



How to Write a Grant: A Guide for Heritage Area Partners

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SECTION 1: Overview of Heritage Montgomery Grants

Heritage Montgomery Mini-Grants

Heritage Montgomery (HM) Mini Grants of \$500 to \$2500 are awarded annually for activities that promote heritage tourism in Montgomery County. They can be used for projects, but not for capital expenses. Mini grants require a 1:1 (cash or in-kind) match from the applicant for projects that are consistent with the mission of Heritage Montgomery: “Heritage Montgomery connects and facilitates the work of cultural, natural, and historical partners in the heritage area while providing residents and visitors with a local rootedness in its stories and experiences.” (HM Strategic Plan 2023-2028).

In-kind contributions are non-cash donations of goods, services, or time that support your project, such as volunteer hours, donated materials, or pro bono professional work. They must be directly related to the project and should be assigned a fair market value.

- **Funding Range:** \$500–\$2,500
- **Eligible Projects:** Educational programs, interpretive signage, trail development, research, preservation, brochures, etc.
- **Match Requirement:** 1:1 (with at least 25% cash)
- **Learning Opportunity:** These grants are partially intended to build your grant-writing skills and project management capacity

Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) Grants

The Maryland Heritage Areas Authority (MHAA) grant program is a source of funding designed to assist and encourage the preservation of historical, archaeological, natural, and cultural resources and support economic development through heritage tourism within heritage areas certified by MHAA. Heritage area grant awards are made from the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority Financing Fund, a non-lapsing, revolving fund. There are two types of MHAA grants:

- **MHAA Capital projects range from \$5,000-\$100,000.** Funds support and create heritage tourism infrastructure within the 13 Certified Heritage Areas. Broadly, types of capital projects funded include acquisition, development (construction), rehabilitation, and restoration of real properties. MHAA also funds pre-development planning for capital projects as part of the MHAA Capital Grants program.
- **MHAA Non-Capital projects range from \$5,000-\$50,000.** Funds support and create heritage tourism resources and experiences within the 13 Certified Heritage Areas. Non-capital projects often fall into the broad categories of planning, interpretation, and programming.
- **Funding Range:** Non-Capital: \$5,000–\$50,000; Capital: \$5,000–\$100,000
- **Eligible Projects:** Exhibits, websites, signage, restoration, acquisition, and more
- **Match Requirement:** Dollar-for-dollar; 20% cash and any combination of cash and in-kind 80%.

SECTION 2: Understanding the Grant Guidelines

What to Find in the Guidelines

Before writing a grant application, it's essential to thoroughly review and understand the grant guidelines. These guidelines provide more than just eligibility criteria — they outline the funder's priorities, evaluation criteria, and the types of projects that are most likely to be funded. Aligning your project with the goals, language, and expectations outlined in the guidelines significantly increases your chances of success.

For example, if your project addresses themes like heritage tourism, experiential learning, or inclusive storytelling — key priorities for programs like the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority — your proposal should clearly demonstrate that connection. A strong understanding of the guidelines also helps avoid common mistakes, such as submitting ineligible expenses or missing required documentation. Ultimately, the guidelines are your roadmap; following them closely ensures that your project resonates with reviewers and meets the funder's intent.

SECTION 3: Set Yourself Up for Success

Before you start writing your grant proposal, take the time to lay a strong foundation. Thoughtful preparation can save time later and significantly strengthen your application.

Select a Discrete Project

To be eligible and competitive for funding, your proposal must focus on a specific, clearly defined project; our grants do not fund general operational support. A **discrete project** has a clear beginning, middle, and end. It results in a tangible product, program, or outcome — something you can point to when the grant period is over.

Examples of discrete projects include:

- Developing a new exhibit or interpretive panel
- Restoring historic ephemera such as farm vehicles, exhibits, and collections
- Hosting a community heritage event or educational program
- Creating a brochure, mobile tour, or website section
- Conducting research or oral histories tied to a future product

What's NOT Eligible or Recommended:

- Requests for general operational support (e.g., staff salaries, office utilities, broad administration)
- Using your entire match to cover overhead or unrestricted expenses
- Proposals without a clear deliverable or public-facing outcome
- Food

If your organization needs operational support to carry out a project (e.g., temporary staffing for an event, contract services, or design assistance), make sure that support is clearly tied to the specific project being proposed, and not to general operations.

Review HM's Strategic Plan and/or Management Plan

Successful proposals show how they support broader heritage tourism objectives. Use [Heritage Montgomery's Strategic Plan \(2023–2028\)](#) to make these connections clear.

For example, if your project involves experiential education, inclusive interpretation, or highlighting underrepresented stories, it directly supports HM's priorities to “amplify Montgomery County’s diversity—past and present” (Goal 3) and to “elevate the regional identity” through strong storytelling and partnerships (Goal 2). Quotations, paraphrasing, or referencing specific goals from the plan will show reviewers that your project advances shared regional objectives.

Talk to Heritage Montgomery

Reach out to the Executive Director (Sarah Rogers, director@heritagemontgomery.org) early in your planning process. A short conversation can clarify whether your project is a good fit for HM/MHAA grant priorities and provide insight into how best to present your proposal. Heritage Montgomery can offer valuable guidance and help ensure you're aligning your project with both local and state-level goals.

SECTION 4: Tips for a Strong Narrative

A compelling proposal tells a clear, complete, and confident story. These tips will help you craft a narrative that stands out.

Be Clear and Specific

A strong proposal is neither vague nor overly technical. Aim for language that is specific, informative, and easy to understand, even for someone unfamiliar with your site or field.

Avoid broad goals like *"increase awareness"* or *"preserve history."* Instead, focus on the concrete details of your project:

- **What exactly will you do?** Describe the scope and activities of your project in concrete terms.
- **Why is it important now?** Connect your project to current needs, anniversaries, or strategic goals.
- **Who will do the work?** Identify key staff, volunteers, or partners and highlight their qualifications.
- **How will you reach your audience?** Outline your outreach or engagement strategy—especially if your project includes public programs, signage, or education.

Clearly describe what your project is, why it matters, how it will be accomplished, who is involved, and what results you expect. A compelling narrative connects the dots between your mission, the community you serve, and the long-term value of the project. Make sure you answer the “so what?” — why your project is important and timely.

Know Your Audience

Grant reviewers may not be familiar with your site or its history. Avoid jargon, acronyms, or assumptions about what is “well known.” Instead, write clearly and concisely, explaining the significance of your site and the impact of your project as if introducing it to someone for the first time. The more accessible your narrative, the stronger your proposal will be.

Demonstrate Capacity

Your proposal isn't just about your idea; it should demonstrate your organization's ability to carry it out to benefit both your organization and the public.

- **Show your team’s subject matter expertise.** Use bios or brief background descriptions to demonstrate credibility.
- **Explain your track record.** Highlight previous successful projects or grants, especially those with Heritage Montgomery or MHAA.
- **Remember:** Your proposal is a preview of your project management skills. A clear, complete, and well-organized narrative shows that you’re ready to deliver results.

Avoid Using AI

Avoid using generative AI to write your narrative. The grant reviewers want to hear *your* voice. Your application reflects your understanding of the site, the community, and the historical significance. Show your passion, local expertise, and genuine commitment to the work.

Use Visuals and Support Materials

Support materials help reviewers better understand your site and your project—especially if they’ve never been there in person. Visuals create an emotional connection, clarify your vision, and show the value of your work in action.

- Include photographs of your location, collections, or similar completed projects.
- Attach brochures, event programs, or press coverage that demonstrate your public engagement and past success.
- Add maps to show your project’s location, layout, or its connection to other sites, trails, or community assets. This is especially helpful for signage, wayfinding, or preservation projects.

Tell the Heritage Montgomery Story

Every grant application in the Heritage Area is an opportunity to reinforce the bigger picture. Your project isn’t just about one building, story, or audience; it’s part of a regional heritage network with shared goals.

Your grant proposal should help the reviewers understand how your project fits into the broader Montgomery County story and how it aligns with the interpretive themes and strategic goals of the Heritage Area. Pull language directly from [Heritage Montgomery’s Strategic Plan \(2023–2028\)](#), [Management Plan](#), or interpretive themes to show alignment.

Heritage Montgomery’s four interpretive themes are as follows – they are detailed in both the Management Plan and Strategic Plan.

- Rivers, Roads, and Rails: Transportation
- Crossroads and Cultures: Home to Many People
- Agricultural Reserve: Farms, Markets, Conservation, and Rural Life
- Heritage Discoveries: Unique Stories of Local History, Culture, and Nature

Examples of language you could include in your grant proposal include:

- “This project supports Goal 3: Amplify Montgomery County’s diversity—past and present, by focusing on underrepresented immigrant stories.”
- “Our proposed tour highlights the Agricultural Reserve, directly aligning with the interpretive theme of Farms, Markets, and Rural Life.”

Incorporate the Funder’s Mission Statement

Make sure your proposal clearly supports the values of both MHAA and Heritage Montgomery: community partnerships, historic preservation, education, inclusive storytelling, and sustainable heritage tourism.

Check Your Organization’s History with the Grantor

Review your organization’s past interactions with MHAA and Heritage Montgomery. Have you received grants before? Were those projects completed successfully? If so, mention them briefly. Do you participate in Heritage Days or take part in workshops, networking events, or regional collaborations? This kind of engagement shows that your organization is an active partner in the heritage area, which strengthens your credibility.

Understand the Review Criteria

Before submitting your application, carefully review the grant selection criteria that explains how reviewers will evaluate your proposal. These criteria outline what the funder values most, such as project significance, alignment with strategic goals, community impact, feasibility, and budget clarity. Understanding these categories helps you tailor your narrative to meet expectations. Think of it as reverse-engineering your proposal: if “public benefit” or “heritage tourism potential” is heavily weighted, make sure your application clearly addresses those elements. Strong proposals don’t just describe a good project, they clearly demonstrate how that project meets the funder’s priorities.

SECTION 5: Budgeting and Match Requirements

A strong budget should reflect a well-planned, **project-specific** request. Your budget should clearly show all of the planned expenses to complete the project. To be successful, you’ll need to understand the differences between **grant expenses, cash match, in-kind match, and other project expenses**, especially when it comes to staffing and services.

GRANT FUNDS – What You Can Pay For with Grant Dollars

Grant funds must be used for **project-specific, eligible expenses**. These are typically external or one-time costs tied directly to the completion of your project.

Allowable grant-funded expenses include:

- Contracted services (e.g., historians, designers, videographers, educators)
- Materials and supplies (e.g., signage, printing, construction materials)

- Event production costs (space rental, A/V, speaker fees)
- Equipment or tools (if directly tied to the project)

NOT allowed with grant funds:

- Salaries or benefits for your own organization's staff
- Overhead/administrative costs
- General operations
- Fundraising or lobbying
- Unrelated expenses not tied to the project

Key distinction: You *can't* use grant money to pay your staff, but you *can* include staff time as part of your cash match for the time they spend working on the grant-funded project.

CASH MATCH – Your Direct Financial Contribution

Your **cash match** is your organization's direct financial investment in the project. This shows that you're committed and that the grant is helping you expand your capacity.

Cash match can include:

- Salaries or wages of your staff **only for time spent working on this project** (e.g., a curator developing an exhibit, or a program coordinator planning an event)
- Organization-paid expenses related to the project (e.g., printing costs, venue rental)
- Any funds from your operating budget or other grants applied specifically to this project

Pro tip: Be specific. List staff roles, estimated hours, and project tasks. The clearer the connection, the stronger your match.

IN-KIND MATCH – Donated Goods or Services

In-kind match is the estimated value of non-cash resources donated to support your project.

Examples include:

- Volunteer time (use the established hourly rate; document hours and roles)
- Donated materials (e.g., paper, paint, historic artifacts for exhibit use)
- Donated professional services (e.g., a designer donating layout work)
- Donated space or equipment use (e.g., free use of a community room)

Pro tip: In-kind contributions must be relevant to the project and should be documented. Provide a short description and estimated fair market value. As you complete the project, keep a log of in-kind volunteer time and receipts from in-kind donations. You will need to submit these with your final report.

Other Project Expenses – Show the Full Picture

In addition to your grant request and required match, you may have other costs that are part of your overall project but are *not* covered by the grant or counted toward the required 1:1 match.

These are still important to include because they:

- Show that the project is well thought out and fully funded
- Help reviewers understand the true scope and scale of your project
- Demonstrate your organization's capacity to manage complex projects
- Help HM understand how much investment the grant is leveraging. Showing additional project costs demonstrates that the grant is just one part of a larger effort, reinforcing the value and impact of HM's support.

Other project-related costs should include funds:

- Paid from other sources (such as separate grants, organizational funds, or partner contributions)
- Not included in your match, because they're either not eligible or not being counted toward the required 1:1

Examples include the following:

- Staff time not directly related to the grant-funded portion (e.g., executive director oversight)
- Marketing or outreach beyond what is covered in the grant scope
- Additional phases of a multi-phase project (e.g., next year's exhibit installation after a research/planning phase)
- Overhead or admin support that enables the project (e.g., use of office space or admin staff not counted as in-kind)
- Related capital improvements not part of the grant scope

Pro Tip: List these costs in your budget under a separate "Other Project Expenses" category. Provide brief notes about how they will be funded or supported.

How to Build Your Budget

Use the official budget templates provided by MHAA/Heritage Montgomery. Follow instructions exactly.

- Expenses must match your narrative and project description.
- Include vendor quotes whenever possible to show that your budget is realistic.
- Use clear, realistic numbers. Include notes in the budget document or the budget narrative that explains how you arrived at your calculations.
- Your total income (grant request + match) must equal your total expenses.
- Clearly label cash vs. in-kind contributions in the match column.
- Don't inflate values to meet the match. Reviewers are looking for realistic, honest budgets that show careful planning.

SECTION 6: Final Steps Before Submission

Before you hit "submit," take a few steps to make sure your final proposal is polished, complete, and compliant. These small details can make a big difference.

Proofread Your Application

Read your full application carefully and then ask a colleague or collaborator to review it as well. A second set of eyes can catch missing details, awkward phrasing, or confusing sections.

Use the Application Checklist

Most grant programs, including MHAA and Heritage Montgomery, provide a checklist. Use it! It's the best way to confirm you've included everything required and haven't accidentally skipped a key document or question.

Check File Formats

Some forms must be submitted in specific formats, such as Word documents for the Mini-Grant budget. Double-check file types and naming conventions to avoid disqualification.

Submit Before the Deadline

Don't wait until the last minute. Build in time for technical issues, internal reviews, or final edits. Late submissions are rarely accepted.