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# preface

Grant writing jump-starts a  
conversation between you  
and your art ... and  
your art and the world.

I landed my first grant as the result of a verbal pitch. It was a rainy day in August 1972 in South Wellfleet, Massachusetts. “I’m bored,” I said to my parents. “I wanna make a film. I’ll put them in it.” I pointed to my younger brother and sister. “Can you give me the money to buy a couple rolls of Super 8 Kodachrome and loan me your tripod?” My parents agreed ... on one condition. “Don’t fight with your brother and sister,” my mother said. My stepfather handed me the cash. I was fourteen years old.

Three weeks later, as *Crazy 500* flickered to life in our darkened living room, the first animated credit read, “This film made possible with a grant from the Marvin and Lilli Ann Killen Rosenberg Foundation.” I didn’t realize then how much I already knew about funding artistic projects. I had matched the needs of my financial backers, assembled a team I knew would impress them, explained exactly how I’d spend their money, and designed a project they found irresistible. I even remembered to thank them prominently at the premier. And I made the film without any artistic compromises except for one annoyance: My sister refused to change out of her pajamas for the shoot or even wear the same nightgown each day for the sake of continuity.

By the time I reached my twenties and started applying for grants in the real world, I’d forgotten all I knew. Instead of building on my

good instincts, I floundered. I felt like I was standing on one side of a brick wall without a clue how to catapult myself over to the pot of money I'd heard was on the other side.

The first grant I wrote was to the Boston Film and Video Foundation asking them to fund a documentary film. I'd met a seventy-three-year-old Tennessee woman on a business trip who turned out to have been my grandfather's mistress for four years in the 1930s. She credited my grandfather with helping her go from a spinner in a textile mill earning \$4 per week to a Southern labor leader. By a twist of fate, I'd found her.

I didn't show my application to anyone. I treated it like a top-secret communiqué between me and the foundation. In my studio apartment, when my scientist boyfriend wasn't around, I edited my work sample—a short video consisting of interviews I'd done, historic photos I'd collected, and footage I'd shot on my visits to Tennessee. The narration was my own shaky voice.

The process of answering the questions on the grant application, assembling my work sample, and calculating a budget was agonizing and filled me with an odd shame. I was afraid to commit my plans to paper, and this fear turned into resentment at having to explain myself. I wanted to be a filmmaker, I wanted the money to make a project, but I didn't want to have to ask for it in black and white. *Why won't they just give it to me? Why do I have to justify it?*

Something deeper was going on that I couldn't see at the time. I wanted to be "chosen." I wanted this foundation to tell me I was a filmmaker so I could feel like one. I wanted permission.

Both of my parents were professional artists. My mother made one hundred-foot-long mosaic murals in our basement. At our house, if you could make it, you didn't buy it. On my grandmother's black-and-gold sewing machine, I stitched outfits for my Barbie dolls and then clothes for myself to wear to school. I developed photographs in our darkroom and built clay sculptures in my mother's pottery studio.

When I visited my father in Manhattan on Sundays, I fell asleep to the sounds of his paintbrush swishing in water, my cheek resting on

his scratchy green couch. Once, I posed for a painting of a girl burying a dead pigeon for a children's book he was illustrating.

"You're so lucky your parents are artists," people told me. And I *was* lucky: Making art wasn't precious or separate from everyday life. It was as valuable and necessary as food and water. Even if at times the whirl of commissions and productivity threatened to overwhelm me. But families are complicated, and even with that upbringing, I was still looking for somebody else to tell me I was an artist. Sometimes even with two artist parents—maybe *especially* with two artist parents—there doesn't feel like there's enough room for another artist in the family.

I didn't get that grant for the documentary film. Nor did I get several others I applied for after that.

Then something happened. I accepted a job at Larry Miller Productions, where I eventually was promoted to producer and then vice president. At work, I made slide shows, films, and videos for non-profit and corporate clients. It wasn't the artistic career I'd dreamed of, but I was making films and honing my business and marketing skills. At the same time, I signed up for every class I could find on grant writing. For a summer course at Harvard, I slogged through pages of thick foundation directories, studying the organizations that gave money to worthy causes. Our perpetually cheerful professor taught us how to discern an organization's interests and passions so we could match ours to theirs. We stared long and hard at application questions and learned that most applications ask the same questions, even though they might look different at first.

This research was tedious, but I was fascinated that something artful could find support in this bureaucratic and rule-filled world. We learned about organizations that believed in the value of art and offered grants of money, equipment, time, and even studio space to help artists create.

One night, the evening before another grant deadline, I finally realized I couldn't write my next grant without help. Since I'd written that first one, my boyfriend had become my husband. I shook him awake. "Can I read this to you?" I asked. "How does this sound?"

He listened. But then instead of answering me, he asked me some questions: Why did I want the money? What did my project entail? How was I going to accomplish it? Why did I think it was important? And on and on.

I stammered and fumbled through my answers, but the more I talked, the clearer my ideas became. His hard questions made me say out loud what I wanted—what my project was and why I wanted to do it. This time, instead of shame, I felt excitement.

I hadn't realized until then that my scientist husband had a lot of experience as a grant writer—not for art projects but to fund his physics research. His attitude as a grant writer was nothing like mine. He felt completely deserving of funds and wasn't afraid to explain in detail why he wanted the money, how he planned to spend it, and why his project was urgent. He used numbers and statistics to support his case. He didn't ask for permission; he asked for cash.

It's true that scientists have it easier than artists. There's more funding available for science, and most scientists haven't been told that their work is unimportant or self-indulgent. I wondered, What if I wrote my applications with a scientist's conviction? My husband didn't doubt his physics. What if I didn't doubt my art? With that revelation, I began to write with more confidence, and that confidence encouraged passion. How is my art needed? Why is my project urgent?

I schemed as to how I could use numbers to build my case. For example, exactly how many people are on my mailing list? How many postcards am I mailing? How many posters am I hanging? Those numbers could be listed in my marketing plans. How much money did I raise at my fundraising event from how many donors? These numbers showed the depth and breadth of my planning and proved there was a groundswell of community support for my work.

I also learned to apply scientific language to my proposals: to say that I'm probing, discovering, or investigating sounds a lot more important than wondering about, considering, or contemplating. Most important, I discovered that grant writing wasn't something to do in secret the night before the deadline. It took time, and it involved other people.

The first grant I won paid for me to travel to San Francisco for a week to study performance art with Action Theater creator Ruth Zaporah. Small though it was, the grant felt like a launching pad for new artistic exploration. And it boosted my self-confidence as an artist. This time I wasn't asking the funder to tell me I was an artist; I already knew that.

Many years had passed since that first grant I wrote for the film. I'd moved to Paris for a year to study writing and acting. I'd written and performed dramatic monologues. I was drawing and painting. I was writing steadily and getting published. I was finding my own voice, my own rhythm, and my own life separate from my artist parents.

Now I knew I'd be an artist no matter what. Making art was like breathing to me. But I had to discover that through my own life experience and by continuing a steady writing practice. Now, I was asking the granting organization if it wanted to come along for the ride I was already taking—with or without them. I didn't realize it then, but this attitude that developed as I grew as both a person and as an artist made all the difference.

Then something even bigger happened. As my career and grant-writing abilities evolved, I was invited to sit on a panel—made up of working artists—to review proposals from individual artists seeking funding for projects. Our efforts as panel members were unpaid. We picked up heavy three-ring binders stuffed with applications and were given several weeks to read each submission in detail, review work samples, and score applications based on the funder's criteria.

Many of these applications read like those first top-secret documents I had once submitted: The applicants were timid and unsure. The worst offenders didn't follow directions. Some writers were self-righteous. Others didn't answer the questions completely, so I couldn't decipher why they wanted the money. Others wrote tentatively, using verbs like “might” or “could,” making the project seem like it *might* or *could* never happen.

In the best applications, the writing was clear and concise. The proposal exuded energy and confidence. As I read, my excitement



about the project grew—I could see it, hear it, practically smell it. I understood how the project fit the trajectory of the artist’s work. It read like a story: First she started here, then her work progressed to there, and now she wanted to advance to over there. Would we help her get to where she was already going? With our help, she might arrive sooner. She explained the urgency of her request—why she needed the funds now and not next year or five years from now.

The successful applicants didn’t declare goals that were unattainable; they described projects that were doable and important to the funder. (A grant that promises to cure world hunger, for example, probably won’t get funded because, as noble as that goal is, we all know that one grant can’t accomplish it.) They weren’t desperate or needy; they wrote like they were already winners. And they proved, through the details of their plans and their track records, that they were capable of finishing the project successfully.

Sitting on that panel deciding which projects to fund transformed me as an artist seeking funding. I had cracked the code of grant writing for individual artists. Now, I understood what it took to rise to the top of the heap, and I was on fire to share what I learned. Artists could articulate their plans and convince others to fund them. I wanted to show them how.

I began teaching grant writing to help artists craft winning proposals, and this book was born out of my popular workshops. In the pages to come, I will share the skills, strategies, and secrets of successful grant writers that I learned from my own successes and failures and from interviews conducted with dozens of artists, panel members, and decision makers.

This is the book that I wish I’d had when I didn’t know whether I was an artist, and even when I did know and I wanted to have both the money and the validation that winning a grant provides. I hope that it will help you realize all you already know about grant writing and help ensure that every hour you spend writing proposals boosts your career. Let grant writing push your art into the world.

If you've never applied for a grant and want to know whether you're ready, I'll help you determine whether now is the best time. Then I'll guide you through the process, step by step—from researching, strategizing, writing, and polishing your application to following up afterward.

If you've already applied for a few grants and want to increase your chances of success, you'll discover tips for finding fresh language to enhance your writing as well as editing advice and proven strategies that will make your application stand out from the crowd. This book will accompany you on your journey from the first clicks of research through follow-up activities. It will show you how to enlist both colleagues and friends to assist you with your proposal in ways that make the process more productive—and even fun.

In the chapter on making friends with funders, I'll teach you how to talk about your work with ease and clarity anytime, anyplace. In the budgeting chapter, I describe, step by step, how to make a budget that showcases your careful planning. I even include a chapter on overcoming the psychological roadblocks you may encounter on the grant-writing journey.

If you're an artist who thrives on deadlines, grant writing is a free kick in the pants. Addressing the application questions will get you to do your homework, outline a budget, interview potential collaborators, and plan the marketing campaign—all the things you need to do anyway. And, as if that weren't enough, it will force you to complete your detailed plan by a specified date (the deadline for the grant application).

Twenty years after I dropped my first grant application into the mail slot at the Boston Film and Video Foundation near Kenmore Square, I rediscovered the work sample tape I'd made long ago in my Cambridge apartment. My curiosity pushed the videocassette into my VCR. I expected to cringe with embarrassment at how bad it was. And I was shocked—not by how awful it was but by how good it was. The footage was well shot, the subject was interesting, and the still photos I'd captured using a homemade rig on my kitchen floor were moving. Even my nervous narration was fine.

At first, I felt the excitement you feel when you unearth your first poem or drawing and see the raw promise of your younger self. And then I felt sad—sad that I'd let the Boston Film and Video Foundation decide whether I was a filmmaker. When I didn't get the grant, I abandoned the project. I gave them the power make a decision that nobody should ever be able to make about you or your work.

Now I know that it's not a funder's job to cheer me on. I ask others in my life to shout from the sidelines. Some of my friends and colleagues love that job. It's comforted me to hear that all the talented, successful, prolific, money-making artists I interviewed for this book (who include sculptors, poets, playwrights, animators, musicians, performers, writers, and visual artists) have stacks of rejection letters. "Rejections are a part of life and most certainly part of being an artist," one successful painter told me. "When your work is out there, it's bound to get rejected. When you're successful, it's a wonderful, albeit challenging, life, but you only get there by taking risks."

If one funder doesn't want to invest in your project, find another who does. And if nobody does, then begin it any way you can. Once you've started, that momentum will help your project find its audience and its financial support.

The artists I interviewed are like you and me, with the same fears, dreams, disappointments, and ambitions. They rise to the top in the grant-application process some of the time because they know and follow eight key points about grants:

1. Apply for grants. You can't win if you don't apply.
2. Don't be bitter or demanding in the application. Even if you're feeling that way, edit it out in the revising process.
3. Use the grant-writing process to clarify where you want to go, so that even if one grant application doesn't succeed, you gain something very valuable—your action plan.
4. Ask for help. Don't write your applications and assemble work samples in isolation.

5. Follow directions even when the rules seem like Kafka dreamed them up.
6. Research the funder so you match what you want with the needs and interests of the people who sign the checks.
7. Ask questions. If anything is unclear, call the funder well ahead of the deadline or ask another artist who has won the grant before.
8. Write and rewrite, have conversations, let the application sit, edit, and edit again until you wring out the words that describe the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your project. Don't give up until it's clear and concise without jargon, lingo, or attitude.

The process of writing a grant clarifies your artistic vision and propels your art further into the world. Discover how that process can ignite your brilliant career.