

## **TEN STEPS FOR PREPARING CLEAR, UNDERSTANDABLE APPLICATION GUIDANCES OR RFPs**

This brief guide is designed to help you write – or rewrite – an application guidance or request for proposals (RFP) in clear English. Its objective is to help you write and format an RFP that your target audience can understand in one reading. Plain language techniques can help you. The important thing is to communicate in plain English.

### **1. Start early.**

Developing a plain English application guidance or RFP takes time. You may be preparing a new RFP or revising last year's RFP. If this is your first plain English experience, allow time to write, edit, and revise. Add at least three weeks to your usual time schedule for RFP development.

### **2. Involve grants management staff as early as possible.**

Be sure you understand public law 106-107, the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999. It calls for streamlining the grants management process and encourages use of clear writing in RFPs. Ask about any specific language that your RFP must include. Find out whether any special review is required. Learn about any requirements that may affect the way you write the RFP.

### **3. Arrange for outside help if needed.**

You may find this new style of writing hard or time-consuming. If so, consider asking for help with your first plain English RFP. Some consultant assistance may be available through the Office of HIV/AIDS Policy (OHAP). OHAP can also suggest consultants with experience in preparing plain English RFPs. Outside help is much more valuable if you get it early in the process. Last-minute rewrites are often less clear and accurate.

### **4. Be sure you are comfortable with plain language and clear English principles and hints.**

Remember: you want your application guidance or request for proposals (RFP) to be understandable to your target audience in one reading. This means you need to:

- Identify your target audience for this RFP (e.g., community-based organizations, health departments, hospitals, universities, companies).
- Think about what they want and need to know.

- Consider what technical terms they know (like *needs assessment* and *epidemiologic data*) and what terms they may not know (like *randomized controlled studies* and *formal efficacy trials*).
- Review principles and hints for writing clearly.
- Think about how to organize and format your RFP.

**5. Review last year’s RFP or a similar RFP from your program area. See where changes are most needed to create a plain English RFP.**

Consider at least the following:

- **Literacy level.** How much education do readers need to understand the RFP as written? To find out, use the Fog Index on a few selected sections such as Eligible Applicants and Program Requirements. (See instructions in this package.)
- **Clarity.** What parts of the RFP are unclear or hard to understand? Are sentences too long or complex? Does the RFP include technical terms that the target audience may not understand?
- **Organization.** How hard or easy is it to find needed information? Would the RFP be clearer if you reordered it? What about the table of contents?
- **Repetition.** Is the same information repeated in several sections?
- **Headings.** Do headings need to be redone, perhaps in the form of questions that section will answer?
- **Format.** Do you need to add bullet-point lists? boxes? topic sentences or key words in bold? more white space?

**6. Create an outline that minimizes duplication and helps readers find needed information.**

Try stating headings as questions that each section will answer. If you include subsections, use a numbered outline format for the section headings. This helps the reader find the main sections and see the relationship among subsections.

**7. Write (or rewrite) the RFP, section by section, using plain language and other clear writing principles.**

If some sections are hard to write clearly and simply, ask for help. Try reading your paragraphs out loud to see if they are easy to understand. Work section by section. Try doing several key sections first – such as Purpose, Eligible Applicants, Program Requirements, Application Content, Evaluation Criteria. Then use the same terms throughout the RFP.

**8. Obtain several reviews – and revise based on the feedback you receive.**

Begin with an internal review for content and clarity. Make needed changes. Then have at least 1-2 people from the target population review the draft RFP if possible. Ask them if they could find needed information and if they could understand it in one reading. Revise again as needed. Get necessary approvals.

**9. Format the RFP to be attractive and easy to use.**

Make the document look good and easy to read. Use several different type sizes for headings. Leave a blank line between paragraphs. Use bulleted lists. Highlight main points with **bold** and *italics*. Use boxes for examples. Leave plenty of white space, including margins of at least one inch all around. If feasible, use two columns to increase readability.

**10. Get feedback – and share it.**

Find out how our RFP works! Ask review panel members how they felt using the RFP. Get feedback from panel Chairs and agency personnel who staffed the review process. Find out if they believe the RFP contributed to better applications. Ask new grantees whether it was easier to write the application, and what made the most difference. Find out what worked – and what needs more work. Make notes on a copy of the RFP. . Summarize what you have learned and file it for next year. Also share this information with colleagues. Encourage them to try writing plain English RFPs.