What is A Letter of Intent/Inquiry and How Do I Write a Great One?

A **Letter of Intent/Inquiry** (LOI) is an opportunity to introduce your proposed project to a funder and to elicit feedback that hopefully leads to an invitation to submit a full proposal. A letter of inquiry is not a vague exploration of an idea. It should be well-conceived, and include a budget, although in an abbreviated form.

An LOI is often the first step in seeking support from private funding sources (i.e. corporations and foundation). Many will request an LOI as the first phase in a funding competition, only inviting to the full submission phase those applicants whose LOIs piqued their interest.

Technique

The Letter of Inquiry should be brief, but convincing. Use your words smartly. Avoid jargon and DO NOT simply copy and paste text written for a different application into your LOI – it is very rare that anything can be recycled verbatim, and this is particularly the case with an LOI where space is limited and impact is critical.

Write as if you are making a logical, persuasive argument based on need and capacity to meet that need, and be sure you are answering these critical questions:

- What is the problem?
- Why is it important to address this problem now?
- What is your solution?
- Why are you the one to do the proposed work?
- Why are they the best funder to support it?

The most compelling case for support directly relates your project to the funder's interests and perspective. Know what your potential funder is passionate about. Look at the funder's website, research the funder's interests and past interactions with your organization, review the organization's 990s. Address these interests in your Statement of Need and you will compel them to read on.

Contents of an LOI

A Letter of Inquiry is a condensed version of a full proposal, usually two to three pages, but sometimes as little as one page in length. If a funder specifies the format and length of an LOI, follow those directions and **do not** exceed the page limit.

In the absence of a funder-specified format, a typical LOI will include:

Opening Paragraph

This serves as your summary statement or abstract and should be able to stand alone. If the reviewer reads nothing else, he or she should understand your proposal idea from this paragraph.

The Opening Paragraph should answer the following questions:

- Who wants to do what?
- How much are you requesting and over what period?
- Is this a portion of a larger project cost?

The Opening Paragraph may indicate if the LOI is a response to an RFP or may make the connection between the foundation's interest and your project.

Keep this paragraph short. You will have time later for explaining your rationale, your methodology, and for establishing your credibility.

Statement of Need (1-2 paragraphs)

This section answers the "why" of the project.

Explain what issue you are addressing.

Articulate why you are responding to the issue(s) in the way that you have.

State briefly the importance of this project in the field in which you will be working.

Note who benefits.

Project Activity (The bulk of the document)

This section answers the "what" and "how" of the project.

Give a general overview of the activities involved. Give more detailed information to the degree that space allows.

Highlight why your approach is novel and merits special attention.

Indicate any collaborations with other organizations and what their roles will be, and be specific about who does what.

Anticipated Outcomes (1-2 paragraphs)

State the specific outcomes you plan to achieve.

Indicate how evaluation is part of the project – how will you know you have achieved these outcomes.

Credentials (1-2 paragraphs)

Demonstrate why your institution or your staff is best equipped to carry out this activity.

Put relevant historic background about the institution here.

Do not attach bios compiled for other opportunities (for example, NIH or NSF) as these are too long and follow a recognizable, federally-specified format. Instead, highlight information such as awards, rankings, and tangible measure that set you and your team apart from other applicants.

Budget (1-2 paragraphs)

State the total project cost and the amount requested from the funder. Indicate broad categories of activities to be funded. Include other sources of funding, both cash and in-kind. Especially

indicate what the university or school will contribute. Do not overlook the value of all in-kind contributions, including those of collaborators.

Closing (1 paragraph)

Offer to provide any additional needed information.

Give a contact name and contact information for follow-up. Indicate if one person is the administrative contact and another is the program contact.

Express appreciation for the reader's attention and/or the opportunity to submit if it is in response to a RFP.

Ask to submit a full proposal.

Signature

Generally it is best to have the highest ranking person available sign the letter. This indicates institutional support.