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Regional Artist Project Grant Tip Sheet

Okay, you've read the guidelines (you have read the guidelines, haven't you?) and you've figured out that you meet the eligibility requirements, you've got a project that will help you advance your artistic career, and you're pretty sure you can rustle up all those annoying required materials. So, what else could you possibly need to know?

Good question. If you're reading this in the hopes of learning the *secret* to a successful grant application, those five words (or three budget line items, or one project idea) that will make reviewers sing, then you will probably be disappointed. There is, alas, no magic formula.

What we can offer are some do's and don't's, which are mostly from the realm of common sense—things you probably know but may not realize will be important to the panel considering your application.

Let's start with general advice:

The Big Picture

Just like a job application, a grant application represents you. And like all representations, the image can be flattering—or not. You want to make it easy for the reviewer to see and appreciate your work and your project, so the first rules in presenting yourself are:

- Be professional. You want to convey to the panel that you are a serious artist and have a feasible project that you need to accomplish, so act like a professional. Type your application and résumé, provide all the requested materials in the order and manner specified (and don't send unrequested extras unless you're sure it's both permitted and helpful to you), and proofread everything before you send it in. A sloppy presentation isn't an absolute indicator of your capacity to complete a project successfully, but it won't help your case.
- Don't get in your own way. Expressive gestures that aren't to the point (for example, submitting your résumé on purple paper just because you believe it demonstrates your strong sense of color) are at best

distracting. They will likely make an impression, but not the one you want. You wouldn't submit anything like that with a job application (I trust), so don't treat this process with any less respect.

Meeting the Requirements

Each region in the Regional Artist Project Grant program has its own application and its own list of required forms and materials, but most request a narrative, project budget, résumé or bio, work samples, and letters of recommendation. Here are a few pointers about each section of the application.

Narrative

Though narrative instructions vary from region to region, most of them ask in some form to 1) describe your project and 2) explain how the accomplishment of this project will further your development and/or career goals as an artist.

In order to be persuasive your project needs to be

- Feasible. Don't propose a project that seems beyond your capacity either in terms of cost, access, or other factors. For instance, as compelling an idea as it is to do an intimate documentary of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, there may be logistical obstacles. Unless you have credible answers to reasonable questions about the scale or ambition of your project, it's best not to shoot for the moon.
- A logical step for you. If your work samples and history are focused on modern dance choreography but you ask for money to build a kiln, there's a disconnect. You never want a panelist to furrow his brow. It should make sense why the workshop tuition, computer, brochure, or new studio you want would be relevant and helpful to you at this point in your career. If the project doesn't pass the intuitive test, you have a lot of explaining to do.

However, do not rely on panelists' powers of intuition. It may seem obvious to you why a web site would be beneficial, but connect the dots for your readers. The more specific you can be the better. Saying "everybody else has a web site" may be your impression and it might even strike a chord with some of your panelists, but it's even better to explain how a web site will improve your situation or address a problem you have as an artist. Something like:

I'm somewhat isolated and don't have gallery representation, so I'm limited in how people can find out about my work. A web site would allow me to 1) expose my work to people who would probably not see it in person; 2) capture email addresses of those interested in my work; 3) potentially sell my work online.

General rules of thumb:

- Use simple, declarative sentences, active voice—and get to the point. Even if you are writer, the application is not an appropriate place to trot out the bells and whistles. The panelists aren't reading your proposal to be challenged. And observe the space or page limits. Panelists are typically asked to read a number of applications, so say what you need to say as efficiently as possible.
- Who, what, when, where, why, and how. You are asking strangers for money. If a stranger asked you for money, what would you want to know? If you find, after you've answered the application queries, that you haven't addressed one or more of the "w" questions, you might want to revisit your responses.
- It's not an artist statement. As fascinating as it would be to know why you make your art, what it expresses about you and the world around you, and the intimate joys and challenges of your process, there are other, more appropriate venues for such expression. Keep your answers focused on the practical needs and outcomes of your project.
- Get a non-arts friend or acquaintance to read your application. If she doesn't understand or is not persuaded by your request, find out why and try again.

Budget

Many applications include budget forms and/or sample budgets to give artists a model to follow in creating their own project budgets. Most of these point you toward a few basic principles:

- Provide detail. As a general rule, more detail is better. Which of the following gives you more confidence that the artist has thought through the project expenses?
 - Travel \$600, or
 - Mileage (200 mi. @ .485) \$97
 - Lodging (4 nights @ \$85) 340
 - Meals (5 days @ \$35) 175
 - Total \$612

Admittedly, some grantors will want you to round your amounts up or down so that the budgets are easier to take in quickly, but

if you can show that you're not just picking numbers out of thin air, you will make a stronger case for yourself.

- Provide supporting documentation. Most of us have a general idea of what a hotel room should (and shouldn't) cost, but fewer know what a new lathe or bandsaw runs. CD production costs and graphic design fees can vary widely. So, it's not a bad idea to get an estimate from the provider to support the numbers you're putting in your application. For most equipment, airfares, and materials costs you can go on the Internet and get a price; for professional services you may need to request an estimate. Always provide documentation for class, workshop, or conference registration costs and it doesn't hurt to attach a description either. These proofs can go a long way toward quelling a panelist's momentary doubts as they're reading your proposal.
- Show your own financial contribution to the project and other sources of income. No RAPG consortium will require that you spend your own money; nevertheless, if you can show you are investing your own funds (over and above your time) to accomplish a project, your commitment to it will be obvious. If you are pursuing or have secured donations from others, especially for more ambitious projects, say so. Just leave enough room on the expected income side of your budget to make it clear that you do need the grant.

Résumés or bios

Résumés are required but are generally reviewed as supporting material to the work samples and narrative. They can provide information to panelists about timing and background that may be relevant during the final decision-making process. As a rule résumés should be:

- Artist résumés. That is, they should focus on your activities as an artist, including exhibitions, performances, readings, screenings, commissions, collections that have acquired your work, publishing history, residencies, articles and reviews of your work, workshops taught or taken, lectures, panels, education, employment, awards, etc.
- Abbreviated. You can submit the 30-page version of your résumé, but a) you have to make however many copies of it are required and b) it may not always make the impression you imagine it will. A good length to aim for is two-to-three pages.

If you have limited experience as an artist, lead with what you have on your résumé and condense the rest to the very broadest strokes. Use this situation to make the case that the grant is especially important as a way to take a meaningful step forward in your artistic career.

Work samples

Even though this is a project grant, your project will not be funded if your work samples are weak. The first stage in every process is an artistic evaluation, so you need to pay attention to what you choose to submit.

- With work samples it's a matter of avoiding mistakes first. If you're a writer make sure there are no typos in your manuscript and that it's formatted in a readable manner (e.g., adequate margins and line spacing); if you're a visual artist avoid out-of-focus, poorly cropped, or cluttered images. Confirm that the sample you think you have saved on your CD or DVD has actually been saved on the disc. Panelists are generally charitable but busy people. They will try to give you the benefit of the doubt but ultimately decide that you didn't care enough to submit a work sample they could review without distractions or extrasensory powers.

Visual artists should always submit work samples in a format that all the panelists can experience at the same time. This means slides or digital images on a CD. While many regions allow applicants to submit photographs or individual reproductions (post cards, etc.) as work samples, this is an unsatisfactory medium for review by a group of panelists. It is much easier to assess a projected image than to leaf through a stack of cards while everyone else is waiting. And fairly or unfairly, the absence of projectable documentation can suggest a lack of professionalism, an impression applicants would be advised to avoid.

Selection. You have only a limited degree of control over the substance of what you submit. After all, you can't choose to send 15 pages of Faulkner because his writing is a little stronger than yours. But panelists don't have to (and don't want to) see everything that's in your drawer either. Choose samples that you consider to be

- Strong and recent representations of the quality of your work. If you're submitting more than one sample, it's generally best to stay in genre. Coherence helps anchor your work in the panelist's mind and avoid unflattering comparisons if they sense unevenness. ("She should stick to classical!")
- In keeping with the project you have proposed. Your pastels may be lovely but they don't say much about your ability to do large-scale fresco painting. If it's all you've got then go with it, but understand that the panel may have reservations that you will need to address.

If the sample is part of a longer work on a tape or one of several on a CD or DVD, make sure it is cued correctly or that the order on the disc is the way you want the panelists to experience it. As a general rule, it's best to submit only what you want the panel to read, see, or hear.

Work-sample descriptions and labeling. Most applications have directions about labeling work samples; at the most primitive, you will at least want to put your name on them so they can be identified as yours. Even more useful are titles, media, dimensions, dates of completion, running times, etc. Slides should always be marked to indicate the top of the image. In addition to labeling DVD cases and discs, it is also helpful to have a menu page on the sample, especially if you have included more than one work.

Some information will not fit easily on a disc or slide and, in any event, the information is very hard to read once the projector or player is running, so it is wise to attach a work-sample description page, numbered in the same order as the works on the sample. At its most straightforward, it's the same information as above, but you may wish to expand on it further, as appropriate to your art form:

- For visual artists: title, date of completion, medium, dimensions, and (for installations and time-based works) description of experiential aspects not apparent in images
- For composers and songwriters: title, date of completion, running time of selected segment, and instrumentation
- For choreographers: title, date of completion, running time of selected segment, where and when the performance represented took place, and the performers or ensemble
- For filmmakers: title, date of completion, running time, original format, your role and the role of other key people in the production, relevant technical considerations, and a brief synopsis of complete work
- For writers: title, genre, and (if you're submitting an excerpt of a longer work) a brief synopsis of the work as a whole
- For performers: instrument or role played, name of production, when and where performance took place, and name of ensemble or company if part of a larger production

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are sometimes required, sometimes optional, but they should always be the least important part of your

proposal. As a general rule, unless you have known, qualified references who can speak specifically and enthusiastically about your abilities as an artist, their value to you and your application is only that they not damage your credibility. So, if you submit them, choose your references with the Hippocratic oath in mind: First, do no harm.

Then, consider the following as you choose your references:

- First-hand knowledge of your work as an artist
- Professional credentials (this is not a personal recommendation)
- How recent is the reference's encounter with your work

You want to tell your references about the project you're planning and send them a résumé. They should be able to talk in an informed way about their estimation of your ability to do the project you're planning. If they can't do that, then you would want them to speak positively about their experience with you on other kinds of projects and/or their assessment of your commitment and skill as an artist. Always ask your intended reference for an honest opinion about whether they can write a strong letter of recommendation for you and don't be offended if they don't think they can. It's better to know ahead of time than to find out afterwards you asked the wrong person.

Other Materials and Information

Most regions allow you to send in supporting materials, including press reviews, brochures, etc. Both for your own sanity (because you will probably have to provide multiple copies) and theirs (because they have to deal with the material), choose judiciously. Sending in a pile of reviews in which you're mentioned only in passing as part of a group exhibition or ensemble performance does little good and in fact can be annoying. If you insist because the reference is especially positive or the publication particularly noteworthy, highlight it for the panelists so they won't have to hunt for it.

Some regions require a promotional or marketing plan for projects whose intent is to advance an artist's career—for example, the production of CDs, brochures, web sites, etc. It's not a bad idea to provide a plan even if your region doesn't require one. Here's why: if the panel senses that the CDs and brochures will probably sit in boxes in your garage or that you don't know what you have to do to actually get visitors to your shiny new web site, then they're going to hesitate to give you the grant. And they should. Show them the plan and it's a lot more likely that they'll show you the money.

Final Thoughts

Consider these tips as a way to help get you started with your application or to give you some ideas if you run into problems along the way. Your greatest resource, however, as you write your application is your local arts council contact. These professionals are eager to help answer questions and guide you through the process. Be sure to take advantage of their knowledge of the program as you put together your Regional Artist Project Grant proposal.