

Financial Assistance

How to Apply

Helpful Hints for Competitive Applications



NOAA
CORAL REEF
CONSERVATION PROGRAM

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NOAA Financial Assistance

How to Apply and Helpful Hints for Competitive Applications

So, you are interested in applying for a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant?

We know applying can feel overwhelming and very complex, so this guide helps you through each of the six steps of the process. It is divided into a series of quick references, designed to help both the new and seasoned applicant.

The brand-new applicant will find straightforward guidance in each step with time-saving tips and the right resources at your fingertips.

For the seasoned applicant, even if you've done this many times, we have highlighted and offered clear guidance on the most common mistakes to help make the process more efficient.

It is vital that you follow all of the instructions outlined within the specific competition, as even slight deviations can cause your application to not be reviewed or funded.

Ready? Let's dig in!

This resource is broken into six basic steps. Note that you do not always need to complete one step before moving onto the next one. In some cases, we recommend starting specific tasks early on (e.g., getting your accounts up-to-date or asking for letters of collaboration from your partners), in order to allow others ample time to complete those tasks.

Within the six steps, you'll find the following five icons that indicate a time estimate, specific tasks to do, tips, resources, and items that should be done ahead of time.



Time: The general time that you need to plan for each overarching step.



Tasks: The specific steps or tasks to complete the overarching step.



Tips: These the most often seen problems or questions we get over and over again, even from the most seasoned applicant.



Resources: Additional resources and links are available throughout if you are brand new to this process and need more information.



Do-Aheads: Things to start early

6-Step Process to Apply for a NOAA Grant

Step 1: Get Accounts

Obtain a SAM.gov account and a Grants.gov account

Step 2: Find Competition

Find a competition, download the NOFO and application package

Step 3: Read Notice

Read the NOAA Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)

Step 4: Complete Application

Develop your project narrative and application pieces

Step 5: Create Workspace

Create an application workspace and complete the application package

Step 6: Submit Application

Submit and ensure acceptance of the application

Where Should You Start?

This guide is broken into six steps. Depending on your role in the application process, and your experience, you may be only interested in certain steps or sections.

<i>Which one is closest to how you feel about grant writing?</i>	<i>If this is you, you may want to consider</i>	<i>Begin at Step</i>
I've done this before and know what to expect. I don't need to read this.	Great! We are excited to see your application and see how we can make it even stronger. We feel all applications could be improved one way or another, so we hope there is something new for you in Steps 3 and 4. NOAA grants can be a bit different than funding from the National Science Foundation since we often have a management component.	Steps 3 and 4
I think I can figure it out - I typically don't read "directions." I like to jump in and figure it out on my own.	Steps 3 and 4 are here to help! Some of the items are easy to figure out, and we want you to get the other things right the first time.	Steps 3 and 4
I know I need to read this but I'm afraid of the jargon and worried I'll struggle to understand it all.	We are here to help! We love answering questions, big and small. Starting the process early allows you more time to give us a call anytime you run into something that doesn't make sense. We can't edit your application, but feel free to ask us your questions.	Start at step 1 and call the point of contact listed in the funding announcement with questions.
I have not done this before, and I don't have a strong grant team within my organization to help me.	We are here to help! We love answering questions, big and small. Starting the process early allows you more time to give us a call anytime you run into something that doesn't make sense. We can't edit your application, but feel free to ask us your questions	Start at step 1 and call the point of contact listed in the funding announcement with questions.

Step 1: Obtain a SAM.gov Account and a Grants.gov Account

Time Estimate:

- The registration process can take 2 weeks! Don't wait until the deadline!

Tips:

- Don't wait until these tasks are completely finished in order to move onto the next step.
- Make a note on your calendar to keep your SAM.gov and Grants.gov accounts updated and renewed (annually) so you are always ready to apply. A recipient's registration has to be updated within one year of registering on Sam.gov in order for the recipient to maintain its funding stream under a NOAA award. The funding stream stops after a recipient's Sam.gov registration expires.
- Obtaining a SAM.gov and Grants.gov account is free. You may be contacted by entities offering to "help" you get your account set up for a fee (sometimes aggressively and implying they are from the government). If you get one of these emails or calls, remember you can ignore it and do it on your own.

Step 1A: Register with or Renew SAM (System for Award Management) www.SAM.gov

Time estimate:

- 3-5 days (If your organization already has an Employer Identification Number or Taxpayer Identification Number (EIN/TIN)).
- Up to 2 weeks (if your organization is applying for EIN/TIN).

Tasks:

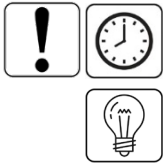
- First time applicants must register with www.SAM.gov; and all applicants must reactivate their account on an annual basis. A Unique Entity ID is required to complete Sam.gov registration.
- You'll need a Unique Entity ID, your organization's EIN or TIN, and some additional information about your organization, including the bank account information.

Tips:

- If your application is selected for funding, your organizations SAM account must be active as a condition of receiving an award.
- SAM requires a notarized letter stating you are the authorized entity administrator before SAM will activate your entity registration in SAM.gov.

Resources:

- The Federal Service Help Desk provides information on what is needed to [create a sam.gov account](#).
- The Internal Revenue Service provides information on [how to obtain a taxpayer identification number](#) or [an employee identification number](#) (one of which is mandatory to complete your Sam.gov Registration information).



Step 1B: Register with Grants.gov



Time estimate:

- 1 day to complete.



Task:

- Complete your AOR (Authorized Organization Representative¹) profile on Grants.gov and create your username and password.



Tips:

- You will need to have a completed SAM.gov account before you can do this step.
- The E-Business Point of Contact² (E-Biz POC) as set up on your SAM.gov account must login to Grants.gov to confirm you (or others) as an AOR. Please note that you can list more than one AOR for your organization.
- Your AOR (Authority Organization Representative) is the only one eligible to submit the application on your organization's behalf. In many cases, this is NOT the principal investigator.
- Save time by creating a [subscription](#) on Grants.gov to send you relevant future funding competitions as soon as they are posted!
- Review the [How to Apply for Grants](#) resources at grants.gov and review the [Workspace Overview](#) feature well before you try to submit an application. Workspace is the online platform for all of your federal forms and application documents within Grants.gov



Resources:

- Grants.gov has an extensive [website](#) and 24/7 phone line, available at 1-800-518-4726.

¹ An AOR is authorized to submit applications on behalf of the organization when they are a Participant of that workspace in Grants.gov.

² Prior to being able to complete or submit application packages on behalf of your organization, your organization's EBiz POC must authorize roles. The EBiz POC is likely to be your organization's chief financial officer or authorizing official.

Step 2: Find a Competition and Check for Eligibility



Time estimate:

- 1 hour to complete.



Tasks:

- Find the competition on [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) that matches your project and funding needs.
- Download the Full Announcement PDF on the “Related Documents” section. This document is also called the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)
- Quickly scan the full announcement and information available on Grants.gov to ensure that your project fits within the competition and ensure you or your organization is an eligible applicant.



Tips:

- Specifically, make sure your organization and project fall into the grant program requirements by looking at the sections indicated below in the announcement.
 - **PROGRAM OBJECTIVE (SECTION I. A.) PROGRAM PRIORITIES (SECTION I. B.)**

These two sections provide the overall intent of the grant program will describe the types of projects, activities, and locations, if restricted, that are prioritized under the competition. Some competitions may allow applications that fall slightly outside of listed priorities. However, projects that are slightly out of scope may be a lower priority, which can be reflected in the evaluation process.
 - **ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS (SECTION III. A.)**

Some competitions are limited to a select number or type of organization. If you don't see your organization type listed, call the POC on the announcement to confirm if you are eligible.
 - **MATCHING OR COST-SHARE REQUIREMENTS (SECTION III. B.)**

If matching is required, you must be able to document and account for the funds during the life of the award. Providing extra matching funds doesn't increase your odds at getting an award, so we recommend matching only what is required.
 - **APPLICATION DUE DATES (SECTION IV. D.)**

NOAA competitions are generally open for 60 calendar days. Make sure you mark the due date early in your calendar and plan for enough time to write the narrative, seek out letters of collaboration from partners, and apply via Grants.gov.

Pre-proposals or letters of intent may have an earlier due date!
 - **AMOUNT OF MONEY FOR EACH APPLICATION OR PROJECT YEAR (SECTIONS II. A. AND II. B.)**



Make sure your project can be successfully implemented within the minimum and maximum funds that can be requested. For projects longer than a year, this maximum may either be a total project maximum, or a per year maximum.

○ **PROJECT DURATION AND START DATES (SECTION II. B.)**

Multi-year projects generally describe a form of grant that is more than one year, and in which NOAA will provide funds each year, not all up front. Project start dates must be on the first of the month, and generally will be 6 to 9 months after application submission.



Resources:

- Visit the [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov/help) help section on applicant eligibility to get more detailed suggestions and tips.

Step 3: Read & Understand the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)



Time estimate:

- 2-3 hours (20-40 pages, on average)



Task:

- After you've determined your project is eligible (see Step 2, task 3), and before you dive into writing, read the full announcement or NOFO in its entirety. It contains lots of important instructions.
- Make note of some of the important aspects of the funding competition as we note below to include them in your application.



Tips:

- Haven't read an entire NOFO before? Here is an [example of a typical NOAA NOFO](#).
- We know many applicants, experienced and new, skip reading the NOFO in detail. We get it can be boring and long. We often see sections or places where points were lost or an application wasn't as strong because the details and instructions within the NOFO were either skipped or ignored. Even if you've written many applications, each competition may be a little bit different.
- While formatting and application limits such as page limits might seem trivial, going even one line over a page limit, including an extra document, or being one-minute late can get your entire application thrown out of the competition.
- Pay particular attention to the following subsections. We've highlighted a few that are vital to understand.
 - **PROGRAM PRIORITIES (SECTION I.B)**
 - This section contains very specific information about what types of projects the competition is looking to fund.
 - In many competitions, you are required to select only ONE program priority. In almost all cases, selecting multiple priorities will not increase your chances of getting funded.
 - Write your project to show how it will directly apply to the program priority. These specific program priorities may change from previous competitions.
 - **PROJECT AND AWARD PERIOD (SECTION II. B)**
 - A multi-year award means that NOAA will provide funding incrementally without additional competition. If multi-year applications are allowed, you must clearly identify and spell out the budget, project priorities, and activities for each specific year.
 - In many cases, if a competition asks for multi-year applications, the competition may not run every year.

- A multi-year award means a project duration of more than 12 months, and that all of the funding is provided at the time of the award. Applications should also show a budget of how the funds will be used in each year of the project.
- **CONTENT AND FORM OF APPLICATION (SECTION IV. B)**
 - This section contains information including the formatting and requirements of the applications. Pay special attention to all page limits, double-spaced or single-spaced narrative, font size, and if items like cover pages are accepted.
 - More guidance and help for what should be in your narrative is found in *Step 4 below titled "Develop your Project Narrative and Application Pieces"*.
- **SUBMISSION DATES AND TIMES (SECTION IV.D)**
 - Late submissions, even one minute, will not be accepted.
 - Make sure that you submit early enough before the due date to allow for slow systems and computers.
 - Some competitions will allow paper applications. If allowed, this section will identify if it must be received by NOAA by the due date, or if it must be postmarked by the deadline. Do not fax or email any application parts.
- **EVALUATION CRITERIA AND REVIEW PROCESS (SECTIONS V. A, B)**
 - This is one of the most important aspects of the NOFO, as it is how your application will be scored.
 - The reviewers will provide comments and scores on your application based on this evaluation criteria. Be very specific on how your application meets the evaluation criteria within your narrative.
 - The reviewers can only review what is explicitly written in the application and may not know anything of your past projects or programs. If appropriate, you may need to show past history and success of previous funding and programs.
 - Ask a friend to use the evaluation criteria to review your application before submission to ensure you have all of the required aspects.
 - This section may also indicate if reviewers will be local to your region, or if reviewers will be national. In some cases, local or regional reviewers may be more familiar with local terms, jargon, and geographies, but be careful and don't *assume* your reviewers will know them all, so clearly describe them. National reviewers may be less familiar with local terms, jargon, and local priorities/challenges so ensure you define and explain them. Again, assume your reviewers know nothing of your project and project area.

- Unless otherwise stated in the NOFO, applications don't get 'extra-credit' for having unrequired match or more match than the required. Don't inflate or add matching that isn't guaranteed. If you receive a grant award, all match on your application, whether required or voluntary, will be required.
- You must account and keep track of all match/cost sharing the same way that you would for any federal monies received. At the end of the award if you have not met your match/cost share, you will have to pay back money to the federal agency.
- The last step in your budget is to fill out the SF-424A. We recommend completing this after you've completed the budget justification and table to ensure all of your numbers match!
- Sample budget form with [matching funds](#).
- Sample budget form for a [multi-year budget](#), meaning NOAA will fund each year incrementally. If multi-year applications are accepted, it will be mentioned in the NOFO, section II Award Information B. Project/Award Period.

Step 4E: Title Page



Time estimates:

- 1 day to complete.



Tasks:

- Prepare your *Title Page* (limit 1 page)



Tips:

- Keep the title page simple, and provide the information exactly as requested in the funding opportunity. Images or graphics on the title page aren't necessary or helpful. Keeping the information brief will ensure that your application is properly routed to the appropriate reviewers.
 - In general, your title page will likely include:
 - (a) Project title;
 - (b) Principal Investigator (or Project Manager) and Financial Representative with complete contact information (address, fax, email, and phone number);
 - (c) Any co-investigators (or Co-managers) with contact information;
 - (d) Start and end dates of proposed project;
 - (e) Identification of programmatic priority applicable to the project;
 - (f) Funding type request (grant or cooperative agreement); and
 - (g) Total cost of the project, including federal and non-federal funding requested. Include amounts per year, as well as total dollar amounts.
-

Step 4F: Data Management and Sharing Plan



Time estimate:

- 1 day to complete.



Task:

- Develop a *Data Management and Sharing Plan* (generally limited to 1-2 pages)



Tips:

- Any environmental data that is created in your project or research must eventually be available to the public. The data sharing plan must outline how you will do this. The NOFO may have additional "Data Management Guidance to Proposal Writers" that may be more specific than what is included here.
- If funded, you will be required to submit published papers to the NOAA Institutional Repository, and they will be made publicly available by NOAA one year after publication by the journal.
- Data accessibility must occur no later than:
 - When the publication of a peer-reviewed article based on the data is published,
 - Two years after the data are collected and verified, or
 - Two years after the original end date of the grant.
- A data management plan should include:
 - Description - An overview of the types of environmental data and information expected to be collected during the course of the project;
 - Date - the tentative date by which data will be shared;
 - Standards - the standards to be used for data/metadata format and content;
 - Methods - methods for providing data access;
 - Volume - approximate total volume of data to be collected; and
 - Experience - prior experience in making such data accessible.

Step 4G: National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) Questionnaire



Time estimate:

- 1 day to complete.



Task:

- Complete the *NEPA questionnaire if or as required*. It can be found on the [NOAA NEPA website](#) or on the NOFO. The NOFO may specify which question(s) must be answered.



Tips:

- All applications will be reviewed by NOAA to ensure it follows and complies with all state, local, and federal environmental regulations. This questionnaire helps NOAA do this review.
- Some of the questions may not apply to your project, and if so, just put "n/a".
- There is no need to rewrite or re-word information written in your narrative that will answer the questionnaire, copy and paste is acceptable!

- Reviewers may not have access to the NEPA questionnaire, it is not extra narrative space.

Step 4H: Appendices



Time estimate:

- 1 week to compile information.



Task:

- Develop or **compile appendix items**, such as:
 - a. Resumes or curriculum vitae of key staff and personnel (recommend 2-page maximum per person);
 - b. Permit or authorization information (if applicable);
 - c. Other visuals, project designs, graphs, or maps necessary to the application;
 - d. Documentation showing proof of non-profit status (if applicable); and
 - e. Letters of collaboration and support from your partners!



Tips:

- Keep appendices to the basics and simple for the reviewers to understand and read.
- Reduce the size of resumes/curriculum vitae by including only the information most important to the work being proposed in the application – relevant experience.
- Many competitions will have appendix page limits.
- Some items listed above may be required, not including those items may result in the rejection of your application. Read the NOFO carefully to see what should and should not be included in the appendix.

Step 5: Create an application “workspace” and complete the Application Package



Time estimate:

- 1 day to create the Grants.gov “workspace”.
- 2-3 days to complete all of the required forms.



Tips:

- **WORKSPACE** is the online platform for all of your federal forms and application documents within Grants.gov.
- If your application is incomplete, or missing even one form, it can be denied and not reviewed. The instructions in a NOFO supersedes any guidance in this document.
- While Grants.gov will accept many file types, PDF format is recommended. PDF files ensure that your documents won’t get changed or modified through the application process.



Tasks:

- Use the “apply” button within the “package” section to create your Grants.gov “workspace”.
- Enter other staff within your organization to assist in the creation of the application. This may include budget personnel to assist with the budget forms.
- Complete the standard government forms within the workspace. For most competitions you will need to complete:
 - SF-424 - Application for Federal Assistance;
 - SF-424A - Budget Information - Non-construction Programs;
 - SF-424B - Assurances - Non-Construction Programs;
 - CD-511 - Certification Regarding Lobbying; and
 - SF-LLL - Disclosure of Lobbying Activities (if applicable).
- Upload your project narrative, budget narrative, and any other attachments.



Resources

- If you have trouble using the Grants.gov workspace, visit the [workspace help section](#).

Application Check-list

Double check that your application is complete!

Federal Forms

- SF-424 - Application for Federal Assistance
- SF-424A - Budget Information - Non-construction Programs
- SF-424B - Assurances - Non-Construction Programs
- CD-511 - Certification Regarding Lobbying
- SF-LLL - Disclosure of Lobbying Activities (if your organization does Lobbying activities)

Proposal and Attachments

- Title Page (typically 1 page)
- Project Summary or Abstract (typically 1-2 pages)
- Project Narrative (1 is within page limit will depend on competition)
- Budget Narrative (is within page limit will depend on competition)
- NEPA questionnaire (<https://www.nepa.noaa.gov/docs/NOAA-Grants-Questionnaire-final.pdf>)
- Data Management and Sharing Plan
- Other Attachments (is within page limit will depend on competition)
 - Documentation showing proof of non-profit status (if applicable)
 - Resumes or CV of key staff and personnel
 - Letters of endorsement, support, or collaboration
 - Permit or authorization information
 - Other visuals, graphs, or maps necessary to the application

Step 6: Submit and ensure acceptance of the Application



Time estimate:

- 1 day to complete.
- 2 - 5 days to receive confirmation emails from grants.gov.



Tip:

- Do not wait until the last minute to submit an application via Grants.gov in case of system errors. If there is an error, you need enough time to resubmit the application **BEFORE** the deadline.
- In some cases, signed hard copy proposals may be mailed with an official postmark *before* the deadline. Check your NOFO for specific details. If this is the case, your mailed package must include a hand signed and dated SF424 form.
- Your AOR (Authority Organization Representative) is the only one eligible to submit the application on your organization's behalf. In many cases, this is not the principal investigator.



Tasks:

- Once all of your forms and documents are attached in your Grants.gov “workspace”, click on the button to “Complete and notify your AOR”. Your AOR should then review the entire application, ensure everything is attached correctly and complete, and hit the “submit” button.
- Ensure your application is properly submitted, and more importantly, validated and accepted by the system. You will know because the following will happen:

Submission Confirmation Screen and Email

After you submit your grant application package, a confirmation screen will appear on your computer screen that confirms the first step of the submission process.

Watch for 3 emails.

Applications submitted through Grants.gov will be accompanied by THREE automated response emails:

- *1st email* confirming receipt - this may take up to 2 business days to be received. The confirmation screen and e-mail will include a tracking number, as well as a "Track My Application" link to use to see the progress of your submission. Write down your tracking number for future use.
- *2nd email* will be a message *validating or rejecting with errors* your submitted application package. The Grants.gov system is designed to check for technical errors within the submitted application package. Grants.gov does not review application content. If your application is rejected, you have until the deadline to fix the errors and resubmit. Grants.gov help desk can be reached at: 1-800-518-4726 for additional help to fix and resubmit the application package.
- *3rd email* validates that the application has been forwarded to NOAA for further processing. This last email message will confirm that the package was received by

NOAA. The package cannot be received by NOAA if it wasn't accepted and validated in the Grants.gov system.



Tips:

- It is important to watch for these automated emails in case they indicate an error. If there is an error, your application may need to be modified and resubmitted before it will be successful submitted.
- If you do not receive the confirmation screen or email, or receive any error through the process, please call the Grants.gov help desk at 1-800-518-4726 prior to the due date.



Resources:

- Grants.gov helpdesk is open 24/7 to answer any questions and confirm your application has been submitted. For this step, they are the best resource to call with any questions.
1.800.518.4726
24 hours a day, 7 days a week, except on federal holidays
support@Grants.gov

Now What?

After your application is received by NOAA, it will go through a review and selection process outlined below. If you have any questions on the timeline, reach out to the POC listed on the NOFO or in Grants.gov. This process can take from **6 to 10** months to award notification.

GRANT CYCLE MILESTONE (Approximate timeline of each step)	DESCRIPTION OF GRANT CYCLE MILESTONE
NOAA RECEIVES APPLICATION (1-4 days after Grants.gov submission)	The NOAA program you apply to will receive all applications submitted through Grants.gov or hard-copy applications received through the mail, if allowable by competition. NOAA processes all applications using the Grants Online system.
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS (1-4 weeks after submission)	NOAA staff reviews all applications to ensure that they are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete, • received on time, and • follow all requirements in the grant announcement. Applications that meet these basic minimum requirements will move on to the next stage. An application that fails to adhere to the specifics listed in the funding announcement (including going over page limits, or missing one document) can be thrown out of the competition and not reviewed beyond this point.
REVIEW PROCESS (2 weeks - 3 months)	All applications are reviewed by a minimum of three subject matter experts. The review process can include an independent merit review, a technical review, a panel discussion, or a combination of these. This process will be described in the NOFO. During the review process, applications are scored with comments and a rank order of all applications is developed.
SELECTION OFFICIAL RECOMMENDATION (1 month)	The Selecting Official receives the results of the review process (ranked order of all applications) and recommends applications for funding to the Grants Management Division for further review and negotiations.

GRANT CYCLE MILESTONE (Approximate timeline of each step)	DESCRIPTION OF GRANT CYCLE MILESTONE
NEGOTIATIONS (1-2 months)	<p>The Principal Investigator and/or Authorized Representative will be notified by NOAA if their application is being recommended for funding.</p> <p>At this stage, NOAA may negotiate with the applicant to reduce or modify the funding amount or scope of work. NOAA will also work with you to correct any errors in your application.</p> <p>If any changes are requested by NOAA, revised paperwork and federal forms will need to be submitted at this stage.</p> <p>Once negotiations are complete, NOAA program staff will submit the revised application to the Grants Management Division.</p>
AWARD NOTIFICATION (2-3 months)	<p>The NOAA Grants Management Division will review the recommended applications and issue all grant awards.</p> <p>Grant award notices to successful applicants will be issued via email to the Authorized Representative who signed the initial application, not the Principal Investigator.</p> <p>If your project is not selected, the Authorized Representative will receive a notification from the NOAA program. This generally occurs after all award notifications have gone out.</p>
AWARD ACCEPTANCE (30 days)	<p>NOAA Grantees must use Grants Online to review and accept the award in 30 days.</p>