

# GRANTING ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE:

## Who Writes Successful Proposals

By DAVID SILVERBERG



How can you get paid by helping people get money? Professional grant writing is fast becoming a promising opportunity for those with excellent writing and research skills.

Lesa Francis, a 34-year-old from Ajax, Ontario, has been writing grants for others since 2005 and she can't picture herself doing anything else. She helps businesses, poets, musicians, and organizations get much-needed funds from governments or foundations with her company Ujamaa Grant Writing Services.

It's not easy, she warns. "You need an attention to detail, and need to research a grant's guidelines thoroughly," she says in an interview.

Her background experience helped inform her grant writing: she worked as a law clerk and honed her research expertise. Her stint in event planning also put her in contact with various entertainers across Toronto. So how did she get started writing those lengthy complicated grants for others?

Sometimes, all it takes is one solid client. Her first contact turned out to be a poet who asked her for help with an application to the Ontario Arts Council's Word of Mouth program. She worked with him on the grant and he later won funding, \$8000 altogether. "His referrals got me lots of work," Francis recalls. "I was soon getting calls from other poets, musicians and even visual artists."

When Francis first began writing grants, her success rate hovered close to 100 percent. Now, with more grants taking up her time, her ratio is around 66 per cent, she says.

At first, she made a living by charging commission, based on what the applicant received from the granting body, if the grant was successful. But she later found out she was doing an immense amount of legwork by researching a grant's background and priorities, only to find out some clients didn't go through with the deal at the last minute. Now, she charges an hourly rate, ranging from \$45 to \$55.

Why would people pay someone else to write a grant, when they could do it themselves? Francis says an outside perspective can offer insight into a grant's clarity and focus. What some applicants don't recognize, she says, is a pro grant writer understands the language of governments and foundations, a language that could be ancient Latin to average people. "Sometimes you need to add a word here, or be more specific in a certain section," she adds.

Francis says she also sells business plan assessment kits to clients, for those who want a one-stop package to help steer their business plan in a loan-friendly direction. Sometimes, people just need to be guided to the right places, she says.

Manager and Canadian Idol judge Farley Flex turned to Francis when he wanted to apply for a grant for his first Durham International Festival, a celebration of "diversity, arts and crafts,

sports and food," Flex says. Francis prepared a successful grant application for the fest, winning it \$23,000 from the City of Oshawa Partnership Program.

Flex opted for a professional because of time and efficiency. "I didn't have the time to work on grants," he admits, "and we wanted someone who knew what they were doing." Plus, grants can be "tedious and demand so much detail it can really take a lot of patience," he adds.

Francis says she tends to absorb things very easily, a skill essential to be a great grant writer. Talking with her clients requires an open mind and a keen ear. She also makes sure to verbalize a grant's mission with utmost clarity, a quality many granting bodies look for.

A grant needs to get its point across clearly, says Paul Seesequasis, the program officer for the Writing and Publishing Program at the Canada Council of the Arts. A program's jury needs to understand what an applicant wants to do and why they want to do it, he notes. "Juries read hundreds of grants and don't want to read any confusing material," he says.

He believes a professional grant writer should also truly care about the artists they are working with; after all, "passion can't be faked," Seesequasis adds.

Grant writing can also be an important task within a larger role. Sarah MacDonald Bingham, the public education coordinator at the Lanark County Interval House, has been writing grants for the past year, taking up a quarter of her work day. Most her grant applications are mailed off to the Ontario Women's Directorate, the Canadian Women's Foundation, Status of Women Canada, Service Canada and others.

She says it's important to tailor each application to the specific venue, and she always makes sure to review the grant's mission statements carefully. "I also look into the history of the funder, what projects they've previously funded," Bingham says.

What other skills should a potential pro grant writer hone? Bingham says creative research habits are a must, as well as basic writing talent.

Francis says "know your industry. Get familiar with your contacts from funders to artists to anyone in the business. Socialize with these people at info sessions, for example."

Seesequasis says grant writers shouldn't be scared away by the budget section of a grant. Math can frighten even the hardest academics, but a budget should simply "make sense," he says. For individuals who apply for grants, tabling a budget isn't as difficult compared to writing one for organizations.

Francis loves her job, noting how running her own business gives her flexibility and allows her to work from home. But she sets strict deadlines for herself. "I always make sure the clock is set right," she says, laughing.

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