

Obtaining Strong Support Letters from Collaborators, Contractors

You're writing a grant proposal and need letters of support from collaborators and contractors you intend to involve. How can you ensure that these provide the details that will have an impact on reviewers? One surprising tactic is for the applicant to write the initial draft of the proposed letter personally.

"We tell our PIs to draft the letters themselves," says Amy Gantt, director of the Office of Proposal Development at Tufts University.

She cites four reasons:

- **Expectations.** "It sets expectations early," Gantt says. Initial conversations with contractors and collaborators may leave both sides with faulty assumptions. But when they see your expectations of their performance in black and white, including what you will provide to them and what they will provide to you, it avoids potential misunderstandings from growing into full-blown conflicts later on. It puts you all "on the same page."

- **Timeliness.** "It means the letter will more likely be completed in time," Gantt says. Your grant application is no doubt a high priority for you and you are well aware of the grant deadline; your collaborators and contractors may or may not have the same priorities. Your letter of support may drop lower on their "to do" list. When you offer to write the letter of support, you're more likely to get a quicker response – one that meets the deadlines.

- **Facilitation.** "It's easier for collaborators and contractors to edit letters than draft the letter themselves," Gantt explains. This helps with the deadline. For them it's easier to read your letter and offer comments and clarifications than start from scratch. It feels easier to start with something and then correct it.

- **Congruence.** "Finally, it makes sure the letters support the grant," Gantt says. You are well aware of your strategy in applying for the grant, so a letter of support written by you personally can be part of your overall strategy. It can be difficult and time-consuming to communicate to a third party exactly what is needed, and what to cover, and then ask them to prepare it. Better to do it for them.

Keys to effective letters

Here are four tips on drafting support letters:

1. **Clarify duties, roles, and timelines.** Offer specific details about what you expect the collaborator or contractor to do — and the deadline. This will avoid potential misunderstandings later. (e.g., "I didn't realize you wanted me to do that – especially on that schedule.")

"When non-applicants, collaborators, and contractors write their own letters of support, it's often more vague than what a PI would say," explains Gantt.

Key: Make sure the letter draws attention to what you've done that's relevant to any guidelines outlined in the agency's RFA (request for applications).

2. **Write it from the point of view of the contractor or collaborator.** Tailor each letter to the specific duties of the collaborator or contractor and write it as if they wrote the letter. By the time they offer feedback and make corrections, it will be from their point of view.

Essential: If you have more than one letter, use unique wording for each one.

"We once had a proposal where the PI had drafted the letters of support, but much of the wording in each was exactly the same. It was pretty clear one person had written all the letters," Gantt recalls.

3. Display enthusiasm. The letter should convey the collaborator's or contractor's enthusiasm for the project by outlining specifics such as commitment of resources, time, and interest in the project details. That's better than saying little more to the funder than you're excited about it.

4. Get the standard details right. Address the letter according to the guidelines of the grant; it will be going to either the PI or the granting agency. Use an institutional letterhead and have it signed by someone authorized to make the commitment.

Letter structure

Gantt recommends the following structure:

- **Statement of support:** Use one to three sentences to show enthusiasm and identify the specific project by name.

- **Supporting paragraphs:** Explain how the research, expertise, or technical skills of the collaborator, consultant, or contractor will support the applicant: What is the relevant experience and how does it bear on the project? What's their previous track record on similar projects? (If you've worked together before, describe that and the results.)

Explain specific duties to perform and describe the use of any equipment or other resources.

- **Cordial closing.** The closing's formality depends on the relationship between the principal investigator and the person who is supporting them. If the two have a previous productive working relationship, it can be less formal. If that relationship is more limited, the closing should be more formal.