

Literacy — How to Read a NOFO

The NOFO is the grants-world sibling of the RFP: same game, different vocabulary. Where the RFP is governed by acquisition rules, the NOFO is governed by grants policy. This page maps the document so you can walk into any NOFO and know where the answers live.

What a NOFO is

NOFO stands for **Notice of Funding Opportunity**. It is the official announcement that an agency has money to give — usually as a **grant** or **cooperative agreement** — and that it is accepting applications. On the federal side, NOFOs are published on **Grants.gov** (and most appear on SAM.gov as assistance listings).

The mental shift from the RFP is small but important:

- An RFP buys **your** goods or services for the government.
- A NOFO funds **your mission** — the government wants your program, your research, your community work to happen.

That shift changes the tone of everything: the evaluation rewards the *impact and approach* of your proposed work, not just whether you can do a defined task.

The standard anatomy

Federal NOFOs follow a dependable structure. Section names vary by agency, but the same questions are answered in the same places. (A note on accuracy: some agencies adapt the format, and the exact labels change over time. What never changes is *that these questions get answered* — learn to find the questions, not the labels.)

Section	What it holds	Your job here
Overview / Summary	What the program is, what it funds, who it is for, the key dates.	Read this first. Is this your mission?
Award Information	The funding amount available, expected number of awards, project period.	Know the size and shape of the pool.
Eligibility Information	Who may apply (and who may not): types of organizations, any eligibility restrictions.	Eligibility is a hard gate. If you do not qualify, stop.
Application and Submission Information	How to apply, what forms, what to submit, the deadline, the portal.	The logistics and the deadline. Submit early; portals jam.

Section	What it holds	Your job here
Application Review Information	The review criteria and how applications are scored.	The Section M of the grants world — the rubric you are graded against.
Award Administration Information	Reporting, payments, compliance requirements after award.	What you must do if you win — read this before you commit to the work.
Agency Contacts	Who to ask questions.	Use them. A question can save a whole wasted application.

The review criteria are the center of gravity

Just like Section M in an RFP, the **review criteria** in a NOFO are the single most important part. The agency publishes what it will judge and how it will score it — typically factors like the significance and approach of the proposed work, the qualifications of the team, the plan for the work, and the reasonableness of the budget.

Two moves matter here:

1. **Write to the criteria.** Structure your application so that an evaluator looking at the criteria in order can find the corresponding answer in order. Mirror the scoring in your document.
2. **Read the criteria’s own adjectives.** If the agency says it values “innovation” and “community engagement,” it will say so in the review language. Your application should prove those exact qualities, with concrete plans and examples.

The budget is part of the proposal

In grants, the **budget and budget justification** are typically reviewed as a factor, not an afterthought. The evaluator is asking: *is this a sensible plan to spend public money on this mission?* Your budget must:

- Be realistic for the work you describe (the work and the budget must tell the same story);
- Follow the agency’s cost rules (some costs are allowable, some are not, some require justification);
- Be **justified** — the narrative explaining why each line item exists and what it enables.

A common beginner error: writing an inspiring narrative and a disconnected budget. Evaluators notice. The work, the budget, and the outcome have to be one story.

Deadlines and portals

The submission deadline is a hard, absolute line — typically a date and time in a specific time zone. Grants.gov (and agency portals) enforce it mechanically: late is late. The professional moves are the same as in the RFP world:

- Submit **early** — hours or days early, not minutes. Portals jam; files fail to validate; “well, it was 4:59:58” is not a legal argument.
- Know the **internal deadline** — your own quality-review checkpoint days before the real one.
- Watch for **amendments** — NOFOs are modified, deadlines are extended, eligibility is sometimes changed.

The difference that matters most

Here is the single most important literacy lesson of the NOFO: **an RFP is scored on your ability to perform a task; a NOFO is scored on your ability to advance a mission.** Read the NOFO looking for the *problem the agency is trying to solve* — the population it wants to serve, the outcome it wants to produce — and write your application as the plan to produce that outcome. The agencies that fund grants are buying outcomes with public money, and they have learned to spot applications that are really about the applicant rather than about the mission.

One practice loop

1. Take any real NOFO from Grants.gov.
2. In 15 minutes: find the program purpose, the eligibility, the review criteria, and the deadline. Write a one-paragraph recommendation: does this match a mission we could advance?
3. Pull out the review criteria. For each, write one sentence of what your application’s evidence would be.
4. Draft a one-page budget sketch for the project period and justify the two biggest line items.
5. Compare with a peer. You are now reading NOFOs like a professional.