

**GET
YOUR
FIRST
\$1000
GRANT.
NOW.**

BY HOONGYEE LEE KRAKAUER

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine was recently turned down by a foundation. I could tell by the rings around her eyes she had One Of Those Nights.

She began to vent. Her face grew red and she got more and more worked up talking about her rejected proposal. Finally, she gave an exasperated sigh and wailed, “What do I do now?”

The world is full of people like this.

People who are artists and people with an inner artist, who dream of having a creative life making things that matter. But the problem is, they don’t know how to get there.

“I’m really clueless about where to start,” she said, glumly accepting her third cup of coffee, “Tell me, how do I write a better grant?”

This is the million dollar question.

Maybe you're thinking, "Nobody knows who I am." Or, "There's so much competition out there, who's going to pay attention to me?"

But you really want this. You just have no idea how to do it.

Grants are wonderful things. Besides the cash award, a grant confers recognition and says something about you as someone whose work stands out from the field and is worthy of an award. It can boost your career to the next level.

My answer to my over caffeinated friend was a question: "Better for whom?"

She stared.

"Who will be better off if you get a grant?" I continued, "And, who will care?"

Grantwriting, like most human interactions, is about a fair exchange and really good grantwriters know that the answers to these questions are important.

"I guess I didn't really think about it like that," she admitted reluctantly. "But they didn't ask those questions in the application."

So true. But these are better questions to address and even if they aren't asked, answer them.

Giving people a reason to care deeply and answering better questions for them are 2 of the most important things successful grant seekers do to get to YES.

WHY SHOULD YOU LISTEN TO ME?

I wrote my first grant proposal a while back and it ricocheted back with a rejection letter tacked on to it. Over the years, I have written many proposals that have been turned down. So I am very familiar with the frustrations and late night soul searching of a crushed creative soul. But with practice and bullheaded perseverance, I got better. I began to get more grants funded and eventually became the executive director of the [Queens Council on the Arts](#), a grant making arts council.

That means, I know what it is like on the other side of the table. The stacks of proposals. The walls of text. The cold coffee late in the afternoon. And, yes, the rock star project that leaps off the paper into the YES pile.

I'm here to tell you that after almost two decades as a grantmaker, a grant reviewer and a grant writer, I know that people who are successful in getting grants have a few, but powerful gamechanging mindsets in common. The truth is, getting a grant is less about what or who you know, and more about how you think. This is true no matter what type of grant you are seeking. Or who you are.

You can do this.

It will take some work and patience but most of all, it will ask you to do one, simple thing: **think differently about why you do what you do.**

If you want to get your first grant that will bring you the acknowledgement, attention and cash award your work deserves, you have to think smarter to stand apart from the crowd. For people to be drawn to you and your work.

For gatekeepers to come to you, imagine!

To get a grant before you write a single word. To have a life every creative person dreams of: support for your work, audiences who love what you do, and recognition of your artistic contribution to the world.

Wouldn't that be great?

I have learned the secret of getting to YES in grantwriting, in getting recognized for who I am and the work I am passionate about, and I am going to share it with you. To give you everything you need to get your first grant.

This is the course I wish someone had written for me when I was starting out.

Let's get started!

HOW TO WRITE YOUR PROJECT NARRATIVE

“Describe your project.”

Three simple words.

Do what they ask and you will fail.

Do this according to my method and you will get a grant.

Well, we all want to write a successful proposal that gets funded.

The most common impulse is to make the best case for your project. You want to talk about how intriguing the topic of your play is, how your paintings will be displayed, the way your music will be performed during the show, why you love modern jazz so much, and everything you can think of to make your project come to life.

Hot tip: We focus too much on making the case of how good we are at what we do instead of what good we can do for others.

Now multiply that description by several hundred and that is your competition. How can you stand out? What will make your proposal be the one that grant reviewers trip over themselves to vote YES to fund?

You answered the questions, wrote your artist statement, selected your work samples, created a budget. Clearly, you've given your best effort in putting together a winning grant proposal.

But without knowing what grant reviewers truly need from you, your proposal will not have what it takes to truly stand out.

Here's the million dollar mindset: **People fund people who change people.**

Funders fund people who can make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

This is why getting grants always begins with the right mindset and strategy.

Mindset:

Think of yourself as the best candidate for the grant, not the best artist.

Strategy:

Deliver confidence, not data.

WRITE YOUR WINNING NARRATIVE

Do you believe the goal of good writing is to be read?

That may be good enough for some but for a successful grant winner, the goal of good writing is to be responded to.

Because this is probably not taught in your creative writing classes or in English 101 classes in college, many of you will find yourself poorly equipped to do this once you are in a competitive world.

By using the following as a guide, you will write quickly and persuasively to draw the energy and support you seek from your reading audience.

A grant proposal is not a place to stuff everything you want to tell us about you and ram it down our throats.

That is a very common mistake.

The respect you show for your reviewers in putting together a well crafted and easily read proposal is instantly recognized and greatly appreciated because the truth is, so few people think about that.

Many artists think the ability to write in “grantspeak” or jargon is important. Some believe it has to do with letters of reference, or the quality of the work samples you submit.

It has been over fifteen years since I sat on my very first panel. I still participate in many grant review panels every year and see that the grantwinners across the board excel in doing one thing better than their competition: **They make a compelling case because they make people care.**

Writing a great narrative is actually quite simple.

Master Mindset: Before you pick up your pen, pick your positioning.

Successful grantseekers always provide the answers to the following questions that grant reviewers value:

1. WHY are you the best candidate for the grant?

This question may not actually appear in the application. But it requires a passionate answer and it is important that your funder knows this.

Funders want to be confident they are investing money in the best possible candidate. They want to be delighted by your awesomeness. And they want this awesomeness to be widely shared among the people they care about.

2. WHAT does success look like?

Funders want to know what transformation your project provides. What does it look like, sound like, talk like? Can you describe the change after people have experienced your project?

What does the difference you create feel like?

Grant Reviewer's Tip: Instead of talking about how unique your art is, talk about the unique difference your art makes.

3. WHO is this for?

Do your research to zero in on the people you and your funder care about. Be able to visualize and convey your empathy for them. This positions you and your funder as partners. Powerful psychological shift.

4. WHEN & WHERE

This is where you describe the details of your project. Show a timeline, give specifics. Make it easy for the panelists to see your well thought out project come to life.

After reading hundreds of applications, grant panelists are looking for **evidence of thought**. If you know the answers to these questions, it will shine through your proposal.

Master mindset: Write like you are going on after the Beatles and hunting lizards.

You never know when your proposal is going to be read. It could be the very first, the last, or the one right after lunch when everyone is getting a little sleepy. This is something you cannot control but what you can do is make sure your proposal is not a daunting wall of text. Make it easy on the eyes, easy to read, easy to hum back.

Just like a Beatle song.

Lizards like bright shiny objects. Instead of wading through a sea of words, think of ways to make the important information in your proposal easy to find and digest.

Just like attracting a lizard.

Here are two narrative examples from successfully funded projects:

1. Our proposed project is the 5th Annual Rockaway Book Festival which will take place at the Boardwalk Arts Open with 100 hours of exciting international and local literary arts events, a Young Authors program, networking events, panels and professional development for writers, all designed to connect the community to a diversity of writers while promoting the visibility of the writers and their work.

The festival will be programmed thematically with readings approximately every 2 hours followed by a hosted "talk-back" providing opportunities for the community to engage with the attending authors.

Venues will be staffed by our board members, volunteers, seasonal staff, interns and professional writers.

2. **Chain** is a film that threads together two different narratives performed by two different groups of people.

On the one hand, the film follows the production of an advertisement for a high tech wristband where a crew records a young Trinidadian man whose body becomes the gadget's support creating a contradictory image of emancipation and incarceration.

On the other hand, the film presents a local band of Reggae musicians playing steel-pan instruments and singing a song about the toll that the Caribbean Islands have paid for the Western pursuit of leisure.

The work unpacks the contradictions of creative labor, the struggles for social liberation, and the intersections of the machinic and the human.

HOW TO WRITE A BUDGET

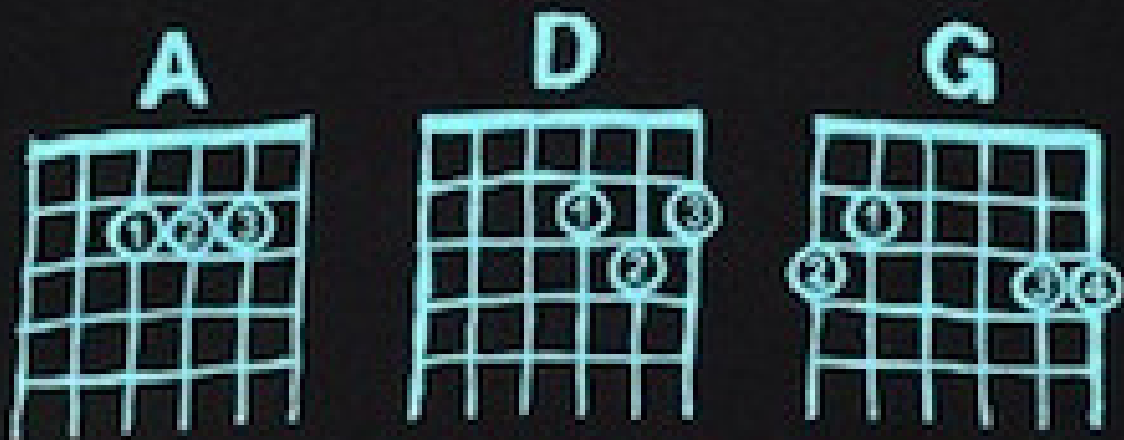
“Writing a rock solid budget is like writing a rock song.”

The secret behind Elvis, the Ramones and the wailing guitar in Bob Marley’s hands is something you are maybe unaware of.

You know the words to all the songs by heart. Your air guitar solo is spectacular. You are transported from the opening upbeat to the last lingering chord.

Here’s the thing: behind the sizzle and special effects, charismatic lead singers and superbly engineered musical performances is a surprisingly simple formula.

The base of rock and roll music is 3 chords - I, IV, V.



now start a band.

PEL

You might be surprised to discover that nearly every single rock and roll, country, or blues song released during the 1950s or early '60s was based almost exclusively on a foundation of these three chords: namely, I, IV and V.

Country music is three chords and the truth
Harlan Howard, songwriter

Think of your proposal narrative as the lyrics of a song. Now think of your budget as the chords, the foundation behind the words.

I want to remind you that what I am going to tell you is the funder's perspective of your budget. Things that raise red flags and things that make us fist bump and place your application in the YES pile.

Your budget has to show how you will carry out your project – and convince your funder to trust you to do this. They have to be totally assured that your terrific, fantastic, fabulous project is based on a foundation of sound financial planning. That you are truly the best candidate for this grant.

Let me put on my grant reviewer's cap and tell you 6 make or break things I look for in a budget.

Key Mindset: Your goal is to make the funder believe they can trust you with their money to carry out your project.

1. Other money

You are going out to dinner and maybe you are curious about a new place that just opened up. Now, if there was no one in the restaurant, how would you feel? Would you think there might be a reason there were no customers?

That is exactly the same thing for funders. They want to see who else likes you. Who else is funding you. Who else thinks you are good enough for them to write you a check. Many funders do not want to be your only funder. Some like to be the last dollar in. If no one else is funding you, why should they?

Showing other money for your project is one of the strongest points you can make in your budget.

2. Artist fee

How much would you pay to replace yourself? Remember that the fee you set for yourself is a direct reflection of what you think you are worth.

If that fee is too low, I am going to wonder about how you will carry out the project if something happens to you. If the fee is too high, I will think, "Gee, this better be epic," and set my expectations high.

Use 20% of your expense budget as a starting point to think about this.

3. Administrative costs

Paperwork, hiring tech people, coordinating artists, sending out promotional materials, training volunteers, stocking up on coffee and late afternoon chocolate chip cookies... someone has to do this.

Maybe it's you who will be doing the administrative work. Maybe you should rethink that.

I am always impressed by someone who has thought this out clearly, who can describe the various duties and responsibilities necessary to run the project and can assign a reasonable cost to them.

I believe in asking for what you need to make your project run successfully.

Just be sure you are super clear about what makes up that administrative amount in the budget notes which is the next thing I am going to talk about.

4. Budget notes

You know what happens when people assume.

You never want the people who are going to decide whether or not to give you money to assume anything about your budget.

Especially your budget.

Hot tip: Remember, the first thing many grant panels do is look for reasons to whittle down the pile of applications. If there are questions about your budget, that is going to send a red flag and make it harder for the panel to trust you and so much easier to toss your proposal in the NO pile.

Your strategy is to assure the grant reviewers that they should fund you because you can be trusted to spend the money appropriately.

Be as clear and informative as you possibly can.

Example: 2 print runs of 500 postcards (\$90 each) = \$180.00

When in doubt, explain everything.

No one ever complains about too much information especially when it has to do with your budget expenses.

Some funders like to know exactly what their money will cover. This is important to know because some funders will not fund certain expenses.

5. Ratios

What is a ratio?

I like to think of a ratio as a rule of thumb. Something to guide your planning.

Here are 2 good basic ratios for your budget:

- Keep your request below 50% of your total expenses unless the funder has other budget requirements.
- Keep your administrative costs between 15 - 25% of your total expense costs.

6. Bids

Your panel will be a group of people who are familiar with your field or discipline. They will know what fair market costs are for things like venue rentals, design and printing costs. Do your homework and it will be appreciated.

Get 3 bids on your vendors so that your costs are reasonable and the panel sees you have done your due diligence in researching prices.

You can add the bids as attachments.

If your costs are high or you need to go with the higher bid, explain why in your budget notes.

If your costs are very low, it may be that someone is doing you a favor by giving you a reduced price or donating something which is fine but you must explain that.

Do the math

I am amazed at the number of budgets I see where things just don't match or add up. Now, if you can't do the math, how do you expect me to believe you can do the project?

Make sure everything totals correctly.

Does your budget mirror your narrative?

Check to see you have a budget line for every expense you talk about in your narrative. And vice versa, describe every budget item in your narrative.

The last thing you want to do is to make panelists wonder about what how the money is being spent.

Here's a sample budget from a successfully funded grant application:

A	B	C
Income Type	Amount (if not applicable, enter '0')	Provide an itemized explanation for each income type entered. Indicate funding as 'Committed' or 'Pending' (e.g. ABC Foundation: \$10,000 - Pending)
Earned Admission/Ticket Sales		
Earned Sales (Concessions, Publications & Artwork)		
Individual and Private Contributions	915	Committed with grant approval (from artist's collector)
Business and Corporate Contributions		
Contracted Services		
Foundation Grants		
Government/Public Contributions		
Other Monetary Contributions (specify)		
In-Kind Contributions (Enter a determined dollar amount)	2250	Graphic Designer: \$750, Rehearsal Space: \$1500
Total Income	3165	

A	B	C
Expense Type	Amount (if not applicable, enter '0')	Provide an itemized explanation for each expense type entered (e.g. Choreographer Fee: \$500)
Artistic Personnel (Artist Fees)	2400	Artist's Fee: \$900, Performers' Fees (10 performers): \$1500
Technical Assistance Personnel (Directly involved in the project, i.e. Soundboard Operator, Installer)		
Outside Professional Services (Indirectly involved in the project, i.e. Graphic Designer for Promo Materials)	750	Graphic Designer
Facility/Venue Rental	1500	Rehearsal Space
Travel Costs		
Marketing Costs	600	Postcard: \$100, Social Media Ads: \$500
Equipment Rental		
Office/Art Supplies	915	Wood poles: \$350, Printing Signs: \$565
Other (specify)		
Total Expenses	6165	

The gap between the total income and total expenses is \$3,000.00 which is the amount of the grant award.

HOW TO CREATE GREAT WORK SAMPLES

Imagine this: You are sitting on a plane squinting at the tablet screen in front of you, balancing a bag of peanuts and trying to get your earphones to stay in your ears. You sigh as you wait for the MP3 file to load and nearly jump out of your seat knocking your drink off that flimsy tray table because the volume is on 10.

The piece you are listening to seems to have started somewhere in the middle, it sounded like it was recorded on an iPhone and there is a lot of noise in the background.

You have to stop the piece and check the label.

Now you are totally aggravated.

When you have to read a lot of applications and go through work samples, this happens a lot. You are taking on a lot of work as a grant reviewer and if you are a busy person, you have to find the time to do this.

Hot tip: You never know where people will be when they read your proposal and review your work samples.

I was on a plane to a conference. How could you possibly know that?

You couldn't.

But my question to you is: How could you have made the work sample experience better?

Here are 3 things grant reviewers look for in work samples:

1. High quality

Your work samples are the proof of the pudding. For some funders, your work samples are the most important part of the application.

Many people take pictures of their work with their phones. In their dining room with their cat sleeping in the background.

Or they tape a performance from their seat in the audience.

Both are really bad ideas.

Your work samples must be high quality. They will be seen on a variety of platforms from phone screens, laptops, computers and white walls. They will be listened to in all kinds of places. Make sure you invest in high quality and high resolution for every piece you submit.

It sounds ridiculously simple but it is absolutely astonishing how many artists do not have professional quality samples.

Important insight: Why would a funder invest in you if you don't invest in your own work?

Grant reviewer's tip: Make sure your work looks good on a phone screen as well as a computer screen.

2. Label, cue and order

Law of the universe: Everything will get mixed up or out of order.

The best thing you can do is label everything clearly, cue up your pieces to the exact place you want to start playing, check the volume and put everything in order with a list.

If you are showing an excerpt of a larger work, cue it up and give an explanation. This may make perfect sense in your mind but there is no way for anyone else to know what is going on unless you make it clear.

If you are showing a piece from a series, label it accordingly, i.e. 3 of 17, trio from third movement.

3. Select appropriate samples

Your work samples have one purpose: To prove you are the best candidate for this grant.

They are examples of your best work in relation to your project to convince the grant reviewers that this project will be successful.

What do you do if you want to create something different from what you already do?

Case study: An artist submitted a grant application to create new work that was very different from his former work. He submitted samples of his past work that showed his talent and experience and that he was clearly a highly accomplished and well respected artist.

However, he did not get the grant.

The reason?

His work samples.

The pieces he submitted showed us the best of what he had done. They supported his reputation as an established artist. But they did not support his request to do something completely new and different. We could not envision or believe in the success of his proposed project.

Later on, as we gathered around the watercooler, we talked about this and what would have changed our minds about funding him.

"Maybe he could have submitted a draft, a sketch or something to show how he was thinking about developing this new work as a work-in-progress sample," someone said.

I think this is important to pay attention to because in a case like this, you will not have a work sample of something you have not yet created. What can you give the grant reviewers to help them see where you are going and to trust you to deliver it?

Case study: A musical group applying for a grant to create new piece created a short video of 2 members in a rehearsal studio working through a passage together.

We heard them run through the melody, stop, try it a different way, add some harmony, argue over the phrasing, and rework the section until they were both happy with the result.

We felt like we were part of the process, we felt their passion and emotion for the music. We saw it in their eyes.

Master mindset: You rarely, if ever, see the applicant's face in the application. This work-in-progress sample personalized the request by engaging the grant reviewers in their creative process. Very powerful.

Note: Funders have criteria governing all parts of your proposal including work samples. Take this as an opportunity to ask a clarifying question regarding your work samples to be sure if they will accept a work-in-progress sample.

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER OF INQUIRY

Many foundations and donors ask for a letter of inquiry rather than a full grant proposal.

Sending a letter of inquiry before you complete a full proposal is an excellent way to get valuable feedback you can use to sharpen your proposal.

Two things can happen:

- You get invited to submit a full proposal - awesome!
- You get turned down - not as awesome, but it opens up the chance for you to get on the phone to talk to someone about why you got a NO and learn a little more about what is important to this funder.

Think of a letter of inquiry as a short mini proposal. Writing one actually gets you to become very clear in your own mind about what your project is.

Here are the common elements of a typical letter of inquiry:

1. Introduction

Open your letter with some basic information about you or your organization, the amount of money you are requesting and a brief description of the project.

Grant reviewer's tip: Write this part last!

2. Statement of need

Describe the need that your project is perfectly positioned to answer. Who will benefit, where will take place and why is it important now.

Grant reviewer's tip: Create a sense of urgency.

3. Description of you/your organization

Be concise and focus on describing you or your organization's unique ability to meet the need you will describe.

Include a brief history and overview of your experience or programs. Be sure to connect directly what you do and what you want to accomplish with the requested funding.

Here's an exercise to help you do this:

I do _____ for _____ so that _____ happens.

Grant reviewer's tip: You want to be very clear why you are the best candidate for the grant.

4. Goals

How are you going to meet the need? What are your goals? What does success look like and how are you going to measure that?

Describe the project and include the activities, names and titles of project team members, and a timeline.

Go over this sentence 5 times:

My project will (*meet my goals*) by (*project activities*) and this is important because (*reason or need*).

This will bring you to the real emotional result you want to achieve. Use this as your first bullet when you are listing your goals.

Grant reviewer's tip: Give clear and specific details about the emotional transformation.

5. Funding

Mention any other donors who are supporting your project. Identify already secured funding if you have that and include any pending support. Describe how you plan to support the project.

Grant reviewer's tip: Most funders do not like to be the only one. Make your funder feel like they are joining a winning team.

6. Summary

Briefly recap the intent of your project. Let them know you are available to provide further information and graciously thank the funder for their time and consideration. Include any requested attachments.

Here's a sample letter of inquiry from an artist to a corporate philanthropy:

Priscilla Tang
Director of Community Affairs
New World Enterprises
Main Street & 38th Avenue
Flushing, NY 11354

Dear Ms. Tang,

Thank you for reading this letter of inquiry to New World Enterprises.

(INTRODUCTION)

I am a local artist and a resident of Flushing, Queens. I hope you will consider a receiving a full proposal from me for the "Knit City" project for which I am respectfully requesting support of \$5,000.00.

This project is a temporary public art piece for elderly immigrant senior women in Flushing Queens. Flushing tops the list with more than 25,000 foreign-born people over the age of 65, according to the Center for an Urban Future.

(STATEMENT OF NEED)

Language barriers can make it especially hard for these seniors to access services, like a senior center. Not assimilating into American culture, not being able to speak the language makes socialization difficult and creates isolation among seniors of different cultures and backgrounds.

(DESCRIPTION)

I have achieved success as an artist receiving numerous public art commissions around the world, teaching fiber art workshops to hundreds of students of all ages and creating community through the arts which is my passion.

My mission is to make art for people and with people that makes a difference in creating spaces of beauty.

I have targeted this project to elder immigrant women because of the high number of women seniors living in the community who do not drive.

This project will provide a public artmaking circle led by a knitting artist that will provide socialization opportunities, trust building, a place to gather, an opportunity to participate in a local creative space like a traditional quilting bee for a large number of immigrant senior women who are isolated from the community. I will engage the women in creating a large knitted piece together in the highly visible corner plaza outside the lobby of Queens Crossing, a busy and high traffic area.

Women can join at any time during the project, knit, learn to knit, or simply be welcomed to sit as part of the group. At the end of the project, a finished piece will be displayed in the lobby window and the women in the group will be celebrated.

(GOALS)

My project aligns with your interests in having an artistic component to your property and positioning yourselves as respected supporters of the community.

My program goals include:

- Diminishing depression, loneliness and isolation
- Improving the social activity levels and emotional well-being among senior immigrant women
- Providing the women with a big creative goal to unify efforts and build camaraderie
- Establishing once a week knitting circles for up to 50 women
- Recruiting volunteers to assist and become program ambassadors (many of the volunteers we expect to recruit from our senior women may be children or companions)

Some of the activities will include:

- Knitting pieces that will become part of the finished product
- Teaching knitting to women who want to learn
- Encouraging women to teach each other
- Sharing community information

Knit City will take place over a period of 8 weeks in an open public space so that we can become a safe and welcoming place in the daily life of local senior women. Project team members include: myself as the leader of the knitting circle, 5 volunteers, 1 art handler.

(FUNDING)

The total cost for the project is \$11,500.00. \$2,500 of that will be covered with a grant from the borough arts council. \$3,000 will be donated by a local bank. \$1,000 in yarn and materials will be an in kind donation from a crafts supplier.

Your investment of \$5,000.00 and use of your site will complete the funding and support needed for the project. I have already many volunteers who are interested in participating.

(SUMMARY)

I look forward to partnering with you on giving members of our most isolated local population a place to come together to make art, to feel less isolated and feel like a valued member of a creative community.

If you would like more information or to receive a full proposal, please contact me at 917 123-4567 or knittingartist@gmail.com.

I truly appreciate your consideration of my request and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

P.S. I am enclosing my press kit and links to my current work for your reference.

THE POWER OF NO

As a young artist, I was passionate about getting my book out there so I pushed myself to learn as much as I could about how to write a grant.

I took courses, read everything I could get my hands on, attended conferences and kept trying.

After a seemingly endless string of rejection letters, I applied for a grant that I truly believed I could get. When the letter came in the mail, I said to myself, "This letter is going to change my life."

And it did.

It was a letter of rejection and my whole world crumbled.

I remember thinking, *"This is it. Maybe I wasn't meant to do this. Maybe I'm just not good enough. Who am I to think I could have such a dream?"*

The naysayers were right about me...."

And then, at 2:00 am in the morning, my relentless inner self critic started cackling with demonic glee in her beady eyes as I started to actually believe this.

*They hate me
They hate what I do
They think I'm a nobody*

Hey, I didn't learn how to do any of this in school, no one ever told me this was a really important skill to have.

How did everyone else do it? What was I not getting?

Why don't I just kill myself?

Does this sound familiar?

Suddenly, my stubborn streak snapped into defiance and I started thinking, *"Hey, who do you think you are rejecting me and making me feel like crap? I need to know why I didn't get the grant!"*

My mother-in-law, with her unerring nose for emotional breakdowns, said, "Dear, if you want something from someone, maybe you should give them a little something first."

Hot tip: Mildred P. Krakauer would never show up at someone's house without a cakebox in her hand and neither should you.

She was right, of course.

I swallowed my pride, braced myself and picked up the phone.

"Oh, are you calling about being a panelist?" asked the woman on the other end. "We are always looking for volunteers. Can I sign you up for our next round?"

Wait a minute, you guys just turned me down and now you want me to sit on your panel?

I didn't want to keep her waiting while I was trying to figure this out and I also didn't have a cakebox handy so I said, "Of course, I'd love to help. Sign me up."

And that one simple thing changed everything.

It turned a NO into HELL YES!

Someone must have finked out on her last minute because she really appreciated my offer and put me on a panel. That opened my eyes to what funders really want to fund. I got really excited because for the first time, I was hearing exactly how grant panelists make their decisions.

I didn't know it at the time, but in addition to putting myself in the midst of grantmaking gatekeepers, I was also positioning myself as a peer, as someone offering value.

She also gave me the panel comments, which left me speechless. No, they did not hate me or my project or think I was a nobody! Everything she told me about were headbangingly simple things I could easily fix and tweak.

I immediately wrote another grant and I nailed it.

I also gained tremendous respect for the power of NO.

What does NO really mean?

What is NO?

No one likes getting turned down and no one likes getting a NO. I want to talk about what NO is and what that really means to you.

NO does not mean that you are a bad artist, and it doesn't mean that you are bad person.

The status quo NO

When you get a NO, remember first and foremost that you are an artist, and for an artist, risk is part of your creative practice.

Everything that you create has the risk of startling the status quo.

The masses do not like change. They do not like challenge, and they will react to your new vision, your new art, your new world by saying NO, because they would rather clip your wings while remaining safe and comfortable behind the walls of their limited understanding.

It is better or easier for them to shoot you down than to exert themselves and their own inertia. So think about it, what does a NO from that type of person mean to you?

Not yet

NO can sometimes mean not yet. Successful people understand this instinctively. This is how they can accumulate piles of rejection letters and keep going.

Some funders have an internal policy of not funding first time applicants. They like to see what you do and they will observe you for a while to make sure that you're really a player.

Think of this NO as a YES in development.

Not for you

NO can also mean not for you. You are not going to be on everybody's Christmas list and not everybody is going to love what you do.

If you are clearly not a fit for this funder, this is important information to know so you can quickly move on.

Not something you could possibly know

These are other reasons why you didn't get the grant. Just remember that some of them are in your control and some of them are not. Do not beat yourself up over it. Get back on track and keep going.

Some include:

- **Distribution**

Funders may be looking to grow their grant pool. Or geographic distribution. You may live in an area that may not be a priority this time.

- **Duplicity**

Are there people doing similar things to you? A lot of times you can end up in a pool and where many people are doing a similar kind of project. This is something that you could do a little homework ahead of time to see who else is out there doing work that's similar to yours.

If there are a lot of people doing the same kind of thing, go back to the drawing board and make yours different. And better. At the end of the day you really don't know who's going to come up in the pool but you do know what you've got will stand out.

- **Shift in focus**

A foundation may decide to focus on one thing this year and another thing next year. You may not know any of this. Again, when you call for comments it's important to think about these things so they can answer that question for you.

You define NO

I want you to begin taking ownership of the power of NO.

Do not let NO define you. You define NO.

Before you begin to understand what NO means from a funder's point of view, you need to understand what NO means to you and that is totally up to you.

I like to think of NO as a pit crew stop in a NASCAR race where you pull in off the track, you sort of recalibrate everything, refocus on the win and then get back in the race with everything you've got.

This is tenacity, a characteristic of artists who are successful because they do not let NO get in their way.

Successful artists have dreams like you. They have obstacles like you. They have nights of deep despair and self-doubt like you.

They have a pile of rejection letters.

They have also kept going.

You will succeed not because you got to YES, but what you do with NO.

HOW TO GO FROM NO TO YES

What happens when you get the grant?

If you get the grant, congratulations!

Now what do you do? Besides doing your project?

Say thank you.

Master mindset: Appreciation is a form of attention.

Let's talk about the art of thank you.

You attract positive attention through creative appreciation.

And hey, you're a creative person. Do it in a way that makes someone think, "Wow, that was really nice."

Here are a few small ways to make a big impression:

- Send a handwritten note
- Pick up the phone and call
- Offer to give a testimonial

When I talk about this, I am always surprised hear people say, "I'm crazy busy!" or "I'm up to my ears working on a bunch of projects" or, here's my favorite - "I can't find the time to do this."

Really?

Someone just gave you a bunch of money and you can't find 10 minutes to say thank you? That's a surefire way to get kicked off someone's Christmas card list - and worse!

If you're not going to listen to me on this one, listen to my mom.

Or yours.

I am sure she taught you important life lessons like saying thank you and not wiping your mouth on your sleeve.

The secret to success here is practice. This is what I mean: Most people are very bad at thank you. Be appreciative and your funder will remember you and not those other ungrateful slobs with dirty sleeves.

You can never be too thin, too rich or too appreciative.

Now, go do your project.

Write another grant. You are doing great!

What happens when you don't get the grant?

Remember, foundations exist to give away money. Your job is to find the right fit and to make it clear that you are the one to fund, not necessarily the best artist in the world, but the best candidate for the grant. It's a very, very important difference. Don't take this personally.

When you look at successful artists I am sure you are wondering, how did they get there? What did they have? Did they have connections, inside information, stuff like that?

Let me tell you about a few successful people and what they did not have.

Examples of artists and rejection

- A famous writer had five years of continual rejection before landing a publishing deal, and her books are now in excess of \$2 billion. Only William Shakespeare has sold more than she has. That was Agatha Christie.
- My favorite book by Dr. Seuss, ***And to Think I Saw it on Mulberry Street***, was rejected by 27 publishers in a row.
- And for the musicians out there, one of my favorite composers had a work that debuted in 1913 that caused audiences to throw rotten fruit at the stage and run him out of town. ***The Rite of Spring***, by Igor Stravinsky is now considered a pivotal masterwork of contemporary music that forever changed how composers think.

So, all of you out there holding a rejection letter in your hand, please know that you are in highly regarded and respected company.

You are no different from many extremely successful artists and share a lot in common with them.

Here's what to do next:

1. Get back in the pit

Okay, you need to pull yourself off the racetrack and recalibrate. Go for a walk that you get some perspective and you clear your head. You need to stay positive and focused on the next step.

Do not take NO personally, even though it might feel that way. Understand they are staying NO to your proposal, not to you.

2. Be gracious

Say thank you.

Let the funder know you appreciate the opportunity to apply. Yes, even an unsuccessful proposal can give you a chance to stand out and build a relationship, simply by expressing your gratitude.

3. Call for comments

One of the things I hear artists worrying about is this: Who's going to give me a grant if they don't know who I am?

Well, your proposal was just read and reviewed by a group of people who now know a whole heck of a lot about you now.

You didn't get the grant, but you now have a wonderful opportunity to pick up the phone and say, "Hi there, I know my proposal was not funded but I wanted to say thank you for the opportunity to be considered. Would it be possible for you to share panel comments with me so that I can improve my proposal for the next time?"

Call for comments immediately and start a conversation.

4. Sit on a panel

Local arts councils are always looking for panelists to participate in their grant process.

Now, if there is one thing you can do to hyperspace your grantwriting skills to the next level - this is it. Volunteer to be a grant panelist. See what it's like on the other side of the table. Learn things you would never know about how funding decisions are made.

In my opinion, this the real MFA of fundraising.

5. Write another grant

Look at new funders. Go out and see who else is doing cool stuff and who is funding them. Read your trade publications. Check out art councils like [Queens Council on the Arts](#).

Attend a conference or a workshop about grants or fund-raising for artists. Google search new prospects, you never know what will turn up.

You now have tons of stuff that you can use for your next grant. You don't have to re-create it again from scratch. This will leave you more time to get out there and find new funders.

6. Feel good about yourself

Let's put everything back into perspective. Remember, this is just one grant and just a part of your long game. You win some and you lose some. Just keep moving.

You are doing a great job!

HOW TO THINK LIKE AN ARTBOSS

I have a friend who tells people she is a witch.

Yes, she can tell an expectant mother if she is having a girl or a boy. Twins? She'll tell you which one will come out first. She knows the name of our next mayor and can name the skeletons in the closet.

Then, there is me. No sense of direction, no intuition at all about things like babies and constantly amazed I don't get hit by a bus everyday.

However, I do notice when the universe thinks maybe my life is going too well and that it's time to toss a few monkey wrenches in the spin cycle just to see if I'm paying attention.

Like the other day when I was having lunch with a friend.

"Yes I finally did get a grant from them after killing myself applying to them year after year," she said, hissing the name of the foundation through her gritted teeth. "And it wasn't as if I was asking for a lot. In the end it was one of their smaller awards but for me, that was a really big deal."

"That is great news! What did they say about your proposal?"

"They told me nothing that was helpful - the usual stuff like we're in a very competitive category, there's not enough money for new awardees, blah blah blah. This whole process is just too random..." she leaned across the table pushing her plate to the side and said, "Your grantwriting stuff doesn't work."

Now, when cornered in a dangerous situation, 2 primal responses will flash through our consciousness: fight or flight.

Flight is fine if you are racing around the rainforest in a loincloth swinging from vines.

However, should you find yourself in a crowded cafe in Astoria, Queens with a friend accusing you of selling snake oil, I suggest a third alternative: Thwart the enemy by throwing food at them. I immediately ordered 2 more Turkish coffees as a distraction as I wracked my brain for something brilliant to say.

"What would MacGyver do?"

Now, I am not a top secret agent devoted to righting the wrongs of the world. I cannot escape deadly situations with a mere paper clip in my pocket.

But ask me what a grant panelist is longing to see in a proposal and you will find I possess an encyclopedic knowledge of how they think - my equivalent of duct tape and a Swiss Army knife.

A lot of people think they can't do this, that grant writing won't work for them because they believe in a lot of myths surrounding grantwriting. Just like my friend, even after she got a grant.

When I started out, I believed in them too.

Rejection is tough. Getting started is even tougher.

No one likes staring at the prospect of spending a lot of time and effort putting a proposal together that could get shot down and leave you feeling that your work isn't worthy of funding.

This is the time all those pesky demons start coming around to fill your head with self doubt and thoughts of giving up. Or worse, to not even begin.

Common objections:

"I'm an artist, not a writer."

Yes and no.

This is an excuse. Being an artist does not exempt you from being to communicate clearly whether it is about your work or how to get to your studio. Knowledge, insights and a deeper understanding will emerge when you spend some time asking yourself clarifying questions about your work.

You can write with confidence once you know what it is you want to say. And what people want to hear.

And most of all, why they should care.

"My art can speak for itself."

This is the second part of the first excuse.

The only thing your art will do is invite a million reactions, none of which you will have any control over.

People are curious creatures and will be drawn to your back story as well as the actual piece.

In a grant proposal, your story is important. It illuminates your artistic process and thinking.

Grant reviewers don't know who you are but are willing to learn about you.

Tell them a story they won't forget.

Your story.

"I don't know grant lingo."

I thought I had to know all the right catch phrases, the right things to say, the language of grants.

Nobody likes to read jargon.

You will get further writing clear declarative sentences that directly answer the questions.

Jargon is the pig latin of the snobberati

"I don't know where to begin."

Start by asking yourself some important basic questions to understand the why, what and how of your project.

The answers will help you to begin your narrative and to make a strong case for why your work deserves to exist. In a grant environment, this is what builds passion and support for a proposal to be funded.

Knowing these key answers will give you powerful information for all parts of your proposal. It will impact how you talk to people about your work, how you pitch your projects, what you say in your elevator speech or while you are waiting on line at the bar during a reception.

Go ahead. Start with answering the following, beginning with the basics:

1. WHY
2. WHAT
3. HOW
4. WHO
5. WHEN/WHERE

Your next steps:

Get comfortable being uncomfortable

Lose the excuses and start writing.

There is no reason for you to dismiss yourself before your proposal gets a chance to be considered.

This may be a new experience that feels awkward for you. Like any other challenge, it will not feel easy or as natural as being creative is for you. But it will become something you are good at if you commit the time and focus to get better at it.

It helps to simply acknowledge the fact that you are doing something different and you will probably feel like you are digging a ditch as you unearth one word at a time from your brain.

Here's a spoiler alert: Everyone feels like this. Welcome to the club!

The people who are really good at this simply decided to pull up their chair, plant themselves at their desk and be OK with their discomfort.

Settle in and take comfort knowing this is uncomfortable for everyone.

Just start.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

This is everything I know about making art, making a difference and making a life that you love.

These are the mindsets, tips and strategies you need to take the most important step: the first one.

Yes, you have great ideas.

But without you and your work, that's all they are — ideas.

And the reason I put this all together is to nudge you to take action, to unleash your inner Artboss and get your first grant.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

Creativity is everywhere and creativity is for everyone

To make your case, make them care

It's not what you want to tell them, it's about what they want to know

So go.

Write your first \$1000 grant. And then write another one.

Make it worth our attention. Give us more than what we ask for.

And see what happens.

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