Can anyone become a grant writer?

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Most people I know who are in the grant writing profession sort of fell into it. They may have worked in development and it became part of their role. They may have worked at a small nonprofit and were forced to learn it. Or like me, they were exploring options that would combine writing and “doing good” and discovered the magic of grant development.

I smile when people ask me what I do and I see the bewildered look on their face. “Grant writing? I can’t imagine, that seems so hard.” Or, they say, “Boring.” Or they say with enthusiasm, “Wow that’s awesome, that must be rewarding.” (That’s my favorite response).

Grant writing isn’t neuroscience. You don’t have to have a PhD to be successful or spend 10 years in the nonprofit world before you have enough experience to leap into it. But like most careers, it does take passion, commitment, and knowledge. Luckily I’m on my seventh year and I still like it. If you knew me the first couple years after college and my track record for job jumping, this is most definitely a great stride for me. Of course, grant writing can be tedious. It can be frustrating and it can be exhausting. But it is also wonderful to see programs actualize. It’s more than “writing.” You get to help refine and design programs that fill needs in the community. But of course like most careers, it’s not for everyone.

The following are the top characteristics and skills needed to be a successful grant professional. If you’re new to the field or are considering entering it, the list breakdowns the key traits needed to become a great grant professional.

- **Organized and Efficient:** Grant writers juggle multiple deadlines and consultants often juggle multiple clients on top of that. You could miss deadlines (in which case you may be out of a job very soon) or you could wait until the last second to submit a grant application every time (in which case you could end up with a heart attack). The better alternative is to stay on top of things by using some kind of system. Whether it is an electronic spreadsheet or a dry erase board, it’s important to be able to prioritize and make sure there’s adequate time to gather all the information you need, meet with staff, and then finally, submit the grant proposal. If you constantly need reminding and do not do well with hard deadlines, this is probably not the career for you.

- **Fundamental writing skills and a love for words:** I don’t think you necessarily have to be a great writer to be a grant writer, but you do need to be able to convey and express your case clearly on paper. Most people know how to use spell check and see how their grammar flows. Beyond that, it’s important to write succinctly and logically. I have a creative writing background and ever since I can
remember, have always loved and felt comfortable writing. For some people, the thought of writing puts them in a sweat and brings back bad memories of college all-nighters. If you fall into that category, stick to a career where writing is not a major requirement of the job.

- **Work under pressure:** Hopefully as a grant professional, you’re organized and efficient with your deadlines but sometimes things happen. You have a crazy month, or an opportunity suddenly appears that you can’t pass up so you find yourself scrambling to finish a grant proposal. You have to be willing to occasionally work the long hours, maybe even into the night with a dependable pot of coffee. If you breakdown and freeze under duress, check grant writer off your list of possible careers.

- **Communication skills:** Aside from writing, it’s important to know how to talk to people. Grant writers don’t work in a bubble. You need to talk with other staff members to figure out the program needs and the elements of the proposal; you may talk to clients to gather testimonials. And most likely you will also call staff at foundations or government programs to ask and answer questions about your grant application and program. Public speaking isn’t a necessity, but it is helpful for professional opportunities.

- **Creativity:** Coloring outside the lines can be a good thing. To stand out among all the other grant applications, it helps to present your grant proposal in a unique way through storytelling, charts, etc. You may also need to think non-traditionally when it comes to presenting something seemingly mundane. For example, a need for a new computer server at a healthcare organization due to a growing number of clients turns into a project that improves technology to allow for more one-on-one time between clinicians and clients. Clinicians can access digital files more efficiently and gain insights into client backgrounds and needs and gain better results. Counter this with, “We need a new computer server because our technology is outdated and things need to run faster.”

- **Ability to work independently:** While grant writing definitely involves collaboration, most grant writers do most of the writing and prospect research themselves. It can be lonely sometimes and while you are often involved in tours and meetings away from your desk, it’s not the type of career where you’re out and about most of the time. It’s important to have the personality that can sit down and write when the work needs to get done. That may mean closing your door and ignoring co-workers when you have a deadline. Those who are easily distracted need not apply.

- **Open to new ideas and criticism:** No one wants to be told, “This stinks.” But it is important to be open-minded to other ideas and know when you need to make changes. You may think you wrote the best grant application in the world, but if others read it and don’t get that same spark and are met with confusion, chances are you need to rework the proposal. Everyone has their own style, but if the content (or obvious grammatical errors) are glaring then you need to take a step back and realize sometimes you just have to start over.
As you read the list, did you say to yourself, “Yep, that’s how I work.” Or did you think, “Geesh, this isn’t me.” Remember life can be very frustrating, especially if your career choice doesn’t match your personality. The choice is yours – and yours alone.