

GRANT BASICS

FREE EBOOK



The Complete Beginner's Guide to Grants

Everything a first-time applicant needs to understand before searching for a grant

8 chapters · ~24 min read

First-time applicants, small NGOs, nonprofits, and community organizations

GrantsForGlobal

SELF-SERVE GRANT INTELLIGENCE SOFTWARE · [GRANTSFORGLOBAL.COM](https://grantsforglobal.com)

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CHAPTER 1

What a Grant Actually Is (and Isn't)

Before you search for a single opportunity, it helps to know exactly what you're looking for. "Grant" gets used loosely — for loans, donations, sponsorships, even lottery-style giveaways. Getting this straight now will save you from wasting time on the wrong kind of funding later.

A Grant Is Not a Loan, a Donation, or a Sale

A grant is money awarded to your organization to carry out a specific project or activity, on the condition that you use it as described in your proposal and report back on the results. Unlike a loan, you don't repay it. Unlike a personal donation, it isn't given simply because the funder likes your cause — it's given because your proposal convinced them your project will achieve something that matters to their mission. And unlike a sale, you're not providing a product or service in exchange; you're providing accountability, results, and evidence.

This distinction matters because it shapes what funders expect from you. They aren't customers you need to please, and they aren't donors giving out of pure goodwill. They're investors in outcomes — and every part of a strong application, from the problem statement to the budget, exists to prove those outcomes are achievable.

Funding type	Repaid?	What's exchanged	What's expected of you
Grant	No	Results & reporting	Deliver the project as proposed, report honestly
Loan	Yes, with interest	Capital	Repayment on schedule
Donation	No	Goodwill	Little to no formal reporting
Sale / contract	N/A	A product or service	Delivery to a buyer's specification

Who Gives Out Grants, and Why

Grants exist because the organizations giving them — governments, foundations, corporations, and multilateral agencies — have missions of their own that they can't accomplish alone. A government agency has a public mandate (reduce youth unemployment, improve maternal health) but no staff on the ground in every community. A corporate foundation wants to demonstrate social impact tied to its brand. A private foundation exists specifically to give away the returns on an endowment, and by law usually has to distribute a minimum percentage of its assets every year.

Understanding a funder's motivation is the single most useful thing you can do before applying anywhere. A funder that must legally distribute funds each year moves faster and is often more open to smaller organizations. A government program tied to a five-year national strategy will care intensely about how your project maps to that strategy's stated indicators. Read the "why" behind the money, not just the amount on offer.

What Funders Expect in Return (Without Expecting Repayment)

- Honest, timely reporting on how the money was spent and what it achieved

- Use of funds strictly for the purpose described in your proposal (a "restricted" grant)
- Compliance with any conditions attached — audits, site visits, co-branding, safeguarding policies
- In many cases, acknowledgement of the funder in public communications
- A working relationship they can point to as evidence their giving works

TIP

The real test before you apply

Ask yourself: "If we received this money, could we honestly deliver what we're about to promise, and report on it accurately?" If the answer is no, it's better to skip that opportunity than to win it and struggle to deliver.

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CHAPTER 2

The Four Types of Grantmakers

Not all funders behave the same way. Knowing which of the four broad categories a funder falls into tells you a lot about how competitive the opportunity is, how fast a decision will come, and how formal the relationship will be.

Charitable Foundations

Long-term philanthropic institutions that fund social, educational, environmental, and cultural work. They break down into private foundations (funded by a single donor or family, often with a narrow, specific focus), community foundations (which pool donations from many sources to support local and regional causes), and family foundations (driven by family values and legacy, and often more accessible to smaller organizations than large institutional funders).

Corporate Grant Programs

CSR-driven funding that ties corporate giving to community impact and business values. This includes direct corporate giving (financial grants aligned with a company's geography and mission), employee matching programs (where a company matches staff donations), and in-kind support — non-cash contributions like software licenses, office space, or professional services rather than cash.

Government Grants

Public-sector funding for services, research, infrastructure, and social development — ranging from large bilateral programs down to accessible local municipality grants. Federal or national grants tend to be large-scale with high value but complex, formal application requirements. State or regional grants fund provincial-level priorities with less competition than national programs. Local or municipal grants are city-led and often overlooked, but are genuinely achievable for grassroots groups.

Regional & Local Funders

Geography-specific funders focused on strengthening local communities and economies — often less competitive than national programs and considerably more relationship-driven. This includes regional foundations with area-specific priorities, local business grants supporting small businesses and cooperatives within a district, and municipal programs funding arts, youth development, or neighborhood revitalization.

Comparing the Four

Type	Typical amount	Competitiveness	Decision speed	Best for beginners?
Charitable foundation	Small – large, varies widely	Medium – high	Weeks to months	Yes, community foundations especially
Corporate program	Small – medium	Medium	Weeks	Yes
Government (national)	Medium – very large	High	Months	Usually not your first application

Government (local) / Regional	Small – medium	Low – medium	Weeks to months	Yes — often the best starting point
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TIP
If this is your first application, start with local, regional, or community-foundation funders. They're less competitive, more forgiving of an imperfect proposal, and give you real reviewer feedback you can use to improve your next attempt.

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CHAPTER 3

Are You Even Eligible? A Pre-Application Reality Check

The single most common reason first-time applicants waste weeks of effort isn't a weak proposal — it's applying to something they were never eligible for in the first place. Run this check before you write a single word.

Legal Structure and Registration

Most institutional funders require applicants to be a formally registered nonprofit, NGO, or equivalent legal entity in their country — not an informal group or individual. If you're not yet registered, look for a fiscal sponsor: an established nonprofit that can legally receive and administer the grant on your behalf while you build toward your own registration. Many funders explicitly allow fiscally sponsored applicants; check the eligibility section of any listing before assuming you don't qualify.

Mission and Geographic Alignment

Funders publish focus areas and eligible geographies for a reason — reviewers screen out anything outside them almost instantly, regardless of proposal quality. Before you invest time, confirm your project's sector (education, health, environment, and so on), your target population, and your operating country or region all sit inside what the funder has explicitly said they support.

Track Record Expectations

Some funders require a minimum number of years in operation or a history of managing funds of a certain size — this protects them from awarding money to organizations without the systems to manage it. If you're brand new, look specifically for "seed," "emerging organization," or "first-time applicant" programs, which exist precisely to fund newer groups.

Basic Financial and Reporting Capacity

You don't need an accounting department, but you do need: a dedicated bank account in your organization's name, some form of basic bookkeeping, and someone able to write a short narrative and financial report after the project ends. If none of that exists yet, build it before you apply — funders can tell when reporting capacity is missing, and it's one of the fastest ways to lose trust with a funder you might want to apply to again.

Eligibility Checklist

Before you apply, confirm you have:

- ☐ Legal registration, or a confirmed fiscal sponsor
- ☐ A project that fits the funder's stated focus area
- ☐ A project location inside the funder's eligible geography
- ☐ Enough organizational track record for this specific funder's requirements
- ☐ A dedicated bank account in your organization's name

- ☐ Someone responsible for financial and narrative reporting
- ☐ Your most recent annual report or financial summary, if requested
- ☐ A list of your board members or governance structure, if requested

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CHAPTER 4

Defining Your Project Before You Search

Searching for grants before you've defined your project is like shopping without a list — you'll be pulled toward whatever looks shiny instead of what you actually need. Spend thirty minutes on this worksheet first.

The One-Paragraph Project Summary

Write a single paragraph that answers: what problem are you addressing, who is affected, what will you do about it, and what change do you expect? Keep it under 100 words. If you can't do this in one paragraph, your project isn't focused enough yet to search for funding — narrow it down first.

Project Profile Worksheet

Fill in each field honestly and specifically. Vague answers here lead to vague, unfundable searches later.

Field	Your answer
Project title	_____
Sector / focus area	_____
Target population	_____
Geographic scope (city / region / country)	_____
Estimated budget range	_____
Project duration	_____
Three keywords a funder search would use to find this	_____

Worked Example: Clearwater Youth Trust

EXAMPLE

A filled-in worksheet

Project title: "Safe Water, Stronger Futures." Sector: WASH / education. Target population: 600 primary school children across 4 rural schools. Geography: Eastern Province. Budget range: \$18,000–\$25,000. Duration: 12 months. Keywords: "water and sanitation," "primary education," "rural community." This level of specificity turns a vague database search into a targeted one — filtering by sector, geography, and grant size will now surface a much smaller, more relevant shortlist.

CHAPTER 5

Where and How to Actually Search for Grants

Most beginners search by checking a handful of well-known funders' websites one at a time. It's slow, it misses most of what's actually available, and it makes comparison nearly impossible. Here's a faster, more complete way to work.

Search by Criteria, Not by Funder Name

Instead of asking "which funders do I know about," ask "which grants match my sector, my geography, and my budget range?" This flips manual searching (funder-first) into database searching (criteria-first), and it's the difference between seeing 5 opportunities and seeing every relevant one that currently exists.

Filtering That Actually Narrows Things Down

- Sector or focus area — education, health, environment, livelihoods, and so on
- Geographic eligibility — country, region, or "global"
- Funding amount range — filter out anything wildly above or below your project's budget
- Deadline window — prioritize what's actually due soon over what's months away
- Organization type — some grants are restricted to registered nonprofits, others to individuals, researchers, or companies

Why a Verified Database Beats Manual Searching

Checking individual funder websites one at a time has three real problems: you only find funders you already know exist, listings go stale (deadlines pass, programs close, and static web pages don't always get updated), and you have no easy way to compare opportunities side by side. A searchable, regularly updated database solves all three — you can filter by every criterion in your project worksheet at once, and see everything that matches instead of only what you happened to think to Google.

IN YOUR DASHBOARD

In your dashboard

GrantsForGlobal's free account lets you preview grants from the database with limited detail. A Premium membership unlocks the full searchable database — advanced filters by sector, country, amount, and deadline — plus the ability to save and bookmark opportunities as you shortlist them.

CHAPTER 6

Understanding a Grant Listing Line by Line

A grant listing packs a lot of information into a small space. Learning to read one quickly and correctly is what separates a productive shortlisting session from an afternoon wasted on opportunities you were never going to pursue.

The Anatomy of a Listing

Field	What to check it for
Funder / donor name	Is this a recognizable, verifiable institution?
Deadline	Enough time to prepare a strong application, not a rushed one
Funding range (min–max)	Realistic against your project's actual budget
Eligible geography	Your operating country or region is explicitly included
Focus area / theme	A genuine match, not a stretch
Eligible applicant type	Nonprofit, individual, researcher, company, or a mix
Required documents	What you'll need ready before you start writing

Red Flags to Watch For

- Any request for an upfront "processing fee" or payment to apply — legitimate grants never charge you to apply
- No verifiable funder name, website, or contact information
- Promises of guaranteed funding before you've even applied
- Deadlines that seem to roll forward every time you check (a sign of a stale or fake listing)
- Contact only through a personal email address rather than an institutional one

Shortlisting Without Overwhelming Yourself

1. Scan 15–20 listings that match your criteria filters
2. Eliminate anything with a mismatched geography, sector, or funding range
3. Rank the remainder by deadline urgency and genuine fit
4. Shortlist your top 3–5 to actually pursue this cycle
5. Save or bookmark the rest for a future round rather than losing track of them

CHAPTER 7

The Grant Application Process, Start to Finish

Most first-time applicants are surprised the process has stages — it's rarely "write one document and submit." Knowing the typical path in advance means fewer surprises and better time management.

The Typical Stages

1. Letter of Inquiry (LOI) or Expression of Interest — a short 1–2 page pitch many funders require before inviting a full proposal
2. Full proposal — the detailed application, usually with a formal budget and supporting documents
3. Review period — internal review, sometimes including a site visit or interview
4. Decision — award, rejection, or a request for revisions
5. Grant agreement and disbursement — signing terms and receiving funds, often in installments tied to milestones
6. Reporting — narrative and financial reports at agreed intervals, and a final report at project close

Typical Timelines

Community and regional funders often decide within 4–8 weeks of the deadline. National government programs and large foundations can take three to six months, sometimes longer for multi-stage competitive processes. Build this into your planning — don't apply for a grant with a decision timeline longer than your project's intended start date allows.

Commonly Requested Documents

Document Readiness Checklist

- ☐ Certificate of registration / incorporation
- ☐ Most recent annual report or activity summary
- ☐ Audited financial statements or financial summary (recent fiscal year)
- ☐ List of board members or governance structure
- ☐ Organizational budget (not just the project budget)
- ☐ Proof of bank account in the organization's name
- ☐ Letters of support or partnership, if applicable
- ☐ Proof of any relevant licenses or safeguarding policies

CHAPTER 8

7 Beginner Mistakes That Get Applications Rejected

Almost every rejected first application falls into one of these seven patterns. Recognizing them in your own draft before you submit is the fastest way to improve your odds.

The Seven Mistakes

1. Applying outside the funder's stated focus area, hoping reviewers will "see the connection" anyway
2. Missing the deadline, or submitting so close to it that errors go uncaught
3. Ignoring the stated word or page limit — reviewers often stop reading, or reject on formatting grounds alone
4. Writing vague objectives ("improve education") instead of specific, measurable ones
5. Submitting a budget that's unrealistic — either inflated or so low it signals the project can't actually be delivered
6. Making claims with no supporting evidence or data
7. Not following the application instructions exactly as written, down to file format and naming

Before and After: Fixing a Vague Objective

EXAMPLE**Rewrite in practice**

Weak: "We will improve education for children in our community." Strong: "By the end of the 12-month project, 300 primary school children in four schools will have access to a functioning classroom library, and 80% will show measurable improvement in a standardized reading assessment." The second version is specific, measurable, and gives a reviewer something concrete to evaluate.

Next Steps

You now understand what a grant actually is, who funds them, how to check your own eligibility, how to define a fundable project, and how to read a listing without wasting time on the wrong opportunities. That's the entire foundation — everything else is practice.

Don't try to do all of this in one sitting. Work through it in order: finish your project worksheet this week, then spend one focused session shortlisting real opportunities against your criteria.

1. Complete your one-paragraph project summary and project profile worksheet from Chapter 4
2. Create a free GrantsForGlobal account and browse the grant database using your project's sector, geography, and budget range
3. Shortlist 5 grants that pass the eligibility checklist from Chapter 3
4. Read "Grant Proposal Writing Made Simple" before you start drafting your first application

Where GrantsForGlobal's software takes over

Everything in this guide works whether or not you ever upgrade — it's a complete, standalone introduction to grants. But once you're tracking more than a handful of opportunities at once, GrantsForGlobal's Premium membership turns the manual process described in Chapter 6 into something the software does automatically.

- Full access to the 10,000+ grant database, filtered by sector, country, amount, and deadline
- Save and bookmark unlimited grants as you shortlist them, instead of tracking them in a separate document
- A deadline calendar and alerts so nothing on your shortlist gets missed
- Donor profiles showing a funder's history and stated priorities before you write a word