Gift Proposal in a Box

A step by step guide to writing an effective gift proposal.
What is a gift proposal?

- A persuasive and compelling solicitation document to an individual, a group, a foundation, or a corporation, presented with the intention of specifically asking for a donation. This document is presented to a donor with no restrictions on style and content, and so is often more artistic, utilizing photos, emotional stories, quotes, and design elements, doing so freely as the writer sees fit.
Let’s start with some sage advice – courtesy of Tom Ahern

Corporate communications are about how great the organization is. Favorite pronoun: we

Donor communications are about how great the donor is. Favorite pronoun: you
Step 1: Gather info—everything you need to know about the project in order to ask for money to fund it

You have a motivated donor. You believe this is an opportunity for them to fund a project that is aligned with how they desire to use their money in a way that is most meaningful for them.

Now, your job is to **convince** them that your project is fully aligned with their motivations for giving and represents an exciting opportunity.

1. Be sure you have fully researched the project. You understand **Who** it will serve and **How** it benefits your unit and the University.
2. Know the broader implications of the gift and **How** it changes the current state of the situation.
3. Be able to describe **How** the gift will be used and **Why** it is important and exciting, for the donor, and your unit and/or the University.
4. Know what amount/s you are asking for and any naming opportunities etc.
5. Have a timeframe in mind of when you will ask for the gift.
6. Know **Who else** you need to involve in the creation of the proposal, who needs to have approval of the proposal and who else will be present when you talk with the donor about the proposal.
Step 2: The Donor — jot down everything you know

Make sure you know the answers to these questions. This knowledge will dictate how you write your proposal and the language you use to say what you need to say.

1. What does the donor’s profile look like – jot down the donor-demographics that you know. (ie., they are an alum/non-alum, where they live/work, past gifts were to what unit/projects, if/how they are connected to the UA). Or – are they a prospect?

2. Why is this opportunity important or exciting to them personally, or the group?

3. What do you know about the donor that is relevant to this gift? (ie., he/she is a scientist and is particularly interested in this specific area of science, he/she has supporting like projects in the past, he/she has a son/daughter that is pursuing this type of degree, OR BEST – they have told you of their interest in funding a project just like this, etc.)

4. What do you know about the donor/s likes and dislikes that could influence/deter their decision to make the gift? (ie., you may know that they prefer to give anonymously so you would be sure to let them know their gift will not be publicly recognized, you may know that they dislike reading long proposals so write a short one, you may know that they have a desire to include a planned gift as part of their investment so be sure include a section on how a planned gift fits into the gift structure in your document).
Step 3: The Donor — jot down personal info you know about their giving habits

Write down the “little things” you know—info that shows you’ve been listening and motivations you can take advantage of while writing the proposal. These don’t have to be profound. They could be as simple as:

- Likes sports, and is interested in recruitment
- Conducts business deals while watching games- make sure to highlight this aspect of the new building.
- Likes to be part of University-wide projects with naming opportunities
- Feels emotionally connected to the School of Art- thinks the arts are underfunded
- Considers philanthropy part of their responsibility – wants their children to follow in their footsteps
Step 4: Possible objections and pitfalls—be prepared

You now have information about what is most important to the donor at your fingertips. Next, you need to be able to speak to any obvious objections and pitfalls.

Sometimes the “white elephant” in the room is apparent. Sometimes it is not that obvious. If you can think of issues that may arise, chances are the donor will think of them, too.

Jot these down, and prepare to address them so you your momentum with the donor does not get derailed.

For example:
- People on campus are asking why we haven’t renovated the building before now, the donor may also want to know.
- We’ve had great turnover in faculty in the last year – what does that say about the strength of our mission today?
- I know the donor was very close to the former Dean and is not happy with our choice for the new Dean – how can I convince him/her that our mission and vision are actually even more aligned?
Step 5: Gather interesting photos and stories

The old saying “a picture is worth a thousand words”, is still true. While your words may be compelling, anytime you can tell a visual story you will help to cement your proposal in the donor’s mind.

Photos that instantly resonate with the donor, or illustrate the future vision are powerful tools you want to use.

1. Gather photos, include descriptive captions where possible
2. Gather quotes from the Dean or Director, other authoritative parties involved whose testimony lends credibility.
3. Gather stories if appropriate—alumni experiences, faculty stories, or students.
Now that you have gathered all the information, photos and stories, you need, begin roughing out your outline. Use the *Basic Proposal Outline* we provide and fill in each section.

Remember, you can condense sections or simply write a few paragraphs-the proposal doesn’t need to be long but it does need to include enough compelling information to **make the donor want to act – and act now.**

You can also utilize the *Expanded Proposal Outline* for more detailed assistance.

**Good luck, we’ll be cheering for you!**
GIFT Center Proposal Writing Team