

# Dear Artists, Stop Turning In Bad Grant Applications (Part 1)

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*This two-part guest post is by Bianca Lynne Spriggs, a multidisciplinary artist who has been a recipient and reviewer of multiple grants. A version of this post first appeared on her [website](#).*

<http://sanfranciscoblog.foundationcenter.org/dear-artists-stop-turning-in-bad-grant-applications-part-1>

Show of hands. How many of you who've applied for a grant or fellowship have turned in your application on the deadline day, right before the post office closed or the website shut down, after dashing off un-spellchecked artist statement and recruiting friends to write your reference letters the night before? Sometimes, you get lucky, and usually you don't.

How many hours do we put into our work? Days? Weeks? Months? YEARS?? Soooooo much time. And yet, when the opportunity comes time to apply for a nice chunk of change to help us stay in our studios, buy supplies, travel to conferences, and well, make a living as artists in a system that generally treats us as though we are little better than a kid with a lemonade stand in winter -- oh, the slacking that ensues.

Frankly, it's embarrassing. If we can't play the same game the rest of the world plays in terms of professionalism, how can we be expected to be taken seriously? And by taken seriously, I mean getting *compensated* the way we should be for all those years of training, 60-hour weeks in the studio, and sacrificed activities and relationships that we can never get back. And by compensated, I mean *paid*.

So, my dear compatriots, for whom I wish nothing but the best with regard to your continued success, here are a few tips from your friendly neighborhood artist/activist who has taken several turns as a grant/fellowship reviewer, as well as the recipient of several awards herself.

### ***Have this artist kit ready at all times***

Every working artist needs the following items ready to use at any time, and which can be tweaked according to the application guidelines:

- **Artist Bio.** Keep two types of bios saved on your desktop/USB drive: A short 50-word bio and something a little longer, but no more than 200 words. That way, you can drag, drop, or easily tweak it to fit the needs of the application.
- **Artist Resume.** Keep it to a page or so, certainly not more than two. This should include your current and past professional positions that pertain to your current artistic occupation, gigs, publications, events, awards, recognitions, by the year and date. You should be keeping a calendar full of these anyway.
- **Artist Statement.** About 250 words that explain your aesthetic, your process, what drives you, inspires you, and who your influences are (personal as well as professional), and how all of this shows up in your work. Be specific. Use an example or two. [See selected resources on how to write an artist statement.](#)
- **Work Sample.** This is going to differ depending on the medium, but you should be able to pull up 10-12 poems, 15-30 pages of prose, 10-15 images, 3-5 videos, etc., that have either been published or exhibited by a *credible* publication, gallery, performance hall or whatever. Do not, under any set of circumstances, turn in material that is un-workshopped. By workshopped, I don't mean a quick spell-check; I mean revised based on the feedback of an objective audience. If it's already been published, you know it's suitable for public consumption. Don't be turning in the dance routine you made up in your bedroom or the piece you wrote a month ago because you're just really feeling that topic right now.
- **Elevator Pitch of Current Project.** No more than 1-2 sentences about what you are currently working on. Have a pitch for each project.
- **Letters of Reference.** Have a list of 5-7 credible people (*not family members*) whom you know, have worked with, or know your work really well, *and* who have already agreed that they would be willing to craft a letter of reference on your behalf. Then, when the time comes, give them *plenty* of time so they're not pressured to write something the

night before, which could strain your relationships and result in a rushed or sloppy letter. Give these people a copy of your resume, your artist statement, and your elevator pitch of the project if the grant is specific to that.

- **Thank You Letters.** If you get the award, let your references know. Make sure you THANK THEM lots of times to let them know how appreciative you are of their time and energy spent on your behalf when they could be doing at least 500 other things. Keep copies of the letter, and if you need them again, all the authors have to do is change the date. Help them help you.

[Part 2](#) of this guest post will have tips on preparing a clean application packet.

# Dear Artists, Stop Turning In Bad Grant Applications (Part 2)

APRIL 24, 2015

## ***Send a clean application packet***

When panelists are reading through the material, this is the only impression we have of you. Often, the judging is blind and sourced from out-of-town. If not, and a panelist has a conflict of interest, they have to state that up front and inform the organization and withdraw themselves from the conversation about your work.

So, typically your work will be reviewed and assessed by strangers. This is the only shot you have at standing out, so make sure you're not standing out for the wrong reasons. Make sure the following happens before you press that submit button or drop your app off in the mail:

- **Clean Copies.** Make sure if the work is a hard copy, you send the exact number of neat, *paper-clipped* (unless otherwise stated), collated copies of everything the application requires. Unless otherwise stated, use plain type, single-spaced, no smaller than 11 point font size. Don't mess with the margins. If you're including a budget for a project, make sure it's large and easy to read on some sort of table with explanations of numbers. All physical samples, including DVDs and CDs, should be clearly labeled and tested *before* you send. If it's in Dropbox or something, links should include at least your last name and a sample number and title.
- **K.I.S.S. Method.** K.I.S.S. stands for "Keep It Short and Simple". Avoid jargon and technical terms that will require a lot of explaining or alienate the reviewer who may or may not be familiar with your exact process. Avoid large words and long convoluted sentences. Remember, I might have a hundred other applications to get through. I'm human. If you bore me, I will glaze over. Bullet points are your friend. So are paragraphs. And bold type to separate sections.
- **Follow all the directions to the letter, and answer all questions fully.** If they want you to only list your name on every third page, then do it. If you get 3,000 words to tell us about your process, and you write three junky little sentences, how am I supposed to know what you're trying to use this money for or if you even deserve it? Also, I've seen plenty of applications come through where the work sample and resume are excellent, but the artist statement is either really pretentious and unnecessarily long-winded, or way too short and smacks of entitlement: "Just give me the dang award already! Can't you see how magnificent I am?" Find that balance of pride, humility, and sincerity in your artist statement, then find people whom you trust will give you brutally honest feedback,

and ask them to read it.

- **Proofread your work.** Don't just read on the screen when you're typing. Print it out and read it aloud. You'll catch tons of errors that way. I've even heard of people reading it on their Kindle because the perspective changes. Also, learn the rules of semi-colons, or don't use them.

### ***Give yourself plenty of time***

The last-minute rush will show like a wonky seam in your materials. If there's software online you have to register to use, create an account at least a month before the deadline so you can figure out how it works. Plan on turning in the application at least ten days before the deadline in case there are kinks, setbacks, stalled screens, finger fumbles, etc.

Same goes for hard copies. You'll need multiple copies of your work samples, at least one trip to the copy shop, and so on.

### ***Keep an open-mind, and keep trying***

Sometimes application decisions have little to do with the work sample and more to do with missing components in the application itself. Sometimes parts -- important parts -- are left out altogether.

Don't be ashamed or give up if you don't get the award on the first or second time. Crafting an application like this is an art in and of itself. The more you do it, the better you'll become, so save your work. Thankfully, most processes will offer you some feedback from the reviewers, or even a workshop *before* the grant deadline, which you should definitely attend if you're a first-timer.

Keep talking about the project to anyone who will listen. Ask a friend to go over the application with you or at least listen to you talk about it. Buy them lunch or something to grease the wheels. Record the conversation if you feel comfortable doing that. Most people are better at *saying* than *writing* anyway. Even for a lot of writers this is true, when it comes to talking specifically about their work. Talk long enough and eventually you'll get to the heart of why you want this award.

This all may seem like common sense, but trust me, as an occasional reviewer, I've seen that it's not common sense to *plenty* of people. If you follow these suggestions, you're almost guaranteed to get out of the slush pile and onto the next round!