

Illinois Extension | Urban Farms

Writing Grants for Funding



Both small and urban farms are eligible for various types of grants to build their businesses and organizations. This guide provides advice on how to get started and increase success.

What is a Grant?

A grant is money given to a person, business, government, institution, or non-profit organization for a specific purpose. They are intended to fund public services and/or help stimulate the economy and business development, and support research. Private foundations, commercial businesses, and governments offer grant funding, but not all grants are available to every type of organization. Grants do not need to be repaid, but should not be considered free money as they require reporting activities.

Grant Preparation

Grants are best used to expand current activities or explore new opportunities. Applicants must demonstrate a need for the project, not a need for the money. Show how the money will help achieve goals or serve communities. If a farm already has a written business plan, up-to-date financial statements, and staff available to write an application, it might be ready to apply.

Prior to applying, individuals should have already identified a need and project scope. Partners such as other farms, local non-profits, or schools can be brought in on a grant to add expertise. However, it's best to utilize established relationships in applications rather than attempting to bring in new partners for a funding request.

If individuals foresee applying for a U.S. government grant, register for a System for Award Management (SAM) Unique Entity ID number at SAM.gov. Apply for a number before it is needed, as approval can take several weeks. Renew registration annually.

After determining the application deadline, consider if the money would be a good return on investment (ROI). If the amount is small and the application is intensive, would it be worth the time to apply? If the application is time-intensive and highly competitive, would the investment in resources for grant writing be worth the risk of not getting the money?

Finally, consider if current staff have the time and skills required to complete and manage a new project. How will additional duties impact the ability to complete the normal workload? If hiring new staff, how will this impact management systems, and will hiring processes delay project implementation?

Grant Considerations

Just because a grant is available doesn't mean everyone should apply. Look for a grant whose mission, vision, and goals align with the farms'. In other words, seek a funder who wants the same things. Don't change who you are and what you do to match a funder's objectives.

Also, beware of the trap of mission creep. If the farm's focus is youth education, don't apply for a grant for adult education. If the goal is neighborhood job creation, a grant focused on job training might not be the right fit. Vegetable consumption and good nutrition are related topics, but if individuals are primarily farmers and food producers, should they apply for a grant focused on nutrition? Applicants for that example grant will be expected to have the expertise or partners capable of developing a nutrition program or the materials to help customers improve their diets.

Funder Expectations

According to Martin Bailkey, retired grants advisor for Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, funders expect "to invest their money wisely and are seeking the most bang for their buck." This means those seeking grant funding must show how and why they will succeed. Having a track record of success will help make a case. Ultimately, funders want to support projects with high impact or a high probability of success. They also require timely reporting and may withdraw funds if individuals are unable to comply.

Reviewer Expectations

Reviewers expect to read a good story on why a project is needed, with a unique or innovative approach, and what the community will look like after the grant has concluded. They also expect both qualitative and quantitative data to be used to back up the story. Explain how the money will

allow the project to provide fifty more CSA boxes to low-income families (quantitative data) and use participant quotes to describe how kids began eating cherry tomatoes like candy (qualitative data). Reviewers also consider if current staff have the expertise and time to implement the project.

Sometimes it is the simple things that determine the fate of a grant application. Make sure all instructions have been followed, and there are no typos or math errors. Purdue Extension reminds grant writers that “a happy reviewer is usually a more positive reviewer.” If reviewers need to sort through many errors and poor grammar, they’ll either consciously or unconsciously reduce the total score.

Who are Grant Reviewers?

Often, farming peers and other industry experts are recruited to serve as grant reviewers. Some reviewers may receive a small stipend, while others may be volunteers. Some may serve as a reviewer as part of their regular job duties. Often, reviewers are busy people, so clear, concise writing and meticulous proofreading are critical.

“Reviewers can be people who don’t understand or don’t share your mission. They may also be nitpicky people who find fault with every typo or misspelling,” says Patricia Welander, grant writer with [University of Illinois Extension](#).

Grant Checklist

- All requirements in the required format
- Evidence of the need for the project
- Unique skills to address the need
- Evidence of the ability to finish the project
- A compelling narrative
- Clear, accurate data to support claims
- A timeline — who is doing what when
- A detailed budget — how funds will be spent
- If asked, letters of support

Getting Started

- Make an annual grant calendar of recurring grants that match goals
- Review each request for proposal (RFP) carefully
- Attend informational webinars and ask questions
- Research and understand the funder’s motivations and the types of projects that have been funded in the past

The reality is that organizations or farmers with experience and well-written applications tend to receive grants rather than those with the most need. Some may even employ grant writers. Grants, by nature, are competitive.

Tips for Success

- Update the farm’s business plan annually
- Allow plenty of time to write several drafts
- Have others proofread the proposal
- Start with grants for small amounts of money and fewer reporting obligations
- Make grant writing a normal part of off-season farm planning efforts
- Divide the work among a team
- Design a plan of work with strict deadlines
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help

Additional Resources

[Business Planning for Urban Farms](#) and [Mission and Vision](#), Illinois Extension
[Writing a Successful Grant Proposal](#), Purdue Extension
[Grant Writing for Farm and Food Entrepreneurs](#), Michigan State University Extension

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Modified May 2025



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