Professional Writing & Technical Communication

The Ask Letter: A Scaled-Down Grant Research Assignment

Overview

For this assignment, you will identify a real organization you care about, research a specific, publicly documented problem or need that organization faces, and identify a public or private grantor whose funding priorities align with that need. You will then draft an ask letter (also called a letter of inquiry or cover letter for funding) that introduces the problem, makes the case for why it matters, and requests a specific dollar amount with a clear rationale.

This is not a full grant proposal. It is the piece that comes before one: the short, persuasive document that gets a program officer to say "tell us more." The goal is to practice concise, audience-aware persuasive writing built on real research, not to write a complete funding application.

Learning Objectives

- Conduct organizational research to identify a real, publicly verifiable problem.
- Research funders (grantors) and evaluate fit between an organization's need and a grantor's priorities.
- Translate research findings into a concise, persuasive piece of professional correspondence.
- Practice audience analysis: writing to a specific reader (a program officer or foundation) rather than a generic audience.
- Integrate and cite supporting evidence within a tightly constrained format.

Assignment Steps

Step 1 — Choose an organization

Select a nonprofit, school, community group, library, arts organization, or similar mission-driven organization you have some genuine interest in. It can be local, national, or one you've volunteered with or followed. Avoid organizations whose internal problems are not publicly accessible — you need to be able to point to public evidence of the need (annual reports, news coverage, the organization's own website, IRS Form 990s, local reporting, etc.).

Step 2 — Identify a specific, publicly documented problem

Narrow in on one concrete problem or unmet need within that organization — not "the organization needs more money" in general, but something specific: an aging facility, a discontinued program, a service gap, an equipment shortfall, a staffing gap that limits programming, etc. The problem should be:

- Specific enough to name in one or two sentences.
- Supported by publicly available evidence.
- Realistically addressable by a grant in the range you'll propose (see Step 4).

Step 3 — Research potential grantors

Identify one public (government, municipal, state) or private (foundation, corporate giving program) grantor whose stated funding priorities plausibly align with the problem you identified. Look at:

- The grantor's mission statement and funding priorities/areas of interest.
- Examples of organizations or projects they've funded previously.

- Typical award size, if publicly listed.
- Any stated preferences for how they like to be approached (many foundations publish this).

Step 4 — Draft the ask letter

Write a one-page ask letter (roughly 400–500 words) addressed to a plausible contact at the grantor (a program officer, executive director, or grants committee — use a real name and title if you can find one, or a defensible generic address like "Grants Committee" if not). The letter should:

1. Open by identifying who you are writing on behalf of and why you're writing to this specific grantor.
2. Summarize the problem clearly and concisely, grounded in the evidence you found.
3. Explain why the problem matters — to the organization, to the community it serves, or both.
4. Make the case for why this grantor specifically is well-positioned to help, tying the request to their stated priorities.
5. State a specific dollar amount requested, with a one- or two-sentence rationale for that figure (e.g., what it would cover).
6. Close with a clear, professional call to action (a request for a conversation, a full proposal, a meeting, etc.).

Step 5 — Supporting research memo

Attach a short research memo (1–2 pages) behind the letter that documents your process and sourcing. This is where the depth of your research lives, since the letter itself has to stay lean. Include:

- A brief profile of the organization and the problem, with citations to your sources.
- A brief profile of the grantor and why it's a good fit, with citations.
- A short reflection (a few sentences) on what you left out of the letter and why — what had to be cut to keep it persuasive and concise.

Deliverables

- Ask letter — one page, ~400–500 words, formatted as professional correspondence.
- Supporting research memo — 1–2 pages, with citations in a consistent style (APA, MLA, or Chicago — confirm with your instructor).
- Both submitted as a single document.

Evaluation

Criterion	What it looks like	Points
Problem identification	Problem is specific, publicly documented (not speculative), and scoped to something a modest grant could plausibly address.	20
Grantor fit	Grantor's funding priorities, past awards, or mission are researched and genuinely aligned with the request — not just "a foundation that gives money."	20
Ask letter	Clear statement of need, specific dollar amount, rationale tied to the grantor's own priorities, appropriate tone and length for a first-contact letter.	25
Supporting research memo	Claims about the problem and the grantor are sourced; sources are credible and properly cited.	20

Professional polish	Formatting, proofreading, letter conventions (date, salutation, closing), and adherence to the page/word limit.	15

A Note on Scope

Because this is a preface to a grant proposal and not a full application, resist the urge to write everything you know about the organization or the grantor. Part of what this assignment teaches is judgment: what belongs in a one-page ask, what belongs in the supporting memo, and what simply doesn't make the cut. The tighter and more targeted the letter, the more successful the assignment.