



GRANT STARTER CHECKLIST

10 THINGS TO DO BEFORE ANY APPLICATION

You don't have to chase every grant blind. This guide gives you the foundation to apply smarter, stronger, and with more confidence. Work through all 10 steps before you submit a single application — and watch your results improve. Each item includes expanded guidance, action steps, and pro tips from filmmaker Michelle A. Daniel.

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS GUIDE

The 10-Step Checklist	Pages 1–2
Common Grant Mistakes to Avoid	Page 3
Director's Statement Template	Page 3
Grant Research Tracker	Page 4

THE 10-STEP CHECKLIST

COMPLETE ALL STEPS BEFORE YOU SUBMIT ANYTHING

01 Know Your Project Inside & Out

Before you apply for anything, you need to be able to describe your project in one sentence — and in one paragraph. Grant reviewers read hundreds of applications. Clarity is your competitive edge. Vague language signals an underdeveloped project. Specificity signals readiness.

Your logline should answer: Who wants what, why can't they have it, and what's at stake? Your paragraph synopsis should expand on that with tone, setting, and what makes this story yours to tell.

ACTION STEPS:

- Write your logline (1 sentence)
- Write a 100-word synopsis
- Write a 250-word synopsis
- Test it on someone outside film — do they get it?

** Pro Tip: If you can't explain your film simply, the grant reviewer can't champion it in the room. Clarity IS credibility.*

02 Identify Your Project's Stage

Are you in development, pre-production, production, or post? Grants are entirely stage-specific. A development grant won't fund a film in post. A finishing fund won't accept a project that hasn't started shooting. Applying for the wrong stage is an instant disqualifier — and a wasted opportunity.

Be honest about where your project truly is. Overstating your progress (saying you're in pre-production when you're still writing) can backfire badly if your application is reviewed by someone who asks follow-up questions or requests materials you don't have.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Know your exact stage: dev / pre-pro / production / post**
- **Have your timeline mapped out (month by month)**
- **Know your budget total and what's been raised vs. what's needed**
- **Identify what THIS grant money would specifically fund**

** Pro Tip: Many grants ask 'what will this funding specifically enable?' Have a precise answer ready — not 'general production costs.'*

03 Research Eligibility Requirements

Every grant has criteria: citizenship, state residency, genre, budget cap, career stage, identity markers (woman-identifying, BIPOC, LGBTQ+), and sometimes even union status. Read every word of the guidelines. Don't skim. Missing one disqualifier means your application won't even be read.

Some grants are only open to first-time directors. Some require you to live in a specific state. Some are narrative-only or documentary-only. Some have hard budget caps — applying with a \$2M project to a fund capped at \$50K shows you didn't read the rules.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Read ALL eligibility requirements (not just the highlights)**
- **Confirm citizenship / residency requirements**
- **Note genre restrictions (narrative, doc, short, feature)**
- **Check career stage restrictions (emerging, mid-career, etc.)**
- **Flag any identity-based criteria that apply to you**

** Pro Tip: Build a simple spreadsheet. Grant name | Deadline | Eligibility notes | Amount | Status. It will save you hours.*

04 Gather Your Key Documents

Most grants require a core set of materials — and they always want them before you feel ready. Assemble everything in advance so deadline panic doesn't lead to rushed, sloppy submissions. A well-prepared applicant signals a well-organized filmmaker.

Common required documents include: filmmaker bio/CV, project synopsis (multiple lengths), full treatment or script draft, director's statement, line-item budget, production timeline, team bios, and letters of support. Some grants also want tax returns, fiscal sponsorship info, or incorporation docs.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Filmmaker bio (50, 100, and 250-word versions)**
- **Project synopsis (1 sentence, 100 words, 250 words)**
- **Treatment or script draft**
- **Director's statement (see template in this guide)**
- **Line-item budget**
- **Production timeline**
- **Team bios (producer, DP, key crew)**
- **Work sample link (Vimeo/Drive — password if needed)**

** Pro Tip: Keep a 'Grant Folder' in Google Drive or Dropbox. Update it every time you revise a document so you always have current versions ready.*

05 Prepare a Strong Work Sample

Your reel or work sample is often the FIRST thing a reviewer looks at — sometimes before they even read your synopsis. It needs to reflect your storytelling voice, your visual sensibility, and your ability to direct performances. A polished 3-minute clip beats a sloppy 20-minute cut every time.

Choose work that matches the tone and genre of the project you're applying for. If you're applying for a drama grant, don't lead with your comedy reel. If the grant is for a documentary, show doc work. Reviewers are trying to answer one question: Can this filmmaker actually execute this project?

ACTION STEPS:

- **Select work sample that matches your project's genre/tone**
- **Keep it under 5 minutes unless guidelines say otherwise**
- **Make sure the link works and is accessible (test it!)**
- **Include a password in your application if the link is protected**
- **Add a brief note in your application explaining what they're watching**

** Pro Tip: Watch your work sample as if you've never seen it. Does it feel like a filmmaker with a distinct voice? If you're not proud of it, curate it — show only your best 2 minutes.*

06 Write a Compelling Director's Statement

This is your WHY. Why this story? Why now? Why YOU? The director's statement is where reviewers decide if they believe in you. Your credentials matter less than your conviction. They're not just funding a project — they're funding a filmmaker.

The best statements are personal, specific, and urgent. They connect your life experience or artistic perspective to the story you're trying to tell. Generic statements that could apply to any film — and any filmmaker — are forgettable. Memorable statements make reviewers fight for your project in the room.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Draft your statement (see template in this guide)**
- **Answer: Why this story? Why now? Why you specifically?**
- **Include a personal connection or lived experience**
- **State the impact you want this film to have**
- **Keep it to 300-500 words unless otherwise specified**

** Pro Tip: Read your statement out loud. If it sounds like a press release, rewrite it. It should sound like a passionate human being — not a grant application.*

07 Build a Realistic Budget

A budget that's too low looks uninformed — like you've never actually produced anything. A budget that's too high looks reckless. Your budget needs to reflect real costs in your region, a real timeline, and a real understanding of what it takes to make YOUR specific film.

Grant reviewers often have producing experience. They know what things cost. Line items that are wildly off — in either direction — raise red flags. Show that you've done your homework. Break out your above-the-line, below-the-line, post costs, and contingency separately.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Research real costs for your region (crew rates, equipment, locations)**
- **Use a proper line-item format (not just categories)**
- **Include contingency (typically 10-15%)**
- **Show which costs are covered vs. still needed**
- **Align your budget with your timeline**

** Pro Tip: Organizations like Film Independent, Sundance Institute, and IFP offer budget templates. Use them as a starting point, then customize for your project.*

08 Identify Your Team (Even If It's Early)

Grants love to see that you're not working alone. Even early attachments — a producer, DP, casting director, or advisor — signal professional credibility and project viability. A filmmaker with no team looks like a passion project. A filmmaker with even 2-3 committed collaborators looks like a real production.

You don't need a full crew locked. You need key collaborators who believe in the project enough to attach their name. A seasoned producer attachment can elevate a first-time director's application significantly. Think strategically about who on your team adds credibility.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Identify your producer (even if informal at this stage)**
- **Attach a DP or key department head if possible**
- **List any advisors, mentors, or industry supporters**
- **Include brief bios for all attached team members**
- **Note any past collaborations that show your working relationship**

** Pro Tip: A diverse team — across gender, race, and background — is increasingly valued by funders who prioritize equity. This is both good ethics and good strategy.*

09 Understand the Review Process

Who actually reviews this grant? Peers? Industry professionals? A board of directors? Understanding your audience helps you write to them. A peer review panel of filmmakers wants to hear about craft and vision. A board of civic leaders wants to hear about community impact.

Also find out: Is it a blind review? Does your name or photo appear anywhere in the materials? How many rounds are there? Is there an interview stage? Do they share feedback? The more you know about the process, the better you can prepare — and the less likely you are to be caught off guard.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Research who sits on the review panel**
- **Find out if it's blind or non-blind review**
- **Understand the number of review rounds**
- **Ask if interviews or presentations are part of the process**
- **Note if they share reviewer feedback (always request it if they do)**

** Pro Tip: If you know someone who previously applied or received this grant, ask them about their experience. Insider knowledge about the process is invaluable.*

10

Set Your Calendar & Track Deadlines

Grant season has rhythms — many open in the fall and close in winter; others run on spring cycles. Missing a deadline by one day means waiting an entire year. And some grants quietly close early when they hit their submission cap. Your grant calendar is as important as your production calendar.

Don't just set one reminder the day before. Set a 30-day reminder to begin gathering materials, a 14-day reminder to draft your application, a 7-day reminder to review and revise, and a 48-hour final check. Build buffer time. Systems save careers.

ACTION STEPS:

- **Map all grant deadlines for the next 12 months**
- **Set 30-day, 14-day, 7-day, and 48-hour reminders**
- **Note if any grants have early-submission incentives or caps**
- **Block writing time in your calendar for each application**
- **Track submissions in your Grant Research Tracker (see page 4)**

** Pro Tip: Apply early whenever possible. Some grant portals crash on deadline day. Submitting with 48 hours to spare protects you from technical disasters.*

COMMON GRANT MISTAKES TO AVOID

LEARN FROM WHAT REVIEWERS SEE EVERY SINGLE CYCLE

X Applying Before You're Ready

Submitting an application with an unfinished script, a rough work sample, or a vague director's statement wastes your one chance at that funder for the year — sometimes longer. Readiness signals respect for the reviewer's time.

X Copy-Pasting Between Applications

Every grant has a different focus, audience, and set of values. A statement written for a social-impact documentary fund will fall flat when submitted to a narrative cinema grant. Customize every application. Even small tweaks make a big difference.

X Ignoring Word/Character Limits

Going over the limit tells reviewers you can't follow instructions. Going dramatically under signals you haven't done the work. Treat the word limit as a craft challenge — say exactly what needs to be said in exactly the space given.

X Weak or Mismatched Work Sample

Submitting work that doesn't represent your current skill level — or that doesn't match the tone of your proposed project — is one of the most common self-sabotaging mistakes. Your work sample is your audition. Treat it like one.

X Forgetting to Proofread

Typos, grammatical errors, and inconsistent formatting are red flags. They suggest carelessness — and if you're careless in an application, reviewers wonder if you'll be careless on set. Have at least one other person read your application before you submit.

X Not Following Up or Tracking Results

If you don't track which grants you applied to, what you submitted, and what the outcome was — you can't improve. Always request feedback when it's available. Rejection with notes is more valuable than silence.

X Treating the Budget as an Afterthought

A budget that doesn't add up, has unrealistic line items, or contradicts your timeline immediately undermines your application. Funders are investing in your ability to steward resources. Show them you know how money works.

X Missing the Relationship-Building Opportunity

Grant organizations are communities. Attend their events, workshops, and labs. Follow their social media. Many funded filmmakers had a relationship with the organization before they applied. Showing up matters.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT TEMPLATE

USE THIS FRAMEWORK TO BUILD YOUR STATEMENT FROM SCRATCH

A director's statement is not a synopsis. It's not a resume. It's your voice — your perspective — your WHY. Use the prompts below as building blocks. Write in first person. Be specific. Be honest. Aim for 300–500 words in your final draft.

PARAGRAPH 1 — THE HOOK

Open with something that pulls the reader in — a personal memory, a striking image, or a bold statement about why this story exists.

"The first time I [witnessed / experienced / heard about] _____, I knew it was a story that had to be told."

Note: Or: Start with a scene from real life that connects to your film's central theme.

PARAGRAPH 2 — THE PROJECT

Briefly describe your film — what it's about and what it's really about (the surface story vs. the deeper theme).

"[FILM TITLE] is a [genre] about [protagonist] who [central conflict]. At its core, it's a story about [theme / universal truth]."

Note: Keep this tight — 3–4 sentences. They've already read your synopsis.

PARAGRAPH 3 — WHY YOU

This is the most important paragraph. Why are you the right person to tell this story? What lived experience, perspective, or research makes you uniquely qualified?

"I come to this project because [personal connection / experience / community]. This story is not just one I want to tell — it's one I feel compelled to tell because [specific reason]."

Note: Be honest. Vulnerability and specificity are more powerful than credentials.

PARAGRAPH 4 — THE VISION

How do you plan to tell this story visually and tonally? What filmmakers, films, or art forms have shaped your approach?

"Visually, I am drawn to [aesthetic reference]. Tonally, the film will feel like [comparison]. I want audiences to feel [emotional experience] by the time the credits roll."

Note: Reference 1–2 films or directors intentionally — not to name-drop, but to help reviewers understand your sensibility.

PARAGRAPH 5 — THE IMPACT

Why does this film need to exist in the world right now? What do you hope it changes, opens, or starts?

"I believe this film has the power to [impact statement]. In a moment when [cultural context], stories like this one matter because [reason]."

Note: End with conviction. Leave the reviewer believing in you and in the project.

STATUS KEY

Researching	Still reviewing eligibility and requirements
Planning	Eligible — gathering materials
In Progress	Application actively being written
Submitted	Application sent — awaiting decision
Awarded	Funded!
Not Awarded	Declined — request feedback if available
Not Eligible	Does not match criteria this cycle

Want to go deeper?

ShowRunHer offers workshops, templates, community, and coaching to help you fund, develop, and produce your film on your own terms.

www.ShowRunHer.com