Facebook** — <https://www.facebook.com/groups/nonprofitjobs/>
This is a community I created that has grown to nearly 9,000 members nationwide. The group features nonprofit job opportunities ranging from entry-level and support positions to executive leadership roles. Every posting is reviewed by our team to help ensure it comes from a legitimate nonprofit organization or professional recruiter. We work hard to keep the group free from scams and questionable listings. You're also welcome to post your resume, qualifications, or job search needs.

General Job Platforms Worth Searching

These platforms cast a wider net and often surface opportunities that smaller nonprofits post when they are not plugged into sector-specific boards.

- **LinkedIn** — <https://www.linkedin.com/jobs> Search 'grant writer,' 'grants coordinator,' or 'development associate.' Follow organizations you admire and turn on job alerts. LinkedIn is also where most hiring managers will look you up before reaching out.
- **Indeed** — <https://www.indeed.com> High volume, broad reach. Use specific search terms and filter by nonprofit or education sector. The quality varies, so read postings carefully to assess whether the role is realistic and well-structured.
- **Glassdoor** — <https://www.glassdoor.com> Useful for job searching and for researching organizations before you apply. Read employee reviews. They will often tell you more about a workplace than the job description ever will.

Freelance and Contract Platforms

If you are exploring freelance work or building early experience through contract projects, these platforms can help you find clients without an existing network.

- **Catchafire** — <https://www.catchafire.org> Matches skilled volunteers and professionals with nonprofits that need specific help—including grant writing. An excellent way to build experience and references while doing real work.

- **Upwork** — <https://www.upwork.com> A general freelance marketplace with a strong demand for grant writers. Competitive, but manageable if you have writing samples and a clear profile. Start with smaller projects to build reviews.
- **GrantStation** — <https://grantstation.com> Primarily a grants database, but also a resource hub for grant professionals. Some job listings and professional development resources worth exploring.
- **Grant Professionals Association (GPA)** — <https://www.grantprofessionals.org> The professional association for grant writers. Member job board, professional development, networking events, and a credential program (GPC) if you want to signal seriousness to employers.

A Few Honest Notes on the Search

Job titles vary more than you might expect. The same role may be called grant writer, grants coordinator, development associate, development officer, grants manager, or resource development specialist depending on the organization. Search broadly and read each posting carefully rather than filtering too narrowly by title.

Pay attention to what the role actually requires. A posting that lists 'responsible for all fundraising, grant writing, events, major gifts, communications, and donor relations' for one person at a small budget organization is a warning sign, not an opportunity. Those roles often exist because good people have already left them.

Your network will eventually matter more than any job board. Connect with other grant writers and development professionals on LinkedIn, attend AFP (Association of Fundraising Professionals) chapter events in your area, and let people know you are building your career in this space. Most meaningful opportunities in this field are filled through relationships, not postings.

The job listing is just the beginning of your research. The culture, leadership, and financial health of the organization matter just as much as the role itself.

C O N C L U S I O N

Start Small. Build Well. Keep Going.

Grant writing is not simply about asking for money. At its best, it is the work of translating community needs, organizational capacity, and program vision into a clear, credible case for support. It is the work of making what matters to people in a community visible to people who have resources to share.

This is a profession that rewards patience, curiosity, discipline, and resilience. It asks you to think strategically, write clearly, manage details carefully, and keep learning as the sector changes around you—because it will change, and the best professionals change with it.

The strongest grant writers build their careers one skill, one project, and one trusted relationship at a time. Over the years, they develop patience, resilience, communication, organization, emotional intelligence, and the kind of strategic thinking that only comes from doing the work honestly and consistently—not from a course, not from a certification, but from showing up and doing it over and over again until it becomes yours.

You do not need to begin as an expert. You do not need to wait until you feel completely ready. Most people who built meaningful careers in this field started with less than you have right now.

What matters most is starting honestly, building strong habits, learning from each attempt, and improving over time. That is how strong grant writing careers are made. Not in a weekend. Not in a shortcut. One honest piece of work at a time.

Start small. Stay intentional. Build well.

Continue the Conversation.

Thank you for reading.

If this guide helped you better understand grant writing, fundraising, and nonprofit careers, I invite you to stay connected.

Nonprofit work is constantly evolving. New funding trends emerge, technology changes, leadership challenges shift, and career opportunities appear every day. The most successful professionals commit to continuous learning.

Follow for more nonprofit advice, fundraising insights, and new resources:

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About the Author

Simone Joye is a philanthropy strategist, nonprofit executive, former journalist, consultant, and author with nearly three decades of experience across grassroots, regional, and national nonprofit organizations.

Throughout her career, she has helped secure millions of dollars in funding, led organizations through periods of growth and transition, and advised nonprofit leaders, boards, foundations, and institutions on fundraising strategy, organizational sustainability, governance, and leadership.

A former nonprofit CEO and development executive, Simone has worked across youth development, education, housing, workforce development, healthcare, and community-based organizations. Her work has been recognized by civic, philanthropic, and community leaders for its impact on strengthening organizations and expanding opportunities for underserved communities. She is also the author of *Nonprofits Unfiltered: Money, Power, and the People Who Carry America's Charities*.

Through S. Joye & Associates, she advises nonprofit leaders and institutions on fundraising, strategy, infrastructure, and organizational effectiveness.

Ready to Build Your Grant Writing Skills?

I also offer:

- One-on-one grant writing coaching
- Grant writing workshops and training
- Fundraising strategy consultations
- Nonprofit development coaching
- Customized presentations for colleges, nonprofits, and community organizations

To inquire about coaching, workshops, speaking engagements, or consulting services, visit:

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