

15 Grant Writing Mistakes to Avoid

NM Grant Writers • Practical Solutions for Winning Proposals

How to Use This Action Guide

Grant reviewers read dozens or even hundreds of proposals per cycle. Small oversights can quickly move an application from the "fund" pile to the "reject" pile. Use this guide as a pre-submission checklist for every proposal your organization submits.

The 15 Critical Mistakes & How to Fix Them

01 Vague Needs Statements

The Mistake: Stating general problems without supporting local statistics or specific evidence. Saying "many youth in our area lack afterschool programs" gives reviewers no concrete benchmark.

The Fix: Use exact local census data, county health stats, or school district reports. Quantify the gap (e.g., "In Bernalillo County, 34% of middle school students lack supervised afterschool care, resulting in a 18% spike in juvenile offenses between 3 PM and 6 PM").

02 No Measurable Outcomes

The Mistake: Confusing project activities with actual outcomes. Listing "we will hold 10 workshops" describes output, not impact.

The Fix: Frame SMART outcomes (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). Example: "80% of 150 participating youth will increase their math assessment scores by at least 15% by month 9."

03 Copy-Paste Narratives

The Mistake: Reusing identical text across different grant applications without adapting to the funder's specific terminology and mission.

The Fix: Tailor your narrative to echo keywords from the funder's RFP. Mirror their priority language (e.g., "community resilience", "capacity building", "equity-focused access").

04 Ignoring RFP Instructions

The Mistake: Skipping required sections, answering questions out of order, or disregarding font size, margin, and submission format rules.

The Fix: Create an RFP compliance matrix before typing a single sentence. Check off every prompt, section header, and formatting constraint prior to uploading.

05 Budget Math Errors

The Mistake: Discrepancies between narrative text numbers and budget table totals. Math errors signal poor administrative management to reviewers.

The Fix: Use formula-calculated spreadsheets. Double-check line-item calculations, fringe benefit rates, and indirect cost percentages with an independent reviewer before copying into the portal.

06 Weak Evaluation Plans

The Mistake: Vaguely stating "we will track success through participant satisfaction surveys" without specifying instruments, baseline collection, or analysis methods.

The Fix: Detail pre- and post-testing protocols, standardized measurement tools, evaluation timelines, and who will analyze the data (internal evaluator vs external consultant).

07 No Sustainability Plan

The Mistake: Telling the funder "we will apply for more grants" when asked how the project will continue after the grant period ends.

The Fix: Outline a multi-stream revenue plan including fee-for-service models, individual donor campaigns, municipal partnerships, or earned income strategies.

08 Jargon Overload

The Mistake: Packing the proposal with internal buzzwords, obscure acronyms, and dense academic phrasing that alienates community grant reviewers.

The Fix: Write in plain, direct English. Define all acronyms on first mention. Test readability by having someone outside your organization read the text.

09 Passive Voice

The Mistake: Writing sentences like "Services will be provided to participants by staff members," which sound weak and uncertain.

The Fix: Use strong active verbs: "Our certified bilingual navigators connect 200 rural families with essential healthcare services each quarter."

10 No Citations

The Mistake: Making assertions like "our strategy is proven to work" without citing peer-reviewed research or evidence-based practice clearinghouses.

The Fix: Reference authoritative sources (e.g., SAMHSA, What Works Clearinghouse, CDC, or state health departments) to validate your methodology.

11 Exceeding Page Limits

The Mistake: Submitting 12 pages when the RFP maximum is 10 pages, leading to automatic administrative rejection.

The Fix: Strict page adherence. Edit ruthlessly. Use bullet points and table formatting to present complex information concisely.

12 Missing Required Attachments

The Mistake: Forgetting IRS 501(c)(3) determination letters, audit reports, board rosters, or signed letters of commitment.

The Fix: Maintain an updated document repository (Drive folder) with pre-formatted PDFs of all standard organizational attachments ready to attach instantly.

13 Inconsistent Numbers

The Mistake: Mentioning "100 participants" in the executive summary, "120 clients" in the narrative, and "150 attendees" in the budget narrative.

The Fix: Conduct a numbers audit before final submission to verify that key participant targets match across all sections and attachments.

14 No Funder Alignment

The Mistake: Requesting funding for a program that falls outside the funder's stated geographic or thematic focus areas.

The Fix: Research recent IRS 990-PF filings or funder award announcements. Only submit proposals to grantmakers whose mission directly aligns with your project.

15 Generic Org Description

The Mistake: Describing your organization with generic history boilerplate instead of highlighting relevant track record, community trust, and capacity.

The Fix: Focus on achievements, past grant performance, staff credentials, and unique community relationships that prove your readiness to execute.

UPGRADE YOUR GRANT STRATEGY

Ready to Write Grants Without Crying?

Now that you know what mistakes to avoid, equip your team with our step-by-step master guide. Get complete proposal templates, budget tables, and narrative prompts.

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