

Communication

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Contacting a Program Officer

PREPARING AN OUTREACH EMAIL

1. *Email Subject Line.* Carefully choose the email's subject line, giving the Program Officer some context to your message.
2. *Program* Note what program you are applying to (be as specific as possible, i.e., grant number, opportunity number, mechanism, or other available details).
3. *Title.* Include the title of your proposal if you have identified
4. *Request:* Construct 1-3 sentences for your request, g., “I would like to inquire as to the suitability of the proposed research to meeting your program’s objectives,” or “I believe my proposed research addresses Objective 1 of the program in that ... I would like to confirm my understanding of the program objective.” In addition, describe the hypothesis you are proposing to test, so the PO has easy access to the context of your work.
5. *Proposed Project Summary.* Write 4-6 sentences summarizing your proposed project, including project objectives, approach, expected results, and how your research will contribute to the field.
6. *Your Background & Research Program.* Write 2-3 sentences providing your background and introducing your research program.
7. *Closing.* End with 1-2 closing sentences acknowledging the PO’s time and efforts and you’re looking forward to the PO’s Let the PO know you are available for follow-up and invite the PO to request any additional information.
8. *Contact Information.* Make sure your full contact information is provided in the

SAMPLE EMAIL TEXT

“ Dear [add Program Officer/Contact name],

My team will be seeking funding from the [Add specific program name and solicitation number] project [Add project title]. While our proposed research seems to meet the requirements listed in the program solicitation to be responsive, I would like to confirm that my project is a good fit for your program.

Our proposed research will [Add summary of hypothesis(es), objectives, and NSF review criteria – intellectual merit and broader impacts].

[Add 2-3 sentences providing your background (and co-I’s background] and introducing your research program [this is your career program, five-year goal, etc.)].

Thank you for taking the time to address my inquiry as to the suitability of my proposed research to meeting your program's objectives. I look forward to your response and can provide any additional information you may need.

Regards,

You should get a response within a day or two – study it for tone and nuance as well as its direct message. You might get a recommendation to contact a completely different program office. There might be hints about how to strengthen the proposal. Some Program Officers will ask to see a longer description of your project – usually a positive sign. If there is encouragement of any kind, go to the next step.

NEXT STEPS

PHONE MEETING

Once you receive a response to your email, say you would like to discuss some issues the Program Officer raised in the email. Ask if you can schedule a call within the next couple of weeks. If the Program Officer agrees to a meeting (and many will), you should prepare a short (1–2 pages) white paper and send it first.

Remember you are using this as an opportunity to obtain “between the lines” information to decide: a) whether to write a proposal for this program; and b) how to shape it in such a way to get a favorable review. In the course of the conversation, seek answers to the following:

- Does my project fall within your current priorities? If it does not, explore different objectives that might yield a better fit or ask for suggestions of other programs that might be interested in your project.
- What would you recommend to improve my chances for a favorable review?
- What is the anticipated proposal success ratio?
- Success ratios are your statistical odds for success. Rates are highly variable among grant programs, ranging from 5% to 40%, with most in the 10–20% range. First-time submissions have lower rates; resubmissions are
- What are some of the common reasons for proposal rejections? This will help you understand likes and dislikes of review panels that do not show up in the program's written
- Throughout the discussion, listen carefully for helpful hints about proposal structure and content. Do you hear any “buying signals,” e., signs that the Program Officer is intrigued by your idea? Conversely, be on the lookout for hints that the Program Officer does not think you have much of a chance.

FOLLOW UP

A short “thank you” note is more than good manners—it is a way to keep the line of communication open and fresh for both parties, especially if you summarize the key points you

heard in the conversation. It is also a good idea to note your desire to serve as a reviewer, and attach a one-page CV. Sponsor agencies seek to enhance the diversity of their panels, and some, will engage investigators before they write their first proposals.

RESOURCES

[What to Say – and Not Say to Program Officers](#)

[Advice for Contacting your Program Officer](#)

[A View from the NIH Bridge: Perspectives of a Program Officer](#)

[Get a Speedy Response from your Program Officers \(NIH\)](#)

[Communicating with Program Officers](#)

[We don't bite! Communicating with your Program Officers \(NIH\)](#)

Reframing a Proposal's Language

DEI Words to Avoid in Funding Proposals — And What to Say Instead



by [Ray'Chel Wilson](#)

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The Cleveland Observer --> See original publication here: <https://cleobserver.com/dei-words-to-avoid-funding-proposals/>

“The world of grant writing is not one-size-fits-all, but recent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) shifts have created a newly complex landscape for businesses, social enterprises, and nonprofits alike. What once resonated with funders may now raise eyebrows, requiring a more strategic and informed approach.

As national development professional [Razelle E. Townsend](#) observed, “Many foundations are shifting their focus from identity-based funding to cause-driven strategies,” a trend that necessitates a critical reevaluation of how we frame our proposals.

What to Avoid

The challenge for grant writers today is clear: How do you communicate the real needs of your community without using language that may unintentionally jeopardize your funding chances? The key is balance. Below are some words that have increasingly been flagged in funding reviews:

- Social Inequality & Discrimination words like inequality, institutional, intersectional, marginalized, minority, oppression, discriminated, hate speech, systemic, victim, polarization, barrier, and excluded may raise concerns in

- Identity & Demographics terms such as BIPOC, Black and Latinx, ethnicity, female, gender, LGBT, Indigenous community, and women might lead to additional
- Bias & Prejudice language, including biases, implicit bias, male-dominated, and privilege, can sometimes trigger objections.
- Diversity, Inclusion & Equity words like advocacy, antiracist, cultural relevance, diversity, equality, inclusive, multicultural, racial diversity, and sense of belonging may attract critical
- Experiences & Conditions terms, such as disability, historically, socioeconomic, sexual preference, trauma, and underrepresented, could flag an application for further

A recent report in [The Washington Post](#) noted how certain keywords related to DEI have come under increased scrutiny, particularly within federal funding streams like the National Science Foundation.

This shift appears linked, in part, to the Biden administration's executive orders concerning diversity initiatives, such as the one addressing women's issues by the [U.S. Office of Personnel Management \(OPM\)](#). These orders, while aimed at preventing discrimination, have inadvertently created a climate where overly emphasizing certain terms can trigger a side-eye.

A Path Forward

So, how do you craft a winning grant proposal that addresses critical needs without falling into these potential traps? Here are some key strategies to update the messaging of your solution:

Shift #1: Focus on the Problem, Not Just the Population

Funders are increasingly looking for proposals that emphasize broad challenges rather than identity-specific language. Instead of centering a project on a particular demographic, frame it around the industry-based issue being addressed and how your solution provides a measurable impact.

-  "Improving educational outcomes for Black and Latinx "
-  "Closing the achievement gap in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields by expanding access to hands-on learning programs."

Shift #2: Quantifiable Impact Matters.

Funders want to see measurable results. Highlight specific outcomes like increased graduation rates, job placements, or health improvements.

-  "Creating an inclusive workplace where underrepresented employees feel valued."
-  "Implementing mentorship programs that increase employee retention and leadership promotions by 25%."

Shift #3: Data-Driven Justifications

Use solid research and statistics to back up your claims. Instead of relying on emotional appeals, present hard data that underscores the need and effectiveness of your project.

-  “Many marginalized communities lack access to quality ”
-  “In [X region], 40% of residents live more than 20 miles from the nearest healthcare provider, increasing preventable hospitalizations by 30%.”

Shift #4: Community Engagement Over Identity-Based Framing

Show how your project is co-created with the community rather than framed as a solution *for* a particular group. Demonstrate active participation and leadership from those directly impacted.

-  “Empowering BIPOC entrepreneurs to overcome systemic barriers to ”
-  “Providing first-time business owners with financial literacy training and direct access to capital.”

Shift #5: Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Funders prefer projects that have longevity beyond the grant period. Explain how your initiative will continue through additional funding streams, strategic partnerships, or self- sustaining models.

-  “Addressing gender disparities in STEM through a summer coding boot camp for girls.”
-  “Launching a STEM workforce pipeline by integrating coding education into K-12 curricula, ensuring ongoing skills development.”

Shift #6: Thoughtful, Strategic Language Use

While inclusive language is still important, it must be used strategically. Instead of broadly stating your organization is “committed to diversity,” describe *how* your programs ensure accessibility and equitable participation.

-  “Our organization is committed to diversity, equity, and ”
-  “We implement hiring practices that expand candidate outreach and create leadership pathways for all employees.”

“

Final Thoughts

The world of grant writing is evolving. What worked a few years ago may not be as effective today, but that doesn't mean you have to water down your mission. By shifting how you frame your impact—focusing on solutions, outcomes, and sustainability—you can continue to secure funding while staying true to your values.

Writer's Bio

[Ray'Chel Wilson](#) is the author of the internationally selling "[Black Wealth Freedom](#)" workbook series and CEO of [ForOurLastNames](#), a technology turning financial trauma into financial action for first-generation wealth builders. She is a graduate student at Duke Divinity School.



[Ray'Chel Wilson](#)

Ray'Chel is CEO of the ForOurLastNames app, a "ready, set, go" environment for first-generation wealth builders. Through her books & articles, she increases human flourishing. [More by Ray'Chel Wilson](#)