

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

WRITING AN ARTIST PROPOSAL

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Artist proposals are tricky pieces of work, and different people will give you completely different pieces of information on how to write them. I take a somewhat emotional, psychological but not particularly theoretical, approach to grant writing. I find it easier to speak about my work intellectually, using the language of sociology and psychology as opposed to the language of semiotics and representation. This is the way I talk and is a language that is complex but shared by non-artists and non-academics (this is pure bias on my part, I'm just stating my facts). I have written about 60 grant proposals. I have been awarded 10. I have been seeking funding for my present film for seven years, and have received funding last year and this year. I continued to work on the film without funding and its submission as a work in progress sample has been pivotal in getting it funded. So keep working, do not delay a project due to lack of funding.

Simple Rules

Tell the truth. Posing is transparent and you'll never know when you get it right.

Talk about your questions, not your answers. A good question is much more engaging than a formulated conclusion. Be specific even if you are working with abstract concepts. Describe the specific parameters.

Artist Proposal Skeleton (in this order)

1 Description of proposed project:

This should be the title of the work, the media, length, genre (non-fiction, experimental narrative, animation, 90-minute play, etc.). Put this in a present and active tense: e.g. the project I am working on...; during the fellowship period, I will continue work on (title).

2 One sentence that encompasses the main questions of your piece:

This should define the parameters of the project. This is both to get people interested and to show that your piece has boundaries.

Example (bad): I plan to do a feature film starring people I meet on the street in all the neighborhoods of Chicago. This piece will be about how we can all live on this planet.

Example (good): I plan to complete a triptych of three ten-minute films which will rework the same narrative using three different sets of actors, in three different locations in Chicago. In this work I will question ways that we view conflict with regards to ethnicity and urban location.

3 Narrative or linear description of the work:

This a pragmatic map of the mechanics of your project, this is important when you start to theorize about less concrete aspects of your film. Even in the most experimental work, there are structures. Words to not use when describing characters: stereotypical, real asshole, horny, loner, average person. Instead of saying a city, say Youngstown, Ohio. Instead of office worker, boiler room maintenance man at the P.W. Pierce Building.

(Please turn the page.)

- 4 Main themes that the work addresses outside of itself:
This can be either the roots of the work or the issues in the world that your film works with. This may seem lofty, but it is the real stuff that the metaphor represents. *The Old Man and the Sea*, after all, is not about a guy not catching a big fish. This is also a good place to mention why you have some legitimacy in this enquiry.
- 5 Material elements of the work:
Specifics of locations, secured equipment and talent (names, if that is allowed). Specific treatments of specific elements of the film that you have outlined in the narrative description, or theme. It is important that the funders can visualize this work coming to fruition, so if you say you are going to shoot footage in Afghanistan, without giving us contacts or ways that you will do this, the project will not get funded. Be specific on the availability of your tools.
- 6 The present state of the work:
I don't think it is good to tell people that if they don't give you money this idea goes on the shelf. Funders want to believe that they are helping you, but not legitimizing your efforts. This is one reason why people often get more than one grant for a project, the funders want to be part of a piece that will have a public life.
- 7 What is a general problem with your work that this project will negotiate?
I swear by this one. There is nothing worse than someone with no sense of where their work fails. Examples: Using close-ups of these characters will make the audience feel less distant from the emotional content of the film; instead of the fast cutting of my sample work, I wish to negotiate a montage in this longer form so that the audience can absorb my metaphorical language. I want to cut down on the excess verbiage that I feel reaches a cacophony in my previous video, and allow silence to intervene.
- 8 Closing statements
Close up with a hopeful goal for your work, addressing the present tense. Example: I am truly excited about this project. I feel that (title) will give voice to ideas that touch us on a daily basis, a search for sanctuary and forgiveness for past failures. I believe that this project can reach a large and diverse audience, and will challenge people's notions of what is a family secret. I will first enter the film in national and international festivals, and then hope for a commercial release in alternative cinema venues. Thank you for your consideration.

The End:

I hope this little map can be of help to you. Remember that the work samples are the most important element in any grant. And a proposal just helps people see them. Feel free to directly address elements of your work samples in your proposals. I always show finished work, and also work in progress toward my proposed project. Just-finished work is great too, as long as you're not taking a 180 degree turn in your work. Good luck, but as Mae West said "luck had nothing to do with it." Oh wait, she said "goodness had nothing to do with it." Nevermind then.

The end again.

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