



Clear & Compelling Financials: Strengthening Your Grant Proposal

A practical guide for small nonprofit teams



Why Strong Financials Matter



Strong financials = credibility + clarity + confidence



Common issue: good programs, weak budgets



Budgets tell the ***operational story*** of your program



Today's Goal



Understand what funders look for in budgets



Learn how to align budgets with program design



Gain tools to build clear financial narratives



Walk away with a usable budget template



What Reviewers Look For



Clarity

Easy to Follow



Alignment

Budget ↔ Proposal
Narrative



Realism

Neither Inflated
Nor Underpriced



Totality

No Gaps or
Hidden Costs



Stewardship

Signals Responsible Use
Of Funds



Role of the Proposal Budget



Budget = Translation of Program into Numbers
It should answer:

- What will this cost?
- Why does it cost this amount?
- How do these expenses drive outcomes?

Simple visual idea: Program Activities → Costs → Outcomes



Budget Basics: Key Components

1 Personnel

2 Advertising & Marketing

3 Administrative/ Overhead

4 Equipment

5 Supplies

6 Travel & Lodging

7 Indirect Costs

8 Research

9 Contingency



Best Practices



Transparency and Clarity Matter!

- Be specific
- Use consistent categories
- Include true costs (don't understate)



Sample Budget Template

Project Expenses		
Expense Category	Amount (\$)	Description/Notes
Personnel		
Supplies & Materials		
Travel		
Equipment		
Advertising/Marketing		
Other		
Total Expenses	\$0.00	
Funding Sources (All Requests & Commitments)		
Source	Amount (\$)	Status
Grant Request (This Proposal)		Pending
Other Grants		Committed
Other Grants		Pending
Individual Donations		Committed
Individual Donations		Pending
In-kind Contributions		Committed
Other		Committed
Other		Pending
Total Funding	\$0.00	
Budget Balance (Funding - Expenses)	\$0.00	
Percent Funded (Total Funding / Total		
<i>Positive = surplus; Negative = deficit</i>		
Notes / Comments		



Building a Strong Financial Narrative



Too General

- \$25,000 for staffing
- \$4,500 for marketing
- \$2,000 for equipment



Very Specific

- \$25,000 supports a part-time case manager who will serve 50 seniors annually, providing weekly wellness checks and care coordination
- \$4,500 will cover the cost of running two weekly half-page ads in the *Gazette*
- \$2,000 will cover the cost of purchasing one laptop to support front office operations



Aligning the Budget and Proposal



Key Concept: Consistency

- If it's in the budget, it should be described in your narrative
- If it's in the narrative, it should be itemized in your budget

Quick Checklist:

- ✓ Staffing matches program description
- ✓ Project timeline aligns with costs and outcomes
- ✓ Numbers are consistent across proposal sections



From Weak to Strong: Budget + Narrative

Program: Home-Delivered Meals for 50 Homebound Seniors (Annual)

BEFORE (Weak)

Budget

Staffing: \$25,000

Food: \$15,000

Transportation: \$5,000

Supplies: \$3,000

Total: \$48,000

Narrative

We request funding to support our senior meals program. Budget includes staffing, food and associated transportation costs.

Issues

- No detail or specificity
- No connection to people served
- No explanation of costs
- Generic language

AFTER (Strong)

Budget

Program Coordinator (0.5 FTE): \$25,000

Meals (50 seniors × 250 meals × \$1.20): \$15,000

Delivery (5 routes): \$5,000

Packaging & supplies: \$3,000

Total: \$48,000

Narrative

We request support for our home-delivered meals program serving 50 homebound seniors annually. Funding covers a part-time Program Coordinator to manage volunteers, coordinate meal delivery, and conduct weekly wellness check-ins. Meal costs reflect 250 meals per participant annually. Delivery expenses support five weekly routes, ensuring consistent access for seniors with limited mobility. Together, these resources reduce food insecurity and support seniors' health and independence.

Same budget. Stronger story. Greater funder confidence.



Common Mistakes to Avoid

1

Underestimating true costs

2

Overcomplicating the budget

3

Failing to explain assumptions

4

Copy-pasting budgets across proposals

5

Ignoring funder guidelines

6

Omitting other funds committed/pending

7

Including indirect costs *if funder specifically disallows*

8

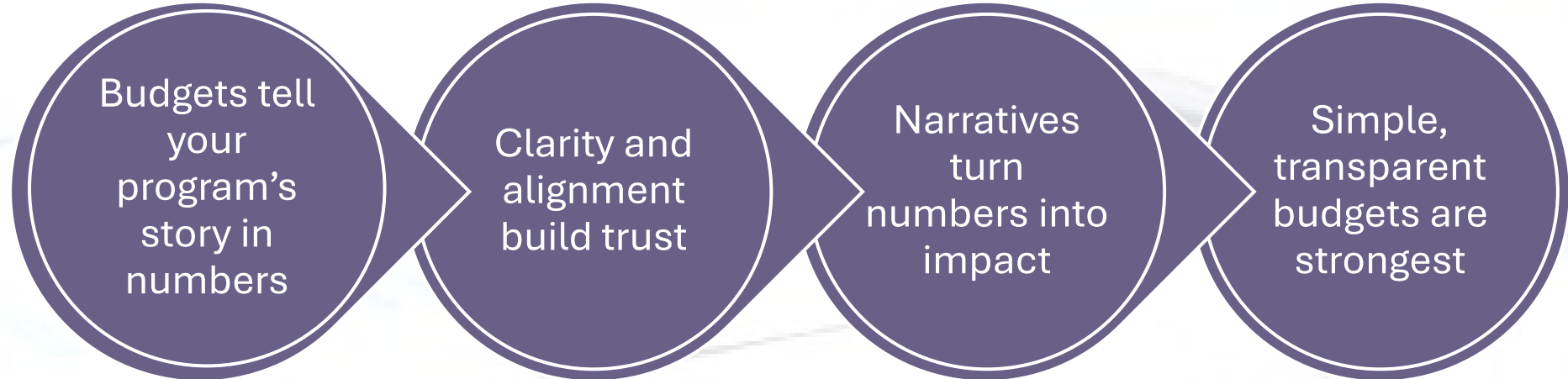
Inflating costs

9

Failing to account for contingency funds








Key Takeaways





One More Time: A Quick Checklist

	Create clear line-item categories
	Project realistic costs
	Leave no unexplained gaps
	Align budget with proposal narrative
	Make it easy to read



Other Financial Documents



IRS Form 990



IRS 501(c)(3) Determination Letter



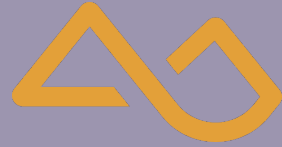
Audited Financial Statements



Organizational Budget



Balance Sheet and Income Statement



Discussion & Q&A

- Based on what our funders shared, what will you do differently in your next budget?
- What part of building a strong financial narrative feels most challenging?
- Are there other financial documents you need help compiling?
- Funders, any final advice for applicants preparing their next proposal?

We welcome your questions and conversation.