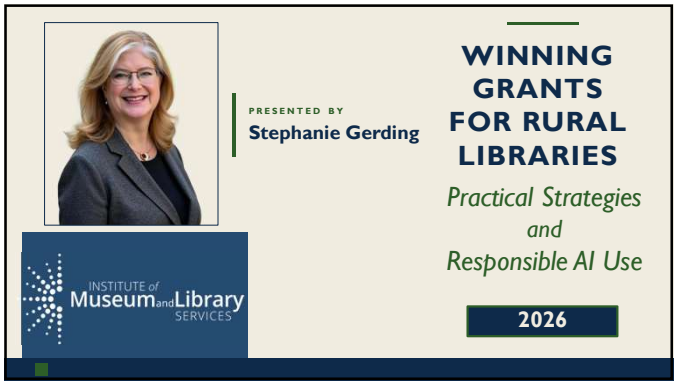
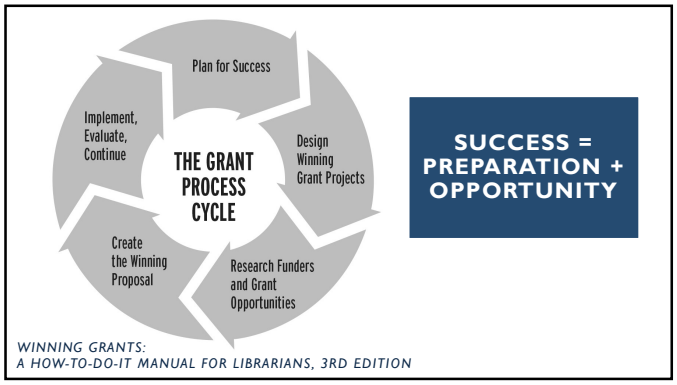

PRESENTED BY
Stephanie Gerding
WINNING GRANTS FOR RURAL LIBRARIES
Practical Strategies and Responsible AI Use
2026
INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

1


AGENDA
• Identifying Community Needs
• Designing Grant Projects
• Finding Funders that Fit
• Writing Strong Proposals
• Using Best Practices and AI Tools

2


Plan for Success
Design Winning Grant Projects
Research Funders and Grant Opportunities
Create the Winning Proposal
Implement, Evaluate, Continue
THE GRANT PROCESS CYCLE
SUCCESS = PREPARATION + OPPORTUNITY
WINNING GRANTS:
A HOW-TO-DO-IT MANUAL FOR LIBRARIANS, 3RD EDITION

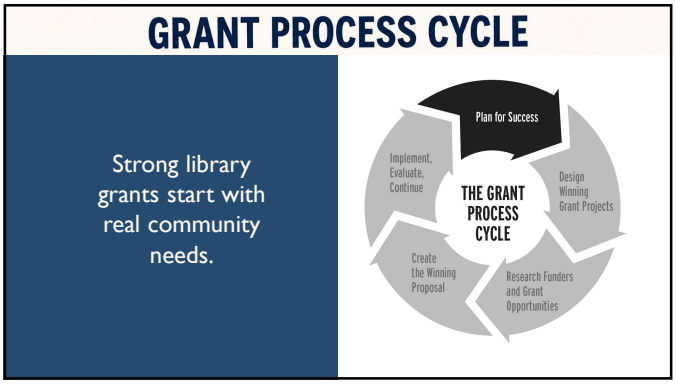
3


You Already Have Grant Skills!
Grant work builds on what you already do.
COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH
ORGANIZATION
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
PROBLEM SOLVING
PARTNERSHIP BUILDING
EVALUATION & IMPACT

4


Focus on People
Funders invest in people, not things. Define the change you want to create, not just the activity you want to offer.
Students complete homework
Job seekers Apply online
Older adults access telehealth
Families learn digital skills

5


GRANT PROCESS CYCLE
Strong library grants start with real community needs.
Plan for Success
Design Winning Grant Projects
Research Funders and Grant Opportunities
Create the Winning Proposal
Implement, Evaluate, Continue
THE GRANT PROCESS CYCLE

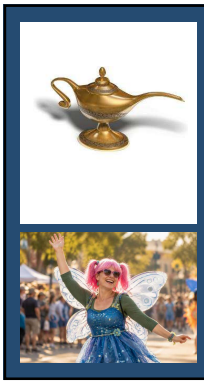
6

Libraries Build Community Well-Being



- **Learning** — Literacy and lifelong learning
- **Workforce Development** — Jobs, skills, and career opportunities
- **Connection** — Belonging; a trusted place to gather
- **Access** — Internet, devices, hands-on help
- **Health** — Wellness and trusted information close to home
- **Resilience** — A steady civic anchor during change or crisis

7



DREAM BIG

How can the library help?

8

START WITH COMMUNITY NEEDS

Use what you have to discover what matters most.

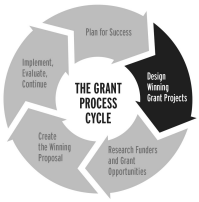
The components for proposals & inspiration for grant projects are in strategic plans.

1. Strategic **plans** are the best shortcut!
   Library and community plans
2. Needs assessments
3. Data (Census, Public Libraries Survey, stats)
   IMLS PLS Search & Compare (library); Census Reporter (community); FCC Broadband Map (internet)
4. Community feedback and partner input
5. Staff observations

Strategic Plan	Grant Proposal
The library's mission, values, and vision statement	Organizational profile
Community needs assessment	Community profile Statement of needs
Strategic priorities, goals, and objectives	Project ideas
Action plan	Timeline/activities/methods
Overall budget	Project budget
Evaluation plan	Project evaluation plan

9

PROJECT PLANNING STEPS



- Step 1: Community Need
- Step 2: Project Idea
- Step 3: Project Goals, Objectives and Outcomes
- Step 4: Activities
- Step 5: Timeline
- Step 6: Budget
- Step 7: Evaluation Plan

10

A **grant project** is
the **solution** to a **need** in the community.



It's About People…

11

Turn a Need Into a Grant Opportunity

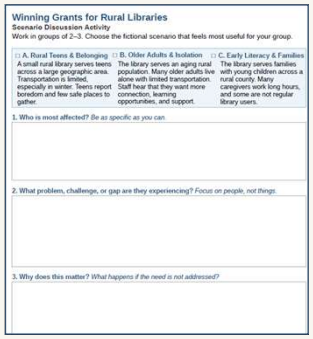
1. Who is affected?
2. What problem, challenge, or gap are they experiencing?
3. What evidence shows the need exists?
4. Why is the library positioned to help?

Keep the focus on people.

12

Scenario Activity

- Work in groups of 2-3
- Answer first 3 questions
- Will complete sheet later



Winning Grants for Rural Libraries

Scenario Discussion Activity

Work in groups of 2–3. Choose the fictional scenario that feels most useful for your group.

☐ A. Rural Teens & Belonging	☐ B. Older Adults & Isolation	☐ C. Early Literacy & Families
A small rural library serves teens across a large geographic area. Transportation is limited, especially in winter. Teens report boredom and few safe places to gather.	The library serves an aging rural population. Many older adults live alone with limited transportation. Staff hear that they want more connection, learning opportunities, and support.	The library serves families with young children across a rural county. Many caregivers work long hours, and some are not regular library users.

1. Who is most affected? *Be as specific as you can.*

2. What problem, challenge, or gap are they experiencing? *Focus on people, not things.*

3. Why does this matter? *What happens if the need is not addressed?*

13

Co-Design

Plan projects with your community, not just for them.

WHAT IT MEANS

Designing programs and services **together** with community members, instead of making decisions for them.

IN PRACTICE

Inviting a group of teens to be part of a library's Teen Advisory Board to co-develop, co-plan and co-implement library teen programs.

WHO TO INVOLVE

- Children or Teens
- Families
- Senior Citizens
- Immigrants/refugees
- Low income
- Persons with disabilities
- Intergenerational groups
- Unemployed
- Rural Populations
- Non/Limited English Speaking
- LGBTQ+ community members
- People experiencing homelessness
- Library Staff, Volunteers, and/or Trustees

14

PARTNER AND COLLABORATE



- Community Service Organizations
- Cultural Organizations (Museums, Historical Societies)
- Chambers of Commerce & Economic Development Orgs
- Healthcare Providers
- Local Businesses (Banks, Retail, Restaurants, Realtors)
- Local Government (Social Services Agencies)
- Media (Newspapers, Radio, and TV stations)
- Nonprofit Organizations
- Other Libraries
- Religious Organizations and Churches
- Schools and Higher Education
- Senior Centers and Technology Centers
- Youth Organizations (Boys and Girls Clubs, Childcare Facilities, Home School Groups)

15



16

Snack and Learn Program
Cambria County Library, PA



Grant: IMLS National Leadership Grants for Libraries
Fiscal Year: 2026
Federal Funding: $100,000

Project Goal: Improve family nutrition, literacy, and health through educational programs and community partnerships.

Key Activities

- Partner with local health, education, and community orgs.
- Offer weekly children's programs featuring healthy snacks.
- Teach families how to grow food and eat well on a budget.
- Assess community needs and connect families with local resources.
- Develop a resource video library and Snack and Learn toolkit for other libraries.

Sustainability: Share videos and program materials to other libraries

Intended Outcomes: Healthier families, stronger community connections, and improved literacy and health outcomes.

17

Community Memory Project

Scott County Library System, Eldridge, Iowa

- **The need:** Rural local history disappearing in crumbling family albums and untold stories
- **The idea:** A scanning and preservation center, community scanning days, kids' genealogy guide, archival kits, oral histories
- **The partners:** Local history organizations, memory care institutions, and 14 rural city governments
- **The ask:** $13,166 **IMLS grant** for scanning equipment, programming, and a project manager.



18

Goals, Objectives, Outcomes

Keep the logic simple and connected.

1 Goal

The broad direction of the project

Example:

Improve digital literacy for older adults.

2 Objective

A specific, measurable target

Example:

1. 30 older adults participate in a series of beginner digital skills classes over 8 weeks.
2. Partner with the local senior center to expand digital skills support for older adults.

3 Outcome

The change in the people

Example:

Older adults will increase confidence, skills, & independence in using digital tools for everyday life.

Outcome:
change in attitude, behavior, skills, knowledge, or life condition.

19

Activities and Timeline

The Community Memory Project, mapped across two years.

Months 1–3	Months 4–6	Months 7–15	Months 16–20	Months 21–24	Ongoing
Hire staff, buy equipment, confirm partners	Kick-off program; open the scanning center	Scanning days, oral histories, uploads	Archives visits, books, backpack kits	Publish the collection, report results	Track items, interviews, contributions

Show funders you have planned a scheduled sequence of project activities and milestones.

20

Build a Realistic Budget

Every cost should connect to a project activity and be justified.

BUDGET CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT
Personnel	Project manager	$7,800
Equipment	Scanners and storage	$3,000
Programming	History program and scanning days	$1,000
Publications	Memory book and guides	$800
Evaluation	Surveys and reporting	$566
TOTAL GRANT REQUEST		$13,166
In-kind contribution	Staff, volunteer, and partner time	$6,000

Budget = the financial version of your project plan.

21

Show the Impact



What will you do?
Activities • services • programs • audience

What will improve?
Skills • confidence • access • behavior

How will you prove it?
Counts • surveys • stories • observations

22

Example: Library Garden Project



Who will be reached?	What will you do?	What will change?	How will you show results?
50 community members	Create garden beds	New skills, confidence, knowledge, behavior	Before/after surveys
Families	Offer workshops	More food security	Attendance counts
Older adults	Provide tools, seeds, and support	Increase community connections	Participant stories
Our rural community			Staff observations

23

How to Measure Impact Using Practical Evidence

- **Set a baseline:** Record where things stand before the project starts
- **IMLS: "Identify what data you will collect from what source, the method you will use to collect it, and according to what schedule."**
- **Count Stats:** Items digitized, sessions held, people served, materials distributed
- **Surveys:** Short before-and-after questions on confidence, skills, and use
- **Stories:** Quotes, interviews, and photos that show change in real lives
- **Observation:** Staff notes on what people do differently over time
- **Data you already have:** Circulation, program attendance, website and catalog use



Choose two or three measures that will provide quality data and set a schedule.

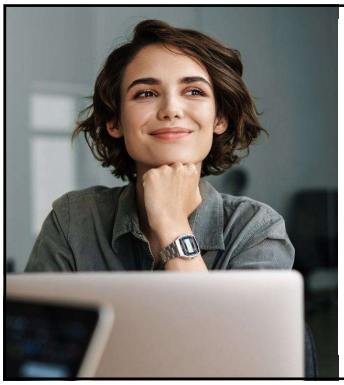
24

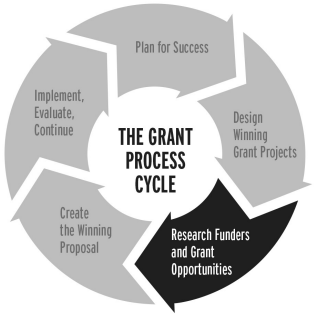
Scenario Activity

Complete question 4 and Do -> Change -> Show

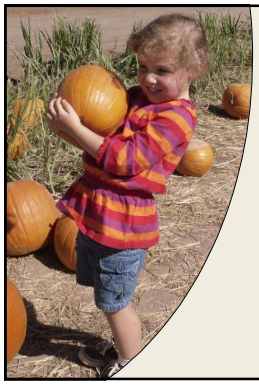


25





26



FINDING THE RIGHT FUNDER

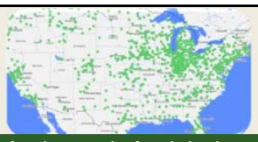


27

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Start Local

Look for funders close to home.



cof.org/community-foundation-locator

- **Community & local foundations** Place-based funders that reinvest in the towns they serve.
- **Businesses & corporations** Local employers and chains with giving or sponsorship programs.
- **Service clubs & civic groups** Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Soroptimists, and Junior League.

28

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Federal Grant Sources

grants.gov

National agencies fund libraries, learning, and community access.

- Institute of Museum & Library Services
  The primary federal funder for libraries and museums
- National Endowment for the Humanities
  Public humanities programming and preservation
- National Endowment for the Arts
  Arts access, creativity, and community arts
- U.S. Department of Education
  Literacy, learning, and education initiatives
- National Library of Medicine
  Health information and outreach projects

Institute of Museum and Library Services

IMLS Community-Centered Implementation Grants
($25,000–$100,000)

Deadline: Nov. 13, 2026

Project start date: August 1, 2027
- Adapt existing models rather than starting from scratch
- Create resources others can use after the grant ends

29

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

State & Local Government

Many state agencies and local governments fund library projects directly.

- State Library
- State Humanities Council
- State Arts Council
- State Department of Education

City & county government Arts, business, community development, environment, historic preservation, education, youth, technology, and archives.

30

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Private Funding Sources

Foundations, companies, and associations all support library work.

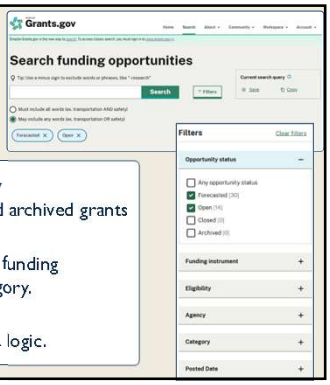
- **Foundations** Private and family foundations fund local community priorities.
- **Corporations** Corporate giving and sponsorships Dollar General Literacy Foundation, Target, Walmart.org, Penguin Random House.
- **Professional associations** Grants and scholarships from ALA, PLA, ARSL, and YALSA.

31

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Simpler Grants.gov

The central portal for finding and applying to federal grants.



- **Search every federal opportunity** Browse forecasted, posted, closed, and archived grants by keyword, number, or category.
- **Filter** Narrow by opportunity status, funding instrument, eligibility, agency, and category.
- **Broaden or narrow results** Combine search terms with AND/OR logic.

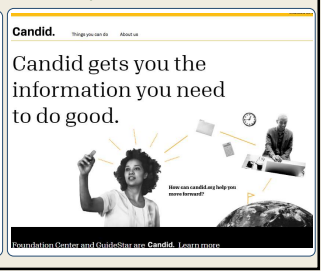
32

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Candid.org

Comprehensive nonprofit and foundation research, all in one place.

- **One trusted source** Formed by joining Foundation Center and GuideStar.
- **Search 1.3+ million organizations** Look up funders by name, EIN, or keyword.
- **Free registration adds depth** Unlock detailed funder profiles and a personalized dashboard.



33

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

The Grantsmanship Center

Funding research and training for grantseekers.

- Explore foundation, government, and corporate funding in one place.
- **Top foundations by state**
- **State grant resources** Click your state for specific, local grants.

tgci.com/funding-sources



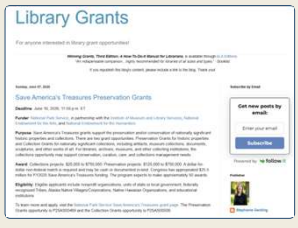
34

WHERE TO FIND GRANTS

Library Grants Blog

Curated grant opportunities for anyone interested in library funding.

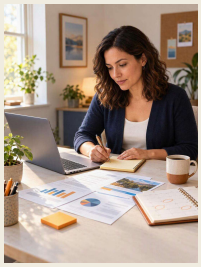
- **Brief descriptions** Each post lists the deadline, funder, award, eligibility, and how to apply.
- **National opportunities**
- **Get new posts by email**



35

Where to Find Library Grant Opportunities

- **Your state library organization**
  Find state grants and helpful people
- **Local & community foundations**
  Look close to home for local funding priorities
- **The Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL)**
  Find small/rural library grants + a monthly member Grant Opportunities Digest
- **Library Grants blog**
  Find library-specific opportunities
- **Simpler.grants.gov/search**
  Search federal grant opportunities
- **Candid.org / Foundation Directory**
  Research foundations, past grants, and 990s tax records
- **The Grantsmanship Center**
  Locate top funders by state.



36

Eligibility and Registrations



Check eligibility first: Read who may apply before writing a word.
For federal grants:

- **Register in SAM.gov:** Required for federal funds, annual renewal; start early
- **Get your UEI:** The Unique Entity ID from SAM.gov identifies your organization
- **Set up Grants.gov:** Register the library and assign who can submit

Nonprofit status: Many private funders require 501(c)(3) documentation
Fiscal agent: Can Friends group, foundation, or city apply on your behalf?

Registrations can take weeks.
Begin before you find an opportunity.

37

Funder Fit Check



- ✓ **Mission match**
  Does the project align with the funder's priorities?
- ✓ **Eligible applicant**
  Does your library qualify? Do they fund your location and organizational type?
- ✓ **Project fit**
  Do they fund this kind of work?
- ✓ **Funding fit**
  Is the award appropriate for the project?
- ✓ **Realistic timeline**
  Can you apply and complete the work on time?
- ✓ **Manageable requirements**
  Is the effort worth the opportunity?

38

Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI is not one tool. It includes many kinds of systems.

1. Predictive & Recommendation AI

These systems look for patterns and make suggestions.

- Netflix or Spotify recommendations
- Google Maps traffic routing
- Social media feeds
- Email Spam filters
- Online shopping recommendations

2. Generative AI

Generative AI creates new content — text, images, summaries, translations, or conversations.

- ChatGPT
- Microsoft Copilot
- Google Gemini
- AI image generators
- AI writing assistants
- AI-generated meeting summaries

3. AI in Everyday Life

Many people already use AI without realizing it.

- Predictive text while typing
- Voice assistants like Siri or Alexa
- Translation tools
- Zoom auto-captions
- Customer service chatbots
- AI-generated email suggestions

39

Responsible AI Use

Use AI for a clear purpose, with human review and appropriate safeguards.

Protect privacy
Never put sensitive and non-public information in unapproved AI tools.

Keep humans in the loop
Treat AI output as a draft.

Be transparent
Clearly disclose when and how AI is used.

Evaluate benefits, risks, and impacts
Consider accuracy, privacy, accessibility, bias, sustainability, and trust.

Build AI literacy
Help people understand AI's benefits, risks, and limitations.

40

Verify Everything

Verify facts, data, citations, deadlines, eligibility, and requirements.

Always rely on your own community knowledge and specifics.

Opinions on AI Use Vary Widely

- Check funder policies on AI use.
- In some cases, funding agencies want you to note that you've used AI in the development of the proposal. Be transparent.

41

Good Uses of Generative AI in Grant Work

- **Summarize public guidelines**
- **Organize notes or information**
- **Brainstorm questions or approaches**
- **Edit for clarity and concision**
- **Compare a draft with criteria**
- **Suggest evaluation questions**
- **Identify gaps to review**
- **Create a first-pass checklist**



Always verify requirements, data, citations, deadlines, and eligibility.
You are responsible for what is submitted.
Don't include confidential or sensitive information.

42

Common AI Tools for Grant Work

- **ChatGPT and Claude:** Brainstorm, draft, revise, review
- **Copilot and Gemini:** Built into Microsoft / Google apps
- **Perplexity AI:** Research and find sources
- **NotebookLM (Google):** Work with your trusted documents
- **Grammarly:** Proofreading, clarity, and tone
- **Transcription tools:** Turn interviews and meetings into text



Customize in settings:

- Use plain, concise language.
- Do not use em dashes. Use periods, commas, or semicolons instead.
- Ask for clarification when needed rather than making assumptions.

43

Effective Prompting

Give AI the destination, not just the task. Explain what you're trying to accomplish for more relevant and useful results.

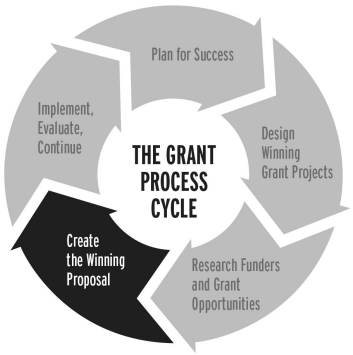
- **Understand the guidelines** "Review these grant guidelines and create a checklist of eligibility requirements, deadlines, required attachments, and review criteria. Use only the information provided."
- **Strengthen the need statement** "Using only the community data I provide, identify how to strengthen this need statement. Identify if additional evidence is needed."
  "Rewrite in clear, compelling language. Preserve every fact, number, and source, and do not add new information."
- **Build the outline** "Turn these review criteria into a proposal outline, one section per criterion."
- **Tighten the abstract** "Cut this abstract to 150 words, while preserving the project's need, purpose, key activities, and intended outcomes. Do not add new information."
- **Review like a panel** "Score this draft against the provided review criteria and identify strengths, weaknesses, unanswered questions, and anything that could cost the proposal points."

Provide clear context, source information, instructions, and constraints.

44

Library Grants and AI Pair Share

45



46

Read the Guidelines Like a Reviewer

- **Find the criteria:**
  The rubric, or scoring criteria, shows what matters most.
- **Follow their lead:**
  Follow the funder's directions, criteria, priorities.
- **Use their headings:**
  Mirror a funder's language in headings and in their order.
- **Build a checklist:**
  Include attachments, formats, page limits, fonts, and deadlines.
- **Answer every question:**
  Make answers easy for reviewers to find and score.
- **Ask, don't guess:** Funders will often confirm fit and answer questions.

The guidelines are your roadmap.



47

Grant Proposal Components



Follow the funder's required format exactly.

01 **Title sheet & abstract** The first page a reviewer reads closely	02 **Organizational overview** Why you can be trusted with the funding	03 **Statement of needs** The problem, in your community's numbers
04 **Project description** Goals, outcomes, activities, partnerships	05 **Timeline and budget** What happens when, and what it costs	06 **Evaluation plan** How you will know it worked

If someone only reads the abstract, they should understand the whole proposal.

48

Writing the Need and the Abstract

- **Write the abstract last**
  It should reflect the entire proposal
- **Open with the need**
  Focus on the people. Who is affected and what if nothing changes?
- **Pair data with a story**
  Census and usage data combined with one real person's experience
- **Cite your sources**
  Local evidence means more than national statistics
- **One paragraph, six answers**
  Who, what, where, for whom, how much, and what changes



49

A clear, specific abstract helps reviewers see the **need**, the **plan**, and the **impact**—fast.





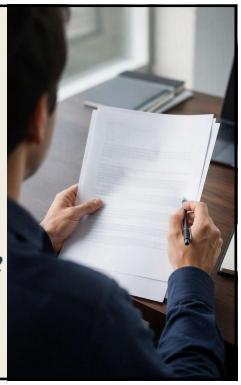
WEAK EXAMPLE:
"We will offer programs to support our community."

STRONG EXAMPLE:
"Our library will launch an afterschool tutoring and mentoring program for 60 middle school students who are falling behind academically, providing weekly academic support and skill-building activities to improve grades, confidence, and school engagement."

50

4 Questions Every Proposal Must Answer

1. What need is being met?
2. How will you do it?
3. Who will be helped or changed?
4. Why should this be funded?



51

PROPOSAL TIPS

PASSION and facts. Tell the story.

Ask for what is needed.

Pay attention to the details.



52

The Grant Review Process

Understand how decisions actually get made.

Build relationships
Talk with funders before you apply, not just when you need funding.

Know their priorities
Read what has been funded and how they decide.

Expect subjectivity
Like most human decisions, giving decisions are partly subjective.

Make it easy to say yes
Clear, complete proposals respect the reviewer's time.





The more you understand reviewers, the stronger your proposal becomes.

53

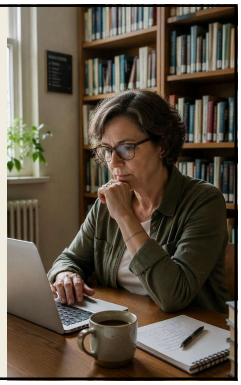
What Funders Look For

- Alignment with priorities and purpose; a strong match
- Project necessity and impact; clearly defined needs and what will change
- Guideline adherence; careful attention to requirements
- Budget precision
- Collaborative efforts
- Research and data
- Effective evaluation with measurable outcomes
- Sustainability; a solid plan

54

Think Like a Reviewer

- Did they follow the guidelines?
- Can I quickly understand the need, project, audience, and expected results?
- Is the need compelling and well established?
- Does the project clearly fit with our priorities?
- Are the activities, timeline, budget, and outcomes clear and aligned?
- Is the plan realistic for this organization?
- Are there partners, sustainability, evaluation plan?
- Have they made it easy for me to say yes?



55

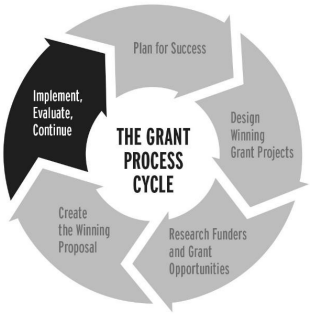
EXERCISE: YOU ARE A GRANT REVIEWER!



- Form teams of funders (4-5 people)
- These are real grant proposals from libraries
- Your foundation has $40,000 for 3 grant categories: Technology, Capital Improvements, and Programs
  - Establish your criteria for evaluation
  - Discuss the grant proposals
  - Decide how to distribute your funding
  - You must give it all away
- You have 10 minutes to decide.



56





57

NOT FUNDED?

Don't give up!

Most successful grant writers are declined sometimes.



58

Keep the relationship

Stay in touch. A no this year may be a yes in the future.
Reviewer comments are free consulting on your next draft.

- **Thank the funder** and ask for reviewer comments.
- **Read the scores** against the criteria, without defending.
- **Rework weak sections,** not the whole proposal.
- **Ask the program officer** what would make it competitive.
- **Resubmit** to a funder whose priorities fit better.

59

FUNDED!

Celebrate, then:



Review the award terms and requirements
Track reporting dates, allowable costs, and what needs prior approval

Track spending and evidence from day one
Set up a way to track the budget and keep every receipt

Watch the budget
Get approval before making significant changes

Collect as you go
Gather numbers, quotes, and photos monthly, not just at the end

Report accurately and on time
Submit interim and final reports; capture what you learn for the next project

Communicate with the funder
Share good news early and flag problems immediately

60

After the Grant Ends

Plan sustainability of the project before you ask for funding.

- **Build it into operations**
  Equipment became a free scanning center run by library staff
- **Share the load**
  History organizations and memory care partners stayed involved
- **Diversify funding**
  Success here led to an ALA grant plus state and local funding
- **Design for low-cost**
  Oral histories continue on a limited basis using existing tools
- **Show early results**
  A growing digital collection made the next funder easier to find
- **Be honest**
  Say what continues, what scales back, and why

61

BINGO!

LIBRARY GRANTS and AI



62

Bonus Benefits of Library Grants

Increased Visibility
Showcases the library's impact and value to a wider audience.

Community Support
Strengthens relationships and builds a stronger, more-engaged community.

Enhanced Programs & Services
Creates new opportunities for learning, creativity, and enrichment for all ages.

Technology & Innovation
Expands access to resources and introduces tools for the future.

New Partnerships
Builds collaborations with organizations, businesses, and government agencies.

63

STAY POSITIVE & PERSISTENT



64

Your Next Steps

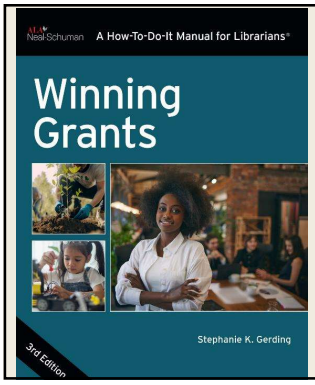
1. **Listen**
   Ask three community leaders what people need most
2. **Set up one alert**
   Create a saved search on Grants.gov or a funder email alert
3. **Draft one page**
   Write a need, project idea, and outcome on a single page



Share your ideas with a co-worker, local supporter, or partner.

One page and one deadline is how every funded project starts.

65



Good luck with your grant work!

Stephanie Gerding
stephaniegerding@gmail.com

https://alastore.ala.org/wingrants3

$10 off *Winning Grants, Third Edition*

Code: **WGWJ26**

Expires: 12/31/26

ISBN: 979-8-89255-567-8

66

A strong grant project does not start with perfect writing.

It starts with a real need and a clear plan.

67