After the conversation, Archer feared he had blown it all. The director hadn't promised anything. Perhaps Archer had just made a fool of himself.

Two days later, Archer got a call from the man who had replaced George Barker at Magnatech. He wanted to know how Archer was making out with Proper. Archer said Proper was interested, but he thought the enterprise was perhaps of more importance to the company than could be discussed adequately at Proper’s level. He expected to work with Proper once the program got underway, and he hoped the university would be able to work with people in other departments as well. "Our feelings exactly," the president said. "You come out here Friday for lunch and we'll work it out."

Archer’s program wasn’t in film, but that doesn’t matter. The dangers his story illustrates are as appropriate for a film grant as for any other. And so are the lessons:

(1) Deal with people who matter. If you get trapped in the petty politics of an organization, even a good project with obvious merits can get shot down.

(2) Learn who matters. Ask questions. If you live in a city smaller than New York or Chicago, you can find out who is involved in almost anything legal with only a moderate amount of investigation. You’ll often find out that you can get personal contacts—and you don’t have to be the chairman’s son or daughter.

(3) Keep your contacts current. If people you know leave, talk with them before you talk with their replacements, if you can manage it and if you can find out the conditions of their departure. Someone who leaves under a cloud might not be the best source of information; someone who has gone but who is still highly regarded by people in major positions can help you design your funding strategy.

(4) Bring to bear whatever external sources of help you can, but be sure they won’t hurt more than they will help. The best way to determine that is to ask the people who will matter. Explain what you want and what you think your work will bring to the corporation, then say to the person you think might help influence the decision, "But if the people making the decisions will react negatively to pressure, don’t do anything." Generally, people in a position to apply pressure are very sensitive to the nature of the pressure they can apply. They parcel out the power. A friend of ours who was a trustee of the Ford Foundation never interfered with specific projects because he felt his responsibility was only to major policy matters; in his work as a trustee of another organization, he frequently involved himself in microscopic levels of operation.

Government funding agencies and foundations tell you why they are in the business of giving money away. Corporations are in business to make money; few of them tell why they act charitably. You know some general reasons—image, passion of someone inside, some direct benefit—but whenever you approach a company you must present a justification that is not at all general: why should this company at this time and in this place give money to you for your project?
You cannot expect them to make the case for you, however noble your cause. Use whatever leverage you have to get an edge, move the discussion as quickly as possible to a level where money decisions can be made, be ready in all conversations to answer specific questions about what your program will do, where the money will go, and how much you really want. Those are the kinds of questions businessmen ask and answer all the time and that fact that your filmmakers and others think you're a wonderful talent won't matter worth a diddly if you can't put your case in terms that make sense to the people you want to give you money.

Getting money for documentaries from corporations is not easy. The political orientation of most corporate executives is conservative. The head of a state humanities program told us that a friend of his who is a program officer for a very large midwestern corporation "routinely discouraged and discourages filmmakers from seeking large sums of money because her board members, 'conservatives' every one of them, distrusted and distrust documentaries of any kind, especially those dealing with social and political issues. As with other program officers, she could make discretionary grants up to $500 and in some cases $1,000. Perhaps what I'm trying to say is this: shoot for the smaller amount to persuade some other funding source to give a greater amount, but skip the idea of gaining the whole wad from a corporate contributions program."

Because of the decrease in budgets for the Endowments (and the concomitant decrease in budgets for the state arts and humanities agencies) and the massive disincentives to charitable contributions inculcated by the 1981 Reagan tax package and the 1986 tax reform bill, competition for corporate funding will be even tighter than it has been. More people will be going to corporations for more kinds of help. They will all say, "We want you to help; our work is in the public interest." Most of the corporate executives will respond, "We pay taxes for things that are in the public interest. My job is to do things in the corporation's interest, to make money for our stockholders. If the stockholders want to make charitable contributions, that's what they'll do."

Your job is to give potential corporate supporters a rationale for giving you some of the shareholders' money, or some of the money that would otherwise go to advertisements in Time or Newsweek, or for buying British programs to be broadcast on American public television stations in the time slots your film might be broadcast instead. The first part of that job is doing research: find out as much as you can about aspects of the company that might help you create a proposal that will be attractive to the company. Prepare all your communications with the company in a way no one there will have cause to ask, "Why the hell are they coming to us with that?" The second part of your job is to prepare a proposal that will let them know exactly what you want to do, how and why you want to do it, and what it will cost. We'll come to that in a little while.

Most corporations you approach by mail won't even bother to answer your letters. Most of the response letters you do get will be simple rejections. Only rarely will a positive response carry with it very much money. Funding documentaries through corporate sources is enormously difficult, but remember that there are far more rich corporations out there than there are foundations or government funding agencies; far more arts support comes from the private sector than from the government. If you get 100 rejections from foundations and
government agencies for a specific film, you may have gone through all the
organizations that were viable sources of funding. If you get 100 rejections from
corporations, it is easy to find 100 more and 100 more after that. If ten of those
corporations give you $500 or $1,000 just to get you off their backs, you've got a
fair amount of money, and each of those contributions increases your funding
chances at the next place because the herd instinct is very much alive in
American corporate board rooms.


SOME OTHER SOURCES OF FILM GRANT INFORMATION

Pay careful attention to the credits at the end of documentaries you've
liked. Everyone who makes films thanks in the credits people and organizations
who paid the bills. Sometimes the filmmaker was the nephew of the company vice
president and was lent a car during location work in Memphis, but generally the
credit is there because the company or foundation gave real help.

Moving in on someone else's funding sources while something is in progress
is lousy manners, but support listing in a film's credit is an advertisement to the
world and you needn't feel embarrassed about following up on one of those
advertisements. If a funder doesn't want people to know it supplied money, all it
need do is say, "Leave our name off the credits. We don't want to be deluged
with letters from filmmakers with great projects for us to fund." (An organization
that funded a substantial portion of our production costs for Death Row and later
underwrote a substantial portion of WNET's broadcast cost for the film made that
request a condition of its grants to both of our organizations.)

If you have filmmaker friends, you might ask them what kind of grant
support they've gotten and how they got it. We've gotten many good tips from
friends. There are limits on how far you can piggyback on other people's work,
though. We got a letter recently from a fellow who had seen our film, Death
Row, on WNET in New York. He wrote, "I noticed that you gave credits to Levi
Strauss, Polaroid and Playboy. Please send me, in the enclosed envelope, the
names and telephone numbers of the people you dealt with and the amount of the
contributions you got from each company." We didn't know the guy and didn't
much want to. We didn't answer his letter. Someone else, a friend we'll call
Charley, called and said he was about to develop a project, he knew from the
Death Row credits that we'd received help from Levi Strauss, and he wondered
what was the best way to approach them. He lived in a town with a large Levi
Strauss plant, so we said that the best way to begin was to contact the local
corporate contributions committee, and the way to do that was through anyone
who worked at the plant. Charley said he knew lots of people at the plant and he
would talk to them immediately. But, he said, just for his own information, who
was the current director of the foundation. We told him, but again said that the
best starting place was with local company employees, and we said specifically,
"Don't start with Jim in San Francisco." Not only did the fool start with Jim, but
he misspelled Jim's last name and began his letter by saying we had told him to
write. He didn't get any money from Levi's and he'll never again get any
information from us. Charley managed to poison two wells with one dopey letter.
You might find help in Jill R. Shellow's excellent book, *The Grantseekers Guide: A Directory for Social and Economic Justice Projects* (National Network of Grantmakers and the Interreligious foundation for Community Organizations, 919 North Michigan Avenue, 5th floor, Chicago, IL 60611). The Guide gives information on 110 foundations and corporate donors. It also has excellent tips on writing letters, having meetings, finding contact persons and other matters. The entry for each foundation gives the address, telephone number and contact person (always check that out before writing), the foundation's statement of purpose, areas of interest, financial data (including assets, how much paid out, number of grants paid, highest, lowest and median grant size), application procedure, grant limitation, meeting times, foundation publications. The Guide is several years old now, so you should call any foundations you want to write to find out if the contact persons have changed.

Some foundations have been particularly helpful to filmmakers in past years, but foundation priorities often change and you should check on their recent grants (in one of the directories mentioned earlier) or with them directly before submitting applications. Among these are: Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, The Ford Foundation, Edward W. Hazen Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Lilly Endowment, Guggenheim Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. You also might check with Corporation for Public Broadcasting for information on their current funding programs, but be warned that the bulk of CPB money earmarked for independent filmmakers seems to go to consortia of public television stations instead. The Independent, published eleven times a year by the Association of Independent Video and Film Makers, lists production grant availability (AIVF, 625 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10012; annual membership is $20 for students, $35 for other individuals, $50 for libraries, and $75 for organizations). The Independent also has regular articles and notes about film funding opportunities, policies, and politics in various government and private agencies and organizations.

You can write to corporations and most foundations for help at any time, but most state and Federal grant programs and some of the foundations have only one funding cycle each year. The New York Council on the Arts announces grants about eight months after application deadlines. Miss their deadline by a day and you have a 20-month wait before you find out if they'll help you in the next cycle.

Sometimes your congressman or senator's grant assistant may be a source of useful information. Most members of the House and Senate have someone in the office who handles grants; many have a full-time person. Most of that person's job consists of writing innocuous support letters when those are needed (letters for projects the congressman or senator supports enthusiastically come from the boss) and following up on applications that have gotten lost in one of the many bureaucracies. Some of those assistants will keep your organization informed when funds become available that might be of use to you. That requires some personal contact on your part—you have to let them know who you are and what you are doing. As we noted earlier, the level of this support may depend on whether your representative cares about the project you're doing or how he or she regards the organization through which you're applying. A representative very much involved in the district is likely to help (as LaFalce and Nowak helped us); a representative running for president is likely to avoid anything with any social...
implications whatsoever or to be too busy to bother with such little problems (as Kemp was with us). If you live in one district, work in another, and are applying for funding through an organization based in a third, you should be able to find some measure of help.

We have not attempted in this chapter to list all the foundations and corporations we think might fund documentary film production. The few listed above are just samples of some that have given money for documentary work. A book like this cannot substitute for your own research done at the time you organize your film idea. Things change very quickly in the grant world. When the dollar weakens or strengthens the patterns of corporate giving change. Every time a foundation gets a new president there are significant changes in its grant priorities. Every time the Federal or state administration changes there are changes in the way government funds are made available.

Clearly there will be, in the next several years, less government money available for film production than was available in the past several years. Mobil and the other oil companies that funded so much high end programming on public television over the past decade not only won’t pick up the slack, but will reduce their current levels of support. (The pattern of reduced funding for discretionary activities is not limited to the arts: in mid-1986 the Wall Street Journal predicted that terrorism would also decline because of the fall in Arab oil revenues.)

The 1981 tax reduction program reduced significantly the incentives for wealthy citizens to contribute to all kinds of charitable causes. The 1986 tax reform bill will have a far greater negative effect on giving. The New York Philharmonic and the Freer Art Gallery will continue to get funding, but unknown artists and smaller organizations will find the going brutal. Some economists have estimated that the tax cuts will result in more real dollar losses to charitable causes than the budget cuts.

For the maker of documentary films, things are probably not nearly so bad as they are for the maker of other kinds of independent films or for many other kinds of artists who need support to do their work. Many organizations not interested in film at all will fund documentaries if they are convinced that the documentary will deal with the cause to which they are dedicated. An index of potential funding sources for documentaries would have to include all foundations and corporations and government agencies with money to give for social, artistic, political, economic and humanistic concerns—except those few that specifically prohibit any grants to filmmakers for any reason at all.

There will be less grant money out there next year than there is there this year, but someone is going to get what money is available. If you research the availability, submit your proposal through a sponsoring agency that will help more than hinder your application (if your potential funder wants a sponsoring agency, as most do), if you have the skills to do the job well, if your subject is worthwhile, and if your proposal is as good as the film you want to make, there is no reason at all that your project shouldn’t be one of the projects funded.

Getting a documentary film funded is hard work. That’s a fact of life and there’s no point lamenting it. We said it was possible to fund worthwhile projects, not that funding them would be easy.
THE 501(c)3 CONNECTION

501(c)3 is the designation given to certain kinds of educational, artistic and community organizations exempted from taxes by the Internal Revenue Service. Gifts to 501(c)3 organizations are tax deductible. Some government funding agencies and foundations will fund only projects sponsored or carried out by tax exempt organizations. Agencies such as NEA, NEH, and NYSCA fund individuals and organizations through different programs, with organizational grants being eligible for far higher maximum dollar amounts.

Most foundation grants are to organizations, not to individuals. The current tax law complicates the foundation's work if it gives what amounts to a fellowship or a scholarship. Large foundations, such as Ford or Rockefeller, can afford to handle the work involved in fellowship grants, and some foundations, such as the Guggenheim, are organized specifically to award individual fellowships. But most foundations have no paid staff or a very small paid staff, and they prefer spending their time selecting grant recipients to overseeing and administering grant activities. The few foundation grants to individuals working in film (such as the grants in independent filmmakers awarded by the American Film Institute) are so hard to get you should not plan a film project around them. Apply, by all means, but don't turn down any paying jobs before you get their letter. (For a good list of programs that might be of help, see the Foundation Center's Foundation Grants to Individuals.)

Most of your applications to a government agency, corporation, or foundation will be through a tax-exempt institutional sponsor, such as an arts organization, a community group, or a school. The relationship between a filmmaker and a sponsor might be based on a conversation and a handshake, and it might be based on a contract as detailed and specific as the grant award. The sponsoring organization submits the application to the funding agency, and that application names a project director. The project director might be an administrative person within the organization, it might be the filmmaker, and it might be a third party acceptable to both. If the application is funded, the sponsor, not the filmmaker, is the legal recipient. The sponsor receives the checks and the sponsor makes the final accounting to the funding agency. Some sponsors are nearly transparent in their dealings with filmmakers: the filmmaker prepares the application, makes the film, does nearly all the paperwork, and the sponsor does nothing but have someone in its staff sign and forward the documents. Other sponsors are involved at every step of the production, beginning with conception of the project and continuing through distribution of the product.

Foundations and corporations have reasons other than the tax law for preferring to have their grants administered by nonprofit organizations. This may be the only grant the project director or filmmaker gets from a particular funding agency, but the sponsoring organization may come back with other projects designed and executed by other project directors. The sponsor has an interest in
helping the filmmaker do well and seeing that the money is spent properly. The 501(c)3 sponsor is not likely to have its bookkeeper write checks for your vacation in Argentina when you're supposed to be doing a film about rats in public housing in Kansas City. The sponsor's books will be subject to auditors' study. The funding agency counts on the sponsor's self-interest to help keep the project director and the project workers honest.

If you're already part of a 501(c)3 organization, skip the rest of this chapter; the problem is already solved for you. But most filmmakers we know are not part of the organizations that are the formal recipients of their production grants.

Some organizations have a bad name among funding agencies. They may do lousy work, they may have been conduits for improperly spent money many times in the past, they may be run by scoundrels. Their tax exemption may still be valid, but they may not be valid. When you go looking for an organization to sponsor your fund-raising efforts, make sure you're dealing with an organization whose reputation won't do you more harm than good. It is easy enough to find out about a potential sponsor's reputation. You can ask them what they've done lately--what kind of projects they have produced, what projects they have helped others produce. You can examine their annual reports. Many grant officers in funding agencies are willing to discuss with an applicant the value of a potential sponsor. Some will be straightforward with you: "That organization is one of the best in the country...." Or, "We wouldn't give that gang another dollar if they staffed their project with the eleven good apostles, not after what they did last time." If the sponsor is an arts organization, try to find some artists who've worked with it or who know about it. If it's a community organization, try to find some community people who have had contact with it.

It may happen that someone in an organization approaches you: "We hear you're working on a film about worms. We'd be delighted to be the sponsor for any of your grants." That kind of support and option are nice to get, but don't get married until you know something about the family. Why are they soliciting your potential grants? Are they smart people doing a good job by making their resources available to good people, or are they representatives of an organization in deep trouble looking to latch on to artists with a good reputation in the hope some of that reputation will rub off on them?

An organization we'll call The Hyperspace Videodrome (it's a real organization; the name is changed to protect the embarrassed) was for several years a vital center of film and video activity: it sponsored screenings, provided community access to equipment, presented multimedia events, organized conferences and lectures, and it also was the sponsor of record for a few film projects. For several years, Hyperspace was a good base for a grant application. But in recent years it has fallen on hard times. It lost several sources of unrestricted income, its physical plant developed major problems, its director lost touch with the daily activities of the place. For several months in a row none of the staff was paid, and they left one by one. Equipment broke down or disappeared. The building is still there, the formal organization still exists, but hardly anything is going on. A program officer in one funding agency told a filmmaker thinking of using Hyperspace as her sponsor: "Go someplace else. We haven't been able to find out what they did with the money we gave them last.
time, so we're not about to give them any more money." Another funder said: "We don't give grants to organizations in such bad shape you can't even get someone to answer the phone." Filmmakers who applied for funding naming Hyperspace Videodrome as the sponsor--filmmakers who didn't bother having a conversation with the appropriate program officers--stood little chance of support.

A sponsor may be of more use to you than merely fulfilling the technical requirement that you have a nonprofit organization administer the disbursement of grant funds. The sponsoring organization may give your proposal a measure of respectability you don't have on your own or give you access to a funding source you couldn't otherwise approach. Some organizations will agree to sponsor only projects they think have real merit; if the funding agency knows that, it will take the sponsor's acceptance of your project as a positive pre-screening qualification. The sponsor may help you meet your cost-sharing requirement; it may help with the work along the way; it may help you with distribution of the completed film.

Almost any reasonable film project will be suitable for sponsorship by a number of organizations. You might do all your funding through one sponsor, or you might use different sponsors for applications to different kinds of agencies and organizations or to agencies in different places. A film about images of blacks in mass media in the 19th and 20th century received funding from humanities councils in New York and California; the New York humanities agency provided funds through DRI, which is a nonprofit group based in Buffalo, and the California agency provided funds through a group in San Francisco. $10,000 of Ira Wohl's budget for Best Boy came from a New York State Council for the Arts grant to the New York State Association for Retarded Children. Some agencies are more likely to fund proposals submitted through ethnic or community groups and others are more likely to fund proposals submitted through old established cultural and universities; if you have a film that fits the guidelines of both kinds of agencies, you should think about finding both kinds of sponsor. Filmmakers funding a documentary on Jewish workers in New York's garment industry used as sponsors a union, a religious organization, and a college.

How do you find out what kind of organization an agency or foundation favors? Easy: read their annual report, their 990, their list of recent grants. Reread the previous chapter of this book and do what it suggests.

And how do you find a nonprofit organization that will be the sponsor for your film? Ask other filmmakers what organizations they have worked with. Ask the granting agencies. Look up media organizations in the Yellow Pages. Look up community organizations that seem to share an interest in the subject of your film. If you know enough about a topic to be making a documentary film about it, you should also know enough to find organizations interested in the topic or in your proposed film. When you find an organization that seems appropriate, find out if you've got a personal connection--a friend, a relative, someone who will introduce you to the people who make the decisions. If not, go down and introduce yourself, tell them what you want to do and why you want them to help you do it. Then they'll decide whether or not they want to take you and your project on. We don't know anyone with a reasonable project--film or otherwise--who was unable to find a responsible nonprofit organization to serve as a sponsor.
Handling your paperwork is a bother: it consumes staff time, it may consume some of their supplies, they have to spend time talking to you. An application by you to an agency may preclude an application by someone else through the same sponsor in that grant cycle. So why do they do it? Why should they sponsor someone who isn't part of their gang?

Many organizations define as one of their functions helping people who want to do certain kinds of work. Helping people like you is one of their jobs. Some organizations like to have people channel attractive projects through their facilities because it makes them look good when they make up their annual report or when they go seeking funding for their general operations. They can reap real benefits from your work. (Let them; it takes nothing away from you.)

There may be money in it for them. Many grants permit charging of indirect costs by the administering or sponsoring agency. Indirect costs are costs not specifically allocable to one particular project. (An organization’s fire insurance is an indirect cost, but the Errors and Omissions policy on a specific film is a direct cost; an organization’s electric bill is an indirect cost, but the expense for the batteries you use on your film is a direct cost.) The income the sponsor gets from the indirect on your grant and on several other grants many cover much of the sponsor’s basic operating expenses. A sponsor should get some money for handling your grant: the paperwork, accounting, and reporting on some grants is enormously time-consuming.) If the funding agency does not allow for indirect costs, it may be possible to put a small line in the proposal for grant administration. And if that isn’t possible, many nonprofits will help anyway if the project makes sense in terms of their own mission.

Some organizations don’t have that dedication, and if they are your only nonprofit connection you might be cut right out of grant eligibility. Several years ago, we designed a project that needed a minimum of $40,000. The project fit perfectly the guidelines of a Federal program that had a $50,000 funding maximum. We're both professors at State University of New York at Buffalo and this was before DRI was organized, so we attempted to apply through the SUNY Research Foundation, which at the time was the contracting agent for all faculty grants. SUNY/RF required indirect payments amounting to about 50% of total project costs. In order to get the $40,000 we needed to do the work, we needed a grant for $60,000. Almost no SUNY facilities would have been used in the project; their participation consisted entirely of processing the checks. We asked for a waiver of a portion of their indirect charges. "Absolutely not," the Research Foundation official said. "Get some of those people you want to hire to work for nothing if you have to save money." "We can't do that," we said, "that wouldn't be fair to them." "Then you can't apply for the grant," the official said. We didn't; the opportunity was lost. That greedy posture is not typical, particularly with smaller organizations that are equipped to deal with problems of this kind on a human scale.

Check out with care who will own the film and who will get the income from rentals, sales and television licenses. Many grant contracts specify that film income must be used to continue the work of the nonprofit organization. Some specify that part of the income must be returned to the funding agency. If you conceive of a film and do all the production and post-production work, you might
have to assign all the post-release income to the nonprofit organization that is the official sponsor of your grant.

That might be a reasonable thing to do. If your film is about a social problem, you might like the idea of having the film’s income go to an organization working to do something about that problem. But you might have invested a lot of your own time and money in the film before it was funded or to cover parts of the work not covered by grants. In that case, be sure your agreement with the sponsor allows for you to be compensated for reasonable wages and expenses not previously covered and that you can also be compensated for time you spend working on the film’s distribution.

It’s not that the sponsors want to rip off the profits from your work. Rather, it is the nature of the tax laws: profits from most grants cannot, generally, go into someone’s pockets, and the IRS does not like nonprofits to work out royalty agreements with grant recipients. This probably isn’t as unfair as it sounds. If you were doing a commercial film, you would have backers who would have to be paid off before you could get anything for yourself. If you are able to get your film fully funded by grants, you’ve obviated that repayment responsibility. The law is trying to make sure that money given to nonprofit organizations for nonprofit purposes stays in the nonprofit cycle, that the money doesn’t become the basis of private gain.

So few documentaries ever earn more than their actual costs that this discussion is largely theoretical anyway. But if you are seriously looking forward to profits (rather than payment for your work), you shouldn’t be trying to fund by grants; you should be getting investors and doing it in the good old capitalistic way.

If you will be making a lot of documentary films that will be funded by grants and contributions, or if the film you’re doing now will be a long-term enterprise, you might consider setting up a nonprofit corporation of your own. It is a tedious process, but it isn’t particularly difficult. In most cities, there are branches of Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts who can give you advice, and so can other nonprofit organizations. You can get practical information on the mechanics of setting up a nonprofit from Ted Nicholas’ How to Form Your Own Non-Profit Corporation Without a Lawyer for Under $75.00 (Enterprise Publishing, Inc. 725 Market St., Wilmington, DE 19801).

We set up DRI because we were involved in several projects and it made sense for us to be able to control the resources involved. There is a fair amount of paperwork in running a nonprofit, but if you’re doing a lot of work it may be far less than the paperwork generated by larger organizations under whose aegis you might fund your work. The two of us at DRI had a film grant administered through the SUNY Research Foundation a few years ago. We spent more time managing Research Foundation paperwork than we spent making the movie. The paperwork kept a lot of clerks employed—but it nearly drove us crazy.

We didn’t have any money when we set up DRI. We had some good ideas for fundable projects and we had experience administering grants through other organizations. We read some books on how to do it and we did it. It’s no big deal. You could do it, too, if you felt the need. IRS has a pamphlet that details
the steps of getting a 501(c)3 exemption. If the organization you want to set up meets their guidelines and if you follow the steps, you'll get the exemption. There's a good deal of red tape, but if you're going to be applying for grants you might as well get used to that. The IRS may try to scare you away and wear you down, but that's just a mode they adopt to get rid of the frivolous and tangential. If you have a legitimate purpose, just hang in there.

If you don't have a legitimate purpose or if you don't really want to take on the responsibility that comes with operating any business but which is even more complicated when the business has nonprofit tax status, don't bother. DRI made sense for us, but just barely. If our university hadn't had a research operation cluttered with bureaucracy and so greedy for indirect compensation we were priced out of most grants, we probably wouldn't have bothered. DRI now fills out federal and state tax forms every year, has a certified audit in any year when combined receipts from all sources is over $50,000 (even when there's only a little bit of fiscal activity, certified audits are expensive), submits regular state and federal withholding forms whether we have employees or sales in the period covered. . . . There's more, but we prefer not to think about it tonight. When we have a big grant none of that paperwork is a bother because we can afford to hire someone to take care of it. In between grants it is a real drag, especially in years when we have very little direct income save several small grants we're administering for others. In those years, we wind up losing money because we don't want to bill those small grants what it costs us for the bookkeeping and the certified audit. Our advice is, set up a nonprofit if it makes economic and personal sense, but if you're not really sure it will be worthwhile, find an appropriate community or educational organization to be your fiscal sponsor. We don't know anyone who has had a decent project who ever failed to find an organization willing to provide that service.
HOW TO WRITE A PROPOSAL THAT MAKES SENSE

THE GENRE

Grant proposals are a distinct literary form. There are levels of discourse, styles of presentation, ranges of tone, degrees of coverage—the same kinds of variation you find in novels and essays and biographies. If you have never been exposed to the grant genre before, don't make the mistake of assuming it is just like anything else. Nothing is just like anything else. If you write a grant proposal the way you write a corporate bid or a literary essay, nobody will give you any money.

Essays are written to let the world in on your secrets: here is how things are, folks. You might like to think that people will take some kind of action after experiencing your essay, but the real function of the form is achieved when the piece finds an audience that will read it. Grant applications aren't meant to amuse or educate (though they may do both), nor do they exist as reasonable documents in their own right (no one publishes the Collected Funding Applications of Margo X). Grant applications are written by one person or a group of persons with the single intention of getting another person or group of persons to part with money. The evidence of a successful essay is internal—how well it states and develops its case; the evidence of a successful grant application is external—whether or not someone writes a check.

Bids are submitted in terms of someone else's requirements: the Elmer Gantry Corporation announces that it will consider bids for construction of a pavement to Heaven City. The company knows what kind of highway it wants and where it wants the highway to go and how much it is willing to spend on the highway. If you come in with the best design that fits Elmer Gantry's strictures of style, direction and cost, you get the contract. Grant applications aren't bids because the thing to be bid upon doesn't exist until the grantwriter posits its existence. All the funder says is, "Here is some money that will be given to people doing certain kinds of things." The funder names the kinds of things. Then the applicants create the thing to be done, justify the doing, prove the competence of the doers, create a budget and justify that, and create a context in which the funder can find funding the applicant reasonable. The evidence of a successful bid submission is external—you are hired to do their work; the evidence of a successful grant application is external in a different way—you are funded to do your work.

Funding agents are stewards. They are responsible for the exercise of other people's options. If they are working for a government agency, they are stewards of the public's money; if they work for a foundation, they are stewards of money in which the public has a major interest; if they are working for the public relations department of a large corporation, they are stewards of the stockholders' money. All of them have a responsibility to be as certain as possible that the money in their care will do what the sources of that money want it to do.
Recipients of grants are also stewards. They are responsible for using public money in a way consonant with the demands of the public that made it available, or they are responsible for using private money in a way consonant with the demands of the private individuals or enterprises that provided it. If, as a filmmaker, you feel you should not be bound in such a fashion, you have one simple recourse: Don't take the money.

Your typed proposal is your voice in the meeting room; it must prove that your project is a just and reasonable one for them to support. The proposal must show that the project is worthwhile, that you are competent, and that the money will be properly spent. The proposal is not simply a statement of what you want to do, why you want to do it, and how you plan to do it. It is an agent in the decision-making process. It should answer all the questions they might have and it should supply all the information you think proper to offer, and it should do that in a form appropriate to the potential funder's needs.

Does that sound like a lot of work for you and a lot of responsibility for a document to bear? Well, it is. That's why most proposals don't get their writers any money.

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SIX QUESTIONS THAT MATTER AND ONE THAT DOESN'T

Six questions must be answered by any grant application, whether it is the brief letter required by some foundations or the complex and bloated statements required by other foundations and by some government agencies. The questions are common to nearly all grant applications and they must be answered if you're requesting funds to make a film, set up a community center, organize a health-care program, build a public swimming pool or expand a residential center for salvageable delinquents. The six questions are:

(1) What needs to be done and how do you know it needs doing?
(2) What is your plan for alleviating this need and why is this the best way to go about it?
(3) Who will do the work and what are their qualifications?
(4) How much will it cost?
(5) How will the value of the work be evaluated and how will we know that you spent the money properly?
(6) Why are you coming to us?

A seventh question, far easier to answer, is far less important: Why do you want to do this film? Foundations and corporations and government agencies do not care about your love for cripples, dancers, Armenians, natural light photography, natural childbirth, chamber music, and making movies, nor does it matter to them that you and your pals will be happier and fulfilled if you can bring this or any other project to a successful completion. Your family, your true-love and your best pal may care about what makes you happy. Foundations, granting agencies and corporations don't--nor should they. They are, with very few exceptions, goal-oriented.

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The six questions may be formulated in different ways, but they are what any funding agency must know before it can give serious consideration to any proposal. The agency must know what the project is, why it is important to people other than you, whether your plan and your skill are adequate to the need, whether it will be cost-efficient, whether it will be possible for them to know how usefully their money was spent, and whether funding you and your project is really consonant with their spending design. If you fail to answer any of these questions adequately, or if your answers to any of them are inconsistent, your project will not be funded.

We shall make suggestions regarding how you might answer each of the six critical questions. The suggestions will probably be helpful. But remember that before you try to answer them for a specific agency, foundation or corporation you must find out how your project fits their reason for giving and you must be sure that the way you tell your story fits the format they require. A film project that might be perfect for NEH might be totally inappropriate for the Ford Foundation; a proposal that is drafted perfectly for the Lilly Endowment will be totally inappropriate for the Exxon Foundation.

Sometimes it is matter of currency or fashion. If your presentation is consonant with what current fashion cherishes you may get funded even though your proposal is weaker than others presented to the same agency in the same cycle. Fashions change quickly and you don't want to tailor your proposal to what seems "in"--the chances are too good that by the time something is perceived as "in" by you it is already dated to the people on the evaluation committees. If you have the kind of antennae that can pick these things up a year or so in advance, take advantage of them. This may depend on nothing more than selection of a few critical vocabulary terms: existential angst is replaced by ontological uncertainty is replaced is . . .

We're not suggesting that you lie, that you make up different stories for different readers. Rather, we're reminding you that there are variations to the answers to the six questions, that different donors put different stresses on different aspects of them. Those differences require of you different styles of presentation. Only serious study on your part will tell you how to best present your case. Many other people, some of them with equally worthy causes to fund, will be arguing their cases too, and it is stupid to help yourself fail because you didn't take the trouble to cast your case in the most appropriate form and vocabulary.

That said, you should have some point of adaptation beyond which you will not go. Your vision should be paramount; you should not be designing projects to meet guidelines established by strangers. The director of a state humanities council wrote us that sometimes there is

a conflict between an individual's concept of an original film production, his idea or vision, and the guidelines of a funding source, particularly those of a state council. My own experience tells me that too often the filmmaker, however experienced, balks at any guidelines, viewing them as restrictions. When discussions of guidelines become unproductive, I usually make the point as emphatically as possible: if the guidelines seem to be changing your concept of the film for the worse, forget about coming to us for funds. We
can't change our guidelines, and you shouldn't change your concept to accommodate them. We want a film with a discernible humanities content, and if such content is alien to your concept, don't waste your time on a proposal to us. Stress these points as I might have on several occasions, applicants have gone ahead and wasted their time and money in working up proposals foredoomed to rejection. I would stress this to any applicant: Don't sacrifice the integrity of your concept to the guidelines of any funding source.

The major danger of sacrificing the integrity of your concept to guidelines you cannot honestly accept is that you might get funded. Then you will make a film you will probably hate or betray people who trusted you.

NINE REASONS FOR FLUNKING PROPOSALS

These are some of the most common reasons given for rejecting proposals:

(1) We don't fund the kind of work you want to do (i.e. you didn't read our guidelines carefully).
(2) Your application is not well-prepared, so we are not prepared to trust you with money.
(3) We are not convinced you have the technical competence to do the job well and/or we aren't convinced the sponsoring organization you've found will be responsible in this matter.
(4) The budget and the narrative sections don't tell the same story.
(5) Your project is boring and uninteresting, even though it falls into an area we generally support.
(6) Your project is interesting, the application is well-prepared, we believe in you and all that jazz, but we got some really dynamite applications in this cycle and those other applications outpointed yours.
(7) We think everything about your project is terrific, we think the film will have an enormous impact, but we want to maintain a low profile and don't want to be thought as radical or liberal as we think that film will make people think we are.
(8) We like everything about you and your project, but you need $50,000 and our maximum grant to any one project or cause is $500.
(9) We like everything about you and your project, but we've already given away all the money we had available for this budget year.

They won't always tell you the real reasons. Usually, you'll get a letter like this one:

We are sorry to advise you that our Governing Committee, at its meeting held the first of this month, did not feel it could help you by funding the film entitled ____________________.
The current economic climate has produced many requests from more agencies than we have the funds to aid. Therefore, many worthy requests were declined, yours among them.

We sincerely hope you will find help from other sources.

Very truly yours,

That's a real letter (except for the blank), one we got at DRI a while back. The letter doesn't say why our application wasn't funded—it says only that we didn't get their money, they got a lot of mail recently, and they hope we'll find satisfaction somewhere else. A letter like this might be a tactful way of saying "don't come back" (if they give reasons we might revise the proposal in light of those reasons, which would make their next rejection more awkward), it might be a test (if we're really serious we'll ask why the proposal was rejected and they'll take the resubmission more seriously), and it might mean simply that in fair competition with all the other proposals ours just wasn't good enough. We'll do some probing (see "AFTER THE MAIL") and if we can get someone at that foundation to be honest with us, we may learn what were the specific reasons for our rejection.

The thing to note about the nine reasons is that they really represent only four reasons for saying no:

--because the funding agency really had given away all its available funds in this cycle (#9), in which case you should find out if you should come back at the beginning of the next cycle;
--because the applicant didn't do enough homework on foundations and programs (#1 and #8);
--because the foundation or program is not willing to deal with sensitive or dangerous subjects (#7);
--or because the applicant didn't prepare an application that could give a foundation or program the rationale it needs to give him or her money that is sitting there waiting to be used (all the others).

There is one other reason for rejection of perfectly good applications: the foundation is a scam and all its public statement about what it funds and why it rejects are lies. The foundation will never admit to that. On rare occasions, the IRS gets enough data about that insincerity to withdraw the foundation's nonprofit status. That happens so rarely you shouldn't waste time brooding about the possibility.

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READ DIRECTIONS BEFORE OPENING

We know: a thousand times you've ignored that injunction on toy boxes, on television set boxes, on toaster oven boxes, and on athlete's foot powder boxes—and you've done just fine. If you want to continue following that procedure when
you enter the grant competition world, fine: you won't offer any competition for the rest of us.

Following all the directions given you by the agency or corporation or foundation to which you are applying won't guarantee you'll make it to the Yellow Brick Road. But ignoring those directions almost guarantees you'll never get there.

Most funding sources have guidelines. Most of those guidelines are rigid; staff cannot simply ignore them, no matter how literate your written presentation or how charming you are in person. If the staff ignores those guidelines, they are replaced by staff that will obey them. Guidelines are like the weather: ineluctable facts of life. If you don't like the weather here, move somewhere else; if you can't live with the guidelines of this agency, go to another one. Your applications must follow the formats specified by the agencies, foundations or corporations. This is so important we'll say it in Aramaic: Your applications must follow the formats specified by the agencies, foundations or corporations.

'Read carefully whatever guidelines are available and follow them. If a foundation sends you a form that says, "Send a two-page description of the project and we will ask for more information if we are interested," resist the temptation to send them three golden pages. Resist even more strongly the temptation to send them a full-blown proposal on the assumption that your project and your plan are so terrific there is no way reasonable people can reject either, hence by sending the whole deal in the first envelope you're saving everyone time. They can reject it; they will reject it. One reason they will reject your proposal is this: "If they can't read and understand the simple directions we sent them in our unambiguous application guidelines, why should we assume they'll follow the terms of our grant contract?"

Funding organization guidelines consist of two parts: guidelines about what might be funded and guidelines about what form the requests for funding should take. You must deal seriously with both parts. A careless sentence can kill a proposal. If a funding agency's guidelines stipulate that the agency will not fund social action projects, you might be careful what you say about the social impact you expect your film to have; if an agency's guidelines stipulate that it is interested in social action only, don't discuss film aesthetics to the exclusion of expected consequences.

All government agencies and many foundations have the forms they expect you to fill out when you ask for their money. The forms may consist of several pages with printed questions and blank spaces for your answers. The forms may consist of a list of questions or topics to be discussed by you in a certain order and in a certain way. You may find their method of description inefficient. You may feel it isn't appropriate to your vision. Keep in mind that it is their vision you are concerned with when it is their money you are requesting. If you can't describe your subject in a way that fits their subject guidelines, don't waste their time and your time; go elsewhere. If your subject does fit their subject guidelines, then phrase your request in terms of their formal requirements. They have their own reasons for wanting the information to come to their office in a certain way. You don't know what those reasons are; they may have forgotten what their reasons were. So what? Even if those reasons are wrong-headed, inefficient and stupid, why give them an excuse to reject you off the bat?
We applied to the Buffalo Foundation for help with a film project. Their application format consists of a one-page letter in which what seemed to us an impossible number of answers must be given to an inordinate number of questions. The instruction sheet said applicants could put as much supplementary information as they wished in appendices. We called the foundation's director and asked if we might submit a two-page letter. "Absolutely not," he said. "Our policy is one page for the application. If what you have to say doesn't fit, write an appendix." Given the amount of information they required, that didn't seem rational. Then a friend who had worked for them before told us the reason they wanted a one-page application was to save on photocopying for the Foundation board: one page per application meant a minimum of copying and a minimum of reading. That suggested that all the information consigned to appendixes was read only by the office staff or was used to help make the discriminations when it came to the final cut. So we designed our one-page letter to give as much information as possible to people who would not have access to the appended information until very late in the process. Had we assumed that the people making the decisions read the full application, we would have composed that first page very differently.

The NEH Media applications require an applicant to say essentially the same thing in three different places. For experienced writers, this is frustrating: you're trained never to repeat yourself. Have you a friend who is a good storyteller? Have you ever heard him or her tell the same story on different occasions? Good storytellers rewrite continually; it's part of their craft. At NEH, saying the same thing differently when they want you to say the same thing the same way can get you into trouble: "He's got three different plans of action here; he hasn't made up his mind about what he wants to do." Experienced grantwriters aren't troubled by the NEH requirement. They think, "If those people want this said three times, they'll have it said three times."

The reason for most requests for repetition is that different people often read different parts of an application or proposal. Someone doing sorting work may read only abstracts, panels and staff may read the full proposal, members of the board or council may see only the cover sheets and staff summaries of panel and consultant reports, and everyone may rely on opening summaries or abstracts to review their decisions after a day of considering twenty or thirty proposals. After eight or ten hours, remembering where one proposal ended and another began is sometimes difficult. If the guidelines ask for repetitious statements of the project or the plan of work, never assume that you can omit essential aspects because the reader will see it on pages 24 and 25. The reader may see only page 1.

Whatever the reason for the format requested, the agency from which you are requesting money has found that format useful for its purposes. If you want to get your film funded, it is stupid to ignore their wishes. If you are burning with passion to change the format so it will be more efficient for everyone, don't enter that crusade when you're submitting an application. Save that for a letter later on when everyone can be objective and you don't have so much to lose.
HOW LONG IS A STICK?

The distance between one end and the other. To answer that question in practical terms you need a practical stick to measure.

It's the same thing with grant applications: the proper length is determined by the situation of the particular application. If you're told, "Two pages and no more," the answer is simple. But if you've got any open ends, then you must decide how much prose your project warrants. You've got to make your case as well as you can, but you don't want to bore or horrify your readers.

DRI received a $22,000 film production grant from NEA after we submitted an application consisting of just the four-page printed application blanks, with the appropriate spaces filled in. We added no supplementary information, we needed no extension sheets for any of the answers. But we had, before filing the application, engaged in extensive correspondence with the director of the program. She had worked with us on refining the focus of the film; we had detailed in one of the recent letters what we hoped the film would accomplish and why we thought it appropriate for that NEA program. The program director told us we didn't have to repeat in our application things we had covered in the correspondence. It was a small program, she selected the reviewers and chaired the evaluation meetings. (Yes: some individuals in the two Endowments have a lot of power.) We did exactly as she suggested.

Another of our applications, this one to NEH, began at about 20 pages. The program officer who saw that preliminary version made several suggestions, almost all of which we incorporated in our revision. We explained some aspects of the film in greater detail than we had before, we included a tentative scenario even though we knew the final form of the film would be predicated on what happened when we were filming in the field, we expanded on the biographies of the crew and consultants. The final version of the application was 31 pages, half again as long as the original. It was, for us, a long application. But it obviously gave the Endowment the information it wanted: the film was funded at $188,000.

Some folks get carried away on their wordprocessors and copying machines. A museum applied a few years ago to NEH for a project budgeted at $80,000, most of which was to come from an NEH grant. The application guidelines limited the project description to about 12 pages, but applicants were permitted to append supplementary documents they thought important. The drafter of this proposal appended to his 12-page application 145 pages of supplementary information. A large segment of the appended material consisted of support letters. Support letters, as we'll discuss in more detail later, can be a great help to you, but like almost anything else, they are helpful only in moderation. This proposal contained 60 of them. Most of the letters incorporated the same sentences and the same paragraphing. Clearly the submitter had sent a note to everyone he could think of that went something like, "What you might say is..." but he didn't think to send each potential letter writer a different sample, so most of them simply copied his Xerox information on their own letterhead. The appendix also included about thirty pages of reviews from newspapers—but almost all the reviews were reprintings or rewrites of three or four articles picked up and distributed by a state-wide wire service. That particular NEH program required applications to
submit 25 copies of their proposals. That meant this fellow had shipped to the National Endowment for the Humanities a package holding 3265 pages—about 35 pounds. The reviewing panel discussed the merits of the proposal for about ten minutes. The discussion was lukewarm. No one was particularly opposed to the project, no one was particularly excited by it. Then one member of the panel said, "I don't really care what is in the first 12 pages of this application. Anybody who wastes this much money on this much bullshit doesn't have enough common sense to get $60,000 out of this program's budget."

The rest of the panel immediately agreed. They voted unanimously to reject the application. The NEH program officer, who would have to prepare a statement of reasons for rejection for the NEH Council and the letter of rejection to the applicant, said "Can you people give me some specific things wrong with the proposal that I might discuss in my letter to help them when they try again." One panelist said he didn't think this group of proposers should be helped. "Well," the program officer said, "they'll probably want to come back to us again." "I hope I'm on the panel when they do," the panelist said. (This isn't hearsay—one of us was there.)

Grant givers assume certain correlations between the paper document you submit and the film you claim you are capable of making. If you wildly exceed reasonable limits in the proposal, they might assume—as the panel above did—that you have no responsible sense of proportion. There is no absolute top or bottom limit. For some proposals, 20 pages is too many, and for other proposals 200 pages is too few. If you're seeking production funds for a scripted documentary, you will have as part of the application the script, which might run over 100 pages. That is not only reasonable, but necessary: if there's a script, they want to see it. If you're seeking preproduction funding and pad out the application with 100 pages of supplements that might have been handled as well with a dozen pages of supplements, they mistrust your judgment, and with good reason.

And neatness counts. A lot.

People who fund proposals in film are impressed by neatness and precision. That isn't because they have grade-school mentalities which cherish neatness for its own sake, but rather because they assume (correctly, we think) that if you are willing to be sloppy and vague in your verbal presentation you'll also be willing to be sloppy and vague in your filmic presentation. We have been part of grant panels considering a wide range of proposals where totally different standards for presentation quality were applied to community action proposals and film proposals. The panels didn't demand the level of prose from applicants for community action work they demanded from applicants from film work.

Film is an art that demands utmost precision. You must keep accurate track of so many bits and pieces of workprint and mag transfer. You must order them in a rhythmic and calculated fashion so the result has a logical and emotional content. You must have the same number of frames on the mag rolls as on the image rolls. When you're on location you must keep film hairs out of the gate and you must keep oxide particles from accumulating on the record head. Your location records must be accurate enough so you can later put things together and, if necessary, track down problems. How long have those batteries been
running? Which magazines were you using on those three rolls that came up scratched? Which audiotapes go with which rolls of film?

Filmmaking is a craft and an art in which neatness counts. Grant panelists who know film know that. Your grant application makes a physical statement which can be as influential—positively or negatively—as the verbal statement. If you can't prepare a document that is clean and sharp, one in which the prose is lean and the typing neat, one in which the numbers in all the columns line up and add up, find someone who can.

A brilliantly-written and gorgeously-typed application will not get funding for a bad film idea or for an incompetent filmmaker. We're assuming that you've got a film worth making and that you've got the skills to make that film. Many people who apply don't even have those basic skills. "You would be astounded," an NEH staff member told us, "how many film applications we get from people who don't know how to make films. They think that just because they have an idea for a film, they can go make it. That's why we usually insist on seeing previous film work." Staff and panelists don't spend time on the incompetent proposals. Theoretically those proposals increase the odds in your favor, but once they're out of the way (and that tends to happen quickly), the competition is serious and the points of differentiation are fine. You want any competitive edge you can get, and you don't want to give or throw any points away.

A grant application to make films, a grant application to do anything, is like driving a motorcycle fast: there are no trivial mistakes. Everything counts. Reputation and previous work matter, but many people with good reputations and good previous work have been turned down by panels which funded people who weren't known at all. The difference, most of the time, is based on the information the applicant chooses and bothers to place on the table before the reviewers. Expect to have every line of your proposal subject to serious examination and criticism. Be specific and precise and keep the predilections of the funding agency in mind throughout the document. If this means you have to do a major rewriting for each organization you ask for money, then do a major rewriting for each organization. NEH demands scholarly criteria of objectivity, so a proposal might be killed by a single line indicating the film has a purpose grounded in advocacy rather than explanation or explanation. Likewise proposals that are too celebratory and not questioning as well might be seen as too soft intellectually. A proposal that is perfect for NEH might be seen as lacking in heart or purpose by a foundation created for advocacy. Fine-tuning the proposal, so it is appropriate to the recipient, is as important as fine-tuning a workprint before the cutting of the real negative begins: a few little errors and the whole thing is seriously, and perhaps irredeemably out of whack.

**DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT ADDRESS?**

A friend of ours edits a quarterly journal that publishes critical articles about modern literature. The journal has never published a cartoon, photograph, short story, poem or diary excerpt. A note on the contents page clearly describes the journal's publishing policy, as does its style sheet and its entry in *Writer's Market*. Our friend nonetheless gets in every week's mail several manuscripts with
cover letters that begin, "I know you don't usually publish poetry [or fiction or cartoons or photographs, etc.] but I am certain the enclosed will be. . . ."

Our friend told us, "I don't even bother returning those in the SASE's [self-addressed stamped envelopes]. If they're that inconsiderate of my time, fuck 'em."

Every foundation director or grant program officer or corporate funder can tell you the same thing. People out there don't bother to read, or they read and just don't care. A foundation will specify in its guidelines that it will fund only programs directly connected with hospitals for crippled children in New York City and it will regularly get letters from people with admirable projects in every other city in the country, projects dealing with geriatrics, alcoholism, deviance, Buick restoration, preservation of vellum manuscripts. . .

You don't make pals in the funding world by sending the wrong application to the wrong people. If they have a good memory (many of them do) or have a computer that logs applicant correspondence, you create a body of influential people who think of you as a fool for now and ever after. Keep in mind that when people get a letter they first read the salutation to make sure it's addressed to them and they next read the signature so they will know how to weigh what comes in the middle. (Don't sneer--you do it, too. And if you insist there is no difference in the weight you would give a page of comments on your most recent film from Fred Wiseman or Francis Coppola on one hand, and a freshman who intends to study Media at Buffalo on the other, you are probably not a person to be trusted.)

You have the materials on hand to find out what a foundation or a grant program is willing to support. Most of them will tell you. You can find out more by examining the appropriate 990 forms.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't ever propose something new to a foundation. A foundation may say it is interested in supporting hospitals for crippled children and you may plan a wonderful film about such hospitals or about child abuse. That would surely be worth a letter. But the random, "I know you don't usually fund films but. . ." is generally not worth the trouble. You waste your time and money and you waste time and money and energy at the foundation. If you don't have a very compelling way to finish that "I know you don't. . ." sentence, you shouldn't ever write it. The foundation officers get surly and someone else may have a bad day because of your lack of good sense. And if you ever do come up with a project really appropriate to that foundation's interest, you may find you have, by terminally prejudiced your chances. We remember most, from our own grant evaluating work, the proposals that were so good they sparkled. We remember next well not the proposals that barely or almost made it or those that settled somewhere in the grey and large middle, but rather the proposals that were so far off the mark we wondered, "Does this yo-yo read?" One remembers the major yo-yos of the past.

That said, keep in mind that few foundations list filmmaking among their priorities and even fewer list documentary filmmaking. But documentarians' options are expanded by their subjects. A foundation that does not sponsor film work per se may be interested in the aspect of poetry or poverty or alcoholism or deviance or dance or pollution you intend to film, and it may fund you for that reason.
The documentary filmmaker has, because of that, a far greater funding potential than the filmmaker working in film qua film.

Your task is to convince the funders that the film will be a useful way to deal with their concern. You must show, in your application, why your film will matter, and that is a responsibility non-documentary filmmakers don't have. They must only suggest what their films will be; you must show that and you must also predict what you film will do.

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WRITING SHORT

William Faulkner once told an interviewer that the reason he wrote novels was he wasn't a good enough writer to write poems or short stories. The shorter forms, Faulkner said, took much greater skill.

Most good writers will tell you that writing short is difficult. It is also powerful. The Gettysburg Address could have been delivered as a two-hour speech: after all, the President was dedicating a new national cemetery. A president can talk long about patriotism, heroism and young blood spilled in war. If you are ever worrying about the potency of brevity, take a careful look at that speech. It is 266 words long. How many words can you cut out to make it better? What would you add to make it better?

There is a story that because the speech was so brief no one clapped when Lincoln stopped speaking. The audience wasn't ready for so lucid and powerful a statement, one lacking all the stroking and bombast to which they had been conditioned by a lot of other politicians making a lot of other speeches. Lincoln, so the story goes, was already gone from the stage by the time the audience realized what it had heard and burst into applause. The applause went on for a very long time.

Grant proposals come in two basic sizes: the one- or two-page letter (which may or may not be followed by something larger) and the full explanation of everything. The need to write short and lucid applies to both. Remember that anyone who is worth anything in the funding business is busy. People who are in a position to give away money are very busy. They appreciate anything you do to make their job easier. It is unlikely you will ever be faulted for saying well in five or ten pages what could have been said less well in twenty or thirty.

The first sentence (of the first letter you write a foundation, the beginning of a long proposal to a foundation or an agency, the preliminary inquiry you send a corporation, or the first sentence of an abstract) is critical. Most applicants beat around the bush. We have read two-page proposals in which we didn't find out what the money would go for until the bottom of the second page. Many busy people won't bother reading two pages if you don't tell them why you are asking them to spend that time.

The beginnings of inquiry letters, short proposals or sections of long proposals should not be little lectures. They should tell the reader exactly what this is all about, and they should provide the incentive to read on. That means
they should have a lot of specific content and should be well-written. Magazine writers spend a good deal of time on their "lead," the first paragraph, and so should you. That is what hooks the reader, what captures the interest, what sets the mood, what lets the reader know where he or she is being taken, what lets him or her decide whether or not to go along.

Think like the novice reporter whose editor continually reminds him that his lead must tell the reader Who? What? Why? Where? When? How?

As quickly as possible, whether you're beginning a long and detailed proposal or a brief letter, you should let your reader know what you want to do, how much it is going to cost, why it is important, why this agency or foundation or company should be the recipient of your missive, why you should be the person doing the work. You'll expand on these things later on, but no one will read the later pages if your first page doesn't make them want to read on.

The next several sections of this chapter will discuss how you might organize a long form proposal; the last section discusses how you should approach the short form proposal of one or two pages. Each form presents its special kinds of difficulties, and each has exactly the same mission: to let the reviewers know what you want and to give them enough information to decide whether or not they want to help you get it.

--- EDITED ---

PROPOSAL ORGANIZATION

Your proposal is organized in terms of two imperatives: (1) the instructions for proposal organization provided by the potential funding agency, and (2) structuring your case within those strictures to give your proposal the most impact. If the agency to which you are applying has no preferred format, your proposal should have these approximate sections:

--abstract and/or summary
--reasons for making the film (what need is there for this film? who will be served by it?)
--description of the film to be made (what will it be and how will it be made)
--personnel and agencies (who will make the film, what organization will oversee the work and spending of grant money)
--distribution plans
--budget
--appendixes (letters of endorsement and support, letters of interest from broadcasters and exhibitors, vitas of principals, etc.)

In slightly more generalized terms, those seven sections answer questions central to any funding proposal, whether it is for a community program, a personal research fellowship, an institutional research project: What is the need for this work? What will be done? Who will do it? How will the results reach those who are supposed to benefit from the work? How will the money be spent? What else should we know? Most proposals have in them some form of evaluation, a plan by which the results can be tested and through which the funders might
know how successful the work was. With film, you can have conversations along the way, but no real evaluation occurs until the film is finished. The closest you can come is in the statement of distribution plans, a category of information often glossed over by applications and usually taken very seriously by funders.

If a foundation were asked to give money to put a bridge over troubled waters, the foundation would have essentially the same questions they expect you to answer: Why a bridge in the first place and why put it here? (You answer that in the Need section.) Once you establish the need, they want to know what kind of bridge you intend to build, how you intend to build it, how long it will take you to build it, and how much the construction operation will cost. Without that information, there is no way they can evaluate the legitimacy of your budget or the adequacy of your staff. You may argue that the bridge situation is not really parallel with a film. You may argue that until you are cyan in the face. It won't do you any good.

Always examine carefully the funder's preferred categories of information. You will find they almost always cover the same kinds of information. Your job is to put the answers in the right places and to cast them in the right terms. You will have to organize the materials in your proposal in a way appropriate to the agency you hope will fund you. You may have to write several different applications for the same film, some of them long, some short, and some with different orderings of the same information. Some potential funders will want very detailed budget statements; others will want general budget breakdowns by major categories of expenditures; some will want a sentence or two about the primary personnel, others will want full vita's on everyone you think will be associated with the project. Some will want a letter from the sponsoring organization, along with that organization's most recent audited financial statement and most recent financial report; some will accept a one-sentence statement by you naming the organization and the official there through whom the grant will be processed. Some will specify the exact order of topics, others will simply say, "Discuss your project in ten pages or less."

We shall, in the pages that follow, offer suggestions about how you might approach each of the sections of your proposal. The headings might not be the headings you elect to use or the headings required by your potential source of funds, but the kinds of information will be central to almost any application you make.

* * * * *

THE COVER LETTER

The cover letter tells the recipient what you want done with your application. The cover letter is not part of the application; it should contain no important information that is not contained prominently in the application itself. If your cover letter has a sentence that begins, "The real importance of the attached proposal is..." you must be sure that the same argument appears early in the proposal itself. The cover letter may refer back to previous communications you had with the recipient or with other individuals in the company, agency or foundation: "Here is the revision of the proposal..." or "Enclosed is the proposal we discussed last month..." The cover letter may identify a proposal being sent

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in with no former contact: "We request that the Able Foundation consider the enclosed proposal, Before the Law, for a grant under its Public Issues Program." You may say more: whatever you think necessary to let the reader know what the attached application is, why you are sending it to them, and what you want from them. The purpose of the cover letter is to help the recipient get your grant application in the proper part of the evaluation circuit; the letter does not argue your case. Keep in mind that the recipient of a proposal might not be the person who will evaluate it, so your cover letter might be kept in the recipient's files (it is addressed to him or her personally) while your application moves through other rooms.

THE ABSTRACT

This is not where you make your argument; this is where you name it. The abstract should be brief and direct. The purpose of the abstract is to give someone picking up this bundle of stapled sheets a quick sense of what the pages are about. The abstract helps people who have just read 20 or 50 such sets refresh their memories quickly on salient points. An abstract might be as simple as, "Documentary Research, Inc., a New York not-for-profit corporation, requests $120,000 to make a 30-minute 16mm documentary film on the consequences of unemployment in Lackawanna, New York, which is in its eighth consecutive year of major layoffs by steel and auto manufacturing plants. The film will be directed by A.P. Farnsworth, whose previous documentary, The Uninitiated, won an Academy Award in 1977. The primary audience for Satanic Mills will be viewers of public television; the film will also be useful for school audiences at several levels." If your abstract gets longer than a short paragraph, you're probably writing too much. You're writing things that should go into the Summary.

THE SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION

Your reader holds an application of 10, 20, 30 or more pages. What will the reader find there and how will it be organized? We use an introductory section to explain briefly what we intend to do, to introduce the primary characters (the subject of the film, the filmmakers, the sponsoring agency), and whatever else is necessary to give the reader a sense of our competencies. The goal is to give the reader enough information so he or she can examine our application without wondering, "Who are these people, anyway?" and enough of a sense of the order of our argument that he or she won't read the first few pages and think, "there should be more detail about these things." The reader will know, from having read the summary, that there will be a full section on whatever "these things" are five or ten pages further along. The summary is more than an expanded abstract, because it at once establishes your authority and it details the plan of the proposal itself. The summary or introduction says, "Here's who we are, here's what we're going to do, and this is how we will explain it all in the pages that follow."
The summary should be written after you’ve written the rest of the proposal. It is like the introduction to a book. The introduction may be the first section of a book seen by a reader, but the author cannot compose it until the rest of the book has been written. Before an author can tell a reader where he is going to take him, the author must first find out where he himself has gone. A summary or introduction to a grant proposal looks in two directions: it helps the readers about to enter a detailed explanation and argument know where they are being taken; it also helps the readers, once they are finished, understand where they have been. After reading your sections on need, plan of work, budget, personnel, distribution, audience, the support letters and the other supplementary material, readers often ask themselves: "Now what was all that about and what do I think about it?" Your summary or introduction can tell them where they have been, which might be a major step in getting them to go where you want them to go next: the checkbook.

THE STATEMENT OF NEED

Why should this film be made? What questions will it answer? Who cares? Has anything like this film been done before and, if yes, how and why will this film be different enough to matter, different enough to deserve some of the scarce funds?

You want to make a documentary film dealing with something you care about. But be aware that the readers of your proposal might not share your concern. They might not even have noticed that the thing or issue or person or situation you want to document exists; they may have noticed it and thought it was not important or interesting. You should never assume that the grant-givers know or care about your subject. Your job is to teach them what they need to know and to help them care, and you should do those things without being pedantic, condescending or boring. If you think the thing you want to document is so obvious that "everyone" knows about it, you should ask yourself another question: If everyone knows about this problem, what is the point of making a film that will tell them what they already know?

"Why," a funder might wonder, "have these people spent so much time on this and why are they now wanting to take some of my time on it?" If the only answer you can come up with is, "I thought it would be interesting to make a film about dwarfs," you won't be funded. The funders want to know more than that; you have to have more than that to say. They know you have a reason for wanting to do this film in this way; they know the reason represents your position on something in this world. Your explanation of that reason tells them why you think the film must be made.

"To tell the truth about..." isn't enough of an answer. You could tell the truth about a lot of things. You could tell the truth about olives, trichinosis, paleontology, amniocentesis, parthenogenesis, stripmining, murder for hire, love, sunlight, spirochetes, latex paint... Why should this truth be told? Why should anyone care about what you will do?
For a social welfare project—a home for delinquents, a community center, a
new wing on a hospital, a medical program for senior citizens, a lunch program
for poor children—the need is usually clear. There is an identifiable problem,
statistics are available to document the dimensions. One can say: here is what
some people have tried to do about this problem and here is what will happen if
nothing is done about it now. A documentary film requires a different kind of
justification. The neighborhood doesn't write petitions to have a documentary
made as it will write petitions to have a community center built or a traffic light
erected. A documentary that is still just an idea in your mind doesn't have the
reality of someone hungry or sick or crazy or a community obviously going to
ruin.

Every documentary addresses itself to an issue. Frederick Wiseman's films
examine the behavior of individuals in institutional contexts and what institutional
structures do to individual men and women and children; John Cohen's films
document the place of art in very spare lives; Harlan County looks at the
dissonance in the economic and social realities of the coal industry; The Plow
that Broke the Plains examines the real price of thoughtless exploitation of the
land; Louisiana Story tries to convince us that simple folk can maintain their
carming life styles in the presence of high technology.

Sometimes the funder is specific about the kind of need your proposal must
answer. NEH, for example, is empowered to spend funds only for projects that
enhance public awareness and understanding of the humanities, so if you are
applying to NEH for film funding you must tell them what humanities themes your
film will explore and why those themes are important and how those themes will
be dealt with in your film. NEH says, "There is a need to present the humanities"
or "There is a need to use the humanities to help us understand aspects of our
world." Your proposal must demonstrate how your film will answer that need. You
must also tell NEH the target audience for this presentation and how you expect
to reach that audience. Without this frame and argument the film is unfundable by
NEH. In our experience the better and subtler filmmakers understare humanities
content and lose points because of it ("We're making films," they'll tell you, "not
illustrated lectures"), while didactic overstaters more easily convince panels that
they're serious about humanities content. Swallow your pride here or choke on it.
This is not to say you should turn into a didactic pedant, but rather that you
should take very seriously the charge to demonstrate humanities content in your
film proposal. Such discussions may seem obvious to you, the elaboration may be
redundant, and seeing a film in such terms may seem reductive and simple-minded.
From your point of view all those points may be valid—but it is the NEH point of
view that controls the money, and NEH is not at all concerned with having films
made. Films are incidental to the mission of NEH. NEH is in the humanities
business, and if your proposal doesn't make a valid humanities case, it will flunk.
Without the humanities rationale you don't qualify no matter how humane and
informative your film actually will be.

The world is full of things that need doing—but you'll have a chance at
getting funded only if the need you want to answer matches a category of needs
the funding agency finds of interest.
After a documentary film is made, it is judged on how well it does whatever it seems to do. The judgement is based on the film, not on your words on a piece of paper and not on your little speech before a screening. The film has its own reality. Before the film exists, only your words give it reality, only your words can demark what use the film will have. Your position may in fact simply be, "I just want to show that for what it is." Reasonable enough. But the funder will want to know: Why is showing that important? To whom will it matter? Does the need justify the expense?"

We're not suggesting that your film idea is any less valid if you cannot answer such questions, if the feeling is buried so deep in your gut that all you can do is come up with the true artist's only honest response: "See the film I'll make and then you'll know. The work will supply its own answer." But we are saying that it is highly unlikely that anyone will give you the money you need if you don't answer those questions, and answer them well.

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DIGRESSION: "IT'S BEEN DONE"

A beautiful proposal is there on the table before each of the 16 panelists. The proposal is neatly typed, cogently argued; the abstract tells what the film will be about and to whom it will be directed and what it will cost; the narrative details what every participant will do and why everyone is qualified; the budget is reasonable.

Then, ten minutes into the laudatory remarks, someone at the far end of the table says, "Yeah--but it's been done." And down the tubes goes the beautiful proposal.

Your research must cover three things: your subject and how you are going to document it, your film's cost and how you are going to fund it, and your vision and how it compares with what has been done before.

Approaches are sometimes new, but totally new ideas are rare.

You must find out who has done films on subjects or themes similar to yours, and your proposal must tell reviewers how and why your film will be of use even though those other films exist (if they do exist). What is new or special about your approach? What justifies the expense of this money for your film when there are so many other fine subjects out there that haven't been treated in film at all?

There are several satisfactory answers:

---Those other films aren't really about the same thing at all and this is why...
---Those other films are about the same things, but ours will be so much better and will have so much more impact and this is why...
---Those other films were wonderful, but the most recent of them was made 25 years ago and here is how the world has changed in the interim...

There are others. The answers don't matter so much as does your awareness of the existence of those other films. If you are not aware of them at all and if
someone on the reviewing panel is aware of them, your application is dead. Anyone with a fair amount of filmic imagination can make a case why his or her unmade film will be better than someone else's made film. (After you make your film the argument gets more difficult, but we're not dealing here with your performance—only with your presentation of your vision to people who have the money you need to let you project that vision.)

You must find out what has been done. If you live in a large city, the chances are good that your public library has a film department with a full-time film specialist. You'll get help searching through catalogs and filmographies. The collection probably includes the NICEM Directory (published by USC), which lists films by subject and title and gives date, producer, and distributor. You can write letters to specialists in the field and ask if they've seen any good movies lately. (A DRI staff member planning a series of films of major poetry performed in sign for people with hearing disabilities contacted literature teachers at schools for the deaf and two libraries specializing in materials for deaf students. She asked what film material was available for teachers of literature and signing. Her search got her the information she needed to be able to argue forcefully in her grant applications the need for the films, and it also resulted in several strong letters of support for funding from potential users of the films.) The Educational Film Library Association prepares occasional filmographies on certain subjects; you can write them for help when all else fails.

Nothing you do will cover everything, but if you are diligent the chances are good that you will at least cover the resources open to most of the people who will evaluate your proposal. The search will be worth your time. If you are lucky, you'll find a film that isn't very good that fails in its attempt to treat your subject, and perhaps you'll find a few reviews of that film that say a good film on that subject would be immensely valuable. The failed film attempt gives you an opportunity to make cogent remarks that can show the panel the idea that you know what other people have been doing. You needn't risk saying, "The only film ever done on this is . . ." You can say, "Among the films done on this is . . . and here is how our film will differ . . . ."

If you're slightly less lucky, you'll find a film that is very good that treats your subject. The reason we consider that luck is it is much better to find that film before you start shooting than it is to find it when you begin trying to distribute the film you've completed and on which you still owe a great deal of your own money.

You can find what has been done by doing some homework. It isn't very difficult, but it will take a little time. Perhaps a day. Failure of a proposer to do obvious homework is one of the things that makes panelists hostile. They assume you're careless and, as we said before, carelessness in a proposal suggests there will be carelessness in the film work, and film is a kind of work in which carelessness is a very serious matter. (People unconsciously accept different levels of carelessness from purveyors of different kinds of services; we are more willing to accept occasional error from a greengrocer than from a surgeon or an airplane pilot. Film is one of the areas of the grant world in which funders expect an applicant to demonstrate control of all the relevant information.)
If you live in the middle of nowhere and don't have access to a good library, get some help. Spend a day or two in another town talking with a librarian who knows these matters well. Consult specialists in the subject fields who know what has been available to them so far. Get on the phone, get in the car, get off your butt and find out what matters before the grant panel gets to vote No on your proposal because you didn't impress them with your knowledge of what you should know better than they.

It's a bother. You may be terribly depressed at having to work so hard only to find out someone was there before you. But if you don't engage in this bit of research, you may very well kick yourself out of the funding process.

THE AUDIENCE

Grant applicants trying to fund social programs include under "Need" the people who will profit from the program. Filmmakers sometimes have separate sections—one justifying the film and another describing the likely audience for the film. If you have a lot to say about audience, you should make that a separate section of your application; if you have very little to say or if what you have to say consists of generalities, you should probably keep the remarks on audience in the "Need" or "Reasons for making this film" sections. You might want to put your comments on the audience in the "Evaluation" section, since the audience size and scope are among the few measurable indicators of a film's success. You will have to decide which placement makes the most sense in terms of your film and the funding agency to which you are submitting the proposal. So long as your categories of presentation don't conflict with the categories the funding agency demands, it doesn't really matter where you put the information. What does matter is that the proposal reads logically and coherently and that the placement of the information lets you make the points you want to make.

You may not need to present enormous numbers to impress the readers of your proposal. Hollywood needs big numbers because that pays back the investors. Commercial television networks increase their advertising income by millions of dollars when they increase their share of the market a fraction of a percentage point. But most documentaries don't cost very much money—not in comparison to the cost of a television drama or a theatrical film—and the importance of a documentary film can often be justified by showing the potential funders that the film will reach an audience that cares. Most companies are aware of the value of targeting. Mobil spends a lot of money on the programs it helps create and then buys for PBS; those programs are seen, on a cost-per-person basis, by far fewer people than see a commercial in the middle of the Superbowl or during the evening news on one of the three network stations. Mobil—and the other large corporations that provide similar funding for PBS operations—spends that money because it believes that the influence it gets among "high end" viewers (people with money and more than nominal influence) is well worth the expense.

If you're applying to a large corporation or NEH for major funding, you'll have to show that your film has at least a strong possibility of getting national exhibition. If your film is likely to interest only viewers or filmgoers or groups in
a small area, you'll probably do better concentrating your funding search on agencies and organizations that concentrate on the same area.

If anyone centrally involved in the current project has made films before, the success of those earlier films may help convince potential funders that this film will be equally successful. It doesn't have to be the director or producer: if your cameraperson and editor have worked on successful documentaries that will suggest to some evaluators that this project is in good hands. Our 1979 documentary, Death Row, was broadcast on many American public television stations, on Antenne II in France and on West German television. We were able to document that the film was seen by well over 10,000,000 people. That exposure helped us get the major funding for our next two film projects, both of which dealt with very different subjects.

Wherever you elect to discuss audience in your application--as a separate section, as part of Need or as part of Evaluation--be as specific as you can. If you say, "This film is being made for the general public," your proposal may immediately be dropped into the box marked "General rejections." Except for Walt Disney studios, no filmmaker shoots for "the general public."

A documentary film is a statement about something (your subject), by someone (you) and for someone (your audience). Unless you're crazy, you don't make speeches just for yourself when you're alone in the house, and neither does anyone rational make a documentary film without an audience in mind. You may stumble across a subject and think, "The world needs to know about this." Ask yourself: The whole world? Who will care about this film? Who will want to watch it? Who will feel it is necessary to have seen it? Who will profit form having seen it? Who is likely to book it, broadcast it, rent it, buy it?

If you can't answer those questions, you haven't thought the film through adequately. The answers to those questions will determine how you shoot and how you cut. The answers will determine how much money you will need to get the film started in distribution once the first exhibition print is made. If your audience is film school aesthetes, you cut the footage one way; if your audience is the average watcher of public television, you cut it another way; if your audience is a member of a group with a certain political position, you cut it another way yet.

Your discussion of audience is directly linked to your discussion of need: who needs this film?

And how do you know? If your answer is, "I feel it in my innards," don't tell them how you know. If you have data--statements by people who matter, reports that say this film will be useful, an analysis of your own on how it will fill a real lacuna--say so. Grant evaluators love pieces of specific information.

All funding agencies and organizations want to get as much impact from their grant dollars as possible--"bang for the buck," as the cliché has it. That doesn't mean they won't fund something done for a small audience. The responsibility is yours, not theirs. If they say No, you can mutter to your friends and mirror, "They don't have any imagination." Such muttering may make you feel better, but making movies is much more fun than muttering. When it comes
to getting grants, it is your responsibility to stimulate and educate the evaluators' imaginations.

Your proposal must be consistent. The readers might accept the notion of a small audience for an expensive film if they believe in the film and believe the audience will be moved by it or will care about it or will learn from it something they can learn no other way. But if you have a project you say will appeal to the same folks who cherish Benji ("the General Public") when the reviewers can look at your proposal and know damned well the film will be of interest only to male Republican proctologists approaching retirement, they'll decide you're not an honest person or not a smart person or not a serious person. Or, worse, they'll decide that you think they are stupid. People with the power to give away a lot of grant money do not respond well to the implication that they are stupid.

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TREATMENT AND PRODUCTION PLANS

Your statement of Need tells what your film will be about and who will watch it. The Treatment and Production Plans tell what your film will look like and how you will do the work, how you will make it happen.

An astounding number of film grant applicants don't bother to tell the application readers what the film will actually show its audience. Perhaps documentary filmmakers assume grant panels know that most documentaries don't take on real form until the raw footage has been on the editing bench for a while. Panels make no such assumption.

To most grantmakers, not having something you can describe beforehand in practical terms means you don't have a film in mind at all; all you have in mind is the notion that a film about something would be interesting. Your Treatment and Production Plans must tell them: this is what we shall get and this is how we shall get it, and these are the resources we shall bring to bear. We have both been on NEH panels and heard panelists remark: "I couldn't see anything as I read this. What are we going to see?" Ideas are important, they underlie your project, but never forget that you're asking for money to make a film.

If you don't give a panel something to envision, you are saying, "Trust me. I'll do the right thing." How many times have people said that to you in this life? And how many times have you done exactly what they asked and waked up the next morning feeling like a fool? As far as grantmakers are concerned, giving money to someone with a lucid vision of what he or she is going to do is trusting someone--they're trusting that the word images will be translated into screen images. Don't expect them to trust the abstractions of your vision as well.

Their desire for clarity of presentation in your application doesn't mean you must stick to it when you make your movie. They know that things change when you're on location, that you learn things in the process of shooting and editing, that the best artists are those who incorporate what they learned a minute ago into what they do a minute from now.
One of the people who helped us get our $188,000 grant for Out of Order said, when we complained about having to write a preliminary scenario for the editing of footage we hadn’t yet shot for a film that couldn’t be pre-scripted, "They just want to know if you have some legitimate and workable film image in mind. They know you might revise it. All they want now is evidence that you think of this subject in visual terms, evidence that if you went out now and everything worked out exactly as you predict, there will be a film there. Tell them what that film might look like."

He was, of course, right. We know that when we have been evaluating other people’s film proposals we have looked to the treatment or scenario to evaluate how well we thought the proposers understood the subjects, even though we knew that the balances might very well change in the process of filmmaking, and we looked to the budgets to evaluate how well the proposers understood the nuts and bolts aspects of the job, even though we know that once production starts some of the dollar assignments always shift from one part of the work to another.

The shape of some documentaries is clear before you order your filmstock: you have a very good idea what you want to get, how you want to get it, what you want the film to look like. But many documentaries, including some of the most interesting ones done in recent years, have none of those securities in front. The filmmaker defines a subject of investigation or concern, goes out with a camera and as much film as can be afforded, then finds out what is really there only when the synchronized reels of film and tape begin rocking back and forth on the editing table.

The world of grant-getting isn’t keyed to the latter type of film. You’ve got to give those reviewers and panelists some idea of what you expect to deliver.

The problem is to submit on paper an idea that will exist only on film. That is terribly difficult. What you see in your mind’s eye may not translate well to what your fingers make a typewriter say. That’s why you’re making a film and not writing a novel or an essay. How can you make a mass of words on a page give a grant reviewer the emotional impact the film will have only when those shots you’ve already envisioned are cut into one another while the soundtrack builds on sounds only you have conceived in quite that conjunction?

You’ve got to figure out an adequate answer to that question, for in that answer lies the essence of the grant-getting enterprise. You must create a paper document that will instill in a person or group of persons who control money that is not their own the willingness to turn that money over to you so you can do what you think is important to do.

Some filmmakers prefer to have separate sections in their applications for their production plans and for their scenarios or treatments. We have written applications both ways. Usually, it depends on how much you have to say. If you have a very clear idea of the whole film, with specific examples of how things will follow one another, a good, tentative scenario can be extremely powerful. If you know what you want to do but aren’t really sure what you are going to get, it might be better to make the treatment part of the section on production plans so its brevity and relative lack of specificity won’t be quite as apparent.