



# How to Write a Compelling Grant Proposal

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Great Lakes Restoration Community Grant  
Program (GLRCGP)

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# Training Objectives

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- Understand what GLRCGP is funding and why
- Learn how reviewers evaluate Letters of Intent (LOIs)
- Align projects with GLRI priorities and metrics
- **Overall:**
- This training will help you translate your *local environmental work* into a proposal that clearly aligns with **GLRI priorities, measurable outcomes, and community-led impact**, using the GLRCGP application itself as your roadmap.

# Understanding the Funder

- GLRCGP is funded through the EPA's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI)
- Focuses on community-driven environmental restoration
- Community-driven environmental restoration projects in the **Great Lakes Basin**
- Projects aligned with **Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Action Plan IV**
- Focus areas:
  - Invasive species
  - Nonpoint source pollution
  - Habitat and species restoration
- You are not just pitching a project—you are showing how your work advances **federal restoration metrics at the community level**
- Strong emphasis on measurable ecological outcomes

# Why the LOI Matters

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- The LOI is a competitive screening tool
- Used to assess alignment, readiness, and feasibility
- Strong LOIs are invited to submit full proposals
- **LOI ≠ Short Proposal**  
The Letter of Intent is used to assess:
  - Strategic fit with GLRI priorities
  - Project readiness and feasibility
  - Community leadership and partnerships
  - Whether your project can realistically scale to a full proposal
- **What I teach applicants:**  
Every answer in the LOI should make the reviewer say:
  - “This organization is prepared, aligned, and worth inviting to full proposal.”

# How Reviewers Read Your Proposal

- Is the environmental problem clearly defined and place-based?
  - Does the project align with GLRI measures of progress?
  - Is the project team credible and community-connected?
  - Is the scope realistic for the budget and timeline?
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- **Key mindset shift**  
Applicants often answer questions literally.  
Successful applicants answer questions **strategically**.
  - **Training approach:**  
For each section, we will cover:
    - What the question is asking
    - What reviewers are looking for
    - How to structure a strong response

# The Basics

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- **Who:** Who are you? Who are you serving? Who is your target audience?
- **What:** What are you doing? What is the purpose? What problem are you solving or attempting to solve? What are the goals, objectives, and outcomes? What level of impact will you make? What change do you seek in the long term? What partners will you be working with? What is their purpose?
- **When:** When is the project taking place? When do you plan to accomplish your outlined goals, objectives, and outcomes?
- **Where:** Where is your project taking place? Where are you located?
- **Why:** Why is this project important? Why should someone care about this? Why is this a need? Why is your proposed project the right project?
- **How:** How will you accomplish your outlined goals, objectives, and outcomes? How will you track it? How will you ensure success? How do you define what success is? How do others identify in real time your project is making an impact?

# Project Overview & Description

- **How I teach this section**
- Write the project description as a **1-minute elevator pitch**
- Clearly state:
  - Environmental problem
  - Location in the Great Lakes watershed
  - What will physically change as a result of the project
- Select the project phase honestly—reviewers look for **realistic pathways**, not ambition alone
- **Common pitfall:**  
Vague descriptions that don't clarify *what is actually happening on the ground*.
- **Application asks:**
- Project name
- Brief description
- Project phase (Pre-Implementation vs Implementation)
- Project location + maps
- Clear, descriptive project title
- Plain-language summary of what will happen
- Accurate project phase selection
- Specific location within the Great Lakes watershed

# Brief Description of Project Examples

## **Stronger Example**

- This project will install green infrastructure at priority runoff entry points and restore 14 acres of riparian habitat along the XYZ tributary to Lake Erie, reducing runoff-driven pollution and improving habitat connectivity while expanding equitable community access and stewardship

## **Bad Example**

- We want to improve the environment and make the community healthier by doing restoration work.

# Project Partners & Community Representation

- **Application asks for:**
- Project partners
- Roles and expertise
- Community representation
- **What reviewers are assessing**
- Are partners meaningful or symbolic?
- Does the team reflect the community impacted?
- Are partners integrated into the **budget and workplan?**
- **Training emphasis**
- Partners should:
  - Fill expertise gaps
  - Strengthen credibility
  - Share responsibility
- Community-led projects must show **shared decision-making**, not just outreach

# Writing a Strong Problem Statement

- **Application asks:**  
“Describe the problem or threat to the Great Lakes watershed ecosystem.”
- **How I teach applicants to write this**  
A strong problem statement:
  - Is **place-based**
  - Uses data *sparingly but effectively*
  - Connects environmental harm to community impact
- **Framework taught in training:**
  - What is happening?
  - Why does it matter environmentally?
  - Why does it matter to *this* community *now*?
  - Think: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How?

# Problem Statement Example

## Bad Example

- Stormwater and invasive species are problems in the Great Lakes and we need to address them.

## Stronger Example

- In the XYZ watershed, untreated stormwater runoff from increased impervious surfaces enters the tributary during rain events, accelerating erosion and transporting nutrients and sediment to Lake Erie. Invasive riparian plants further destabilize banks and reduce habitat quality, degrading nearshore conditions and limiting safe recreation for nearby residents.

# Impact & Sustainability

- Describe tangible environmental outcomes
- Tie outcomes directly to GLRI metrics
- Explain how impact continues beyond the grant period
- Avoid one-time or short-term framing

# Impact Statement & Sustainability

- **Application asks:**
- Ultimate impact
- How impact will be sustained
- **Reviewer lens**
- Does the project produce measurable change?
- Will benefits last beyond the grant period?
- **Training guidance**  
Applicants learn to:
- Tie impact directly to GLRI metrics
- Avoid vague language like “raise awareness”
- Describe **maintenance, policy change, capacity-building, or stewardship** plans that extend impact beyond funding

# Impact Statement Example

## Stronger Example

- The project will reduce an estimated 1.8 million gallons of stormwater runoff annually, stabilize 1.6 miles of streambank, and restore 14 acres of habitat—directly advancing GLRI measures related to runoff reduction, stream restoration, and invasive species control. Benefits will be sustained through a funded maintenance plan and stewardship agreements

## Bad Example

- This project will help water quality and benefit residents.

# GLRI Alignment

- **How I teach alignment**
- Start with the GLRI measure first
- Design the project *around* that metric
- Clearly show how activities → outputs → GLRI outcomes
- **Key warning to applicants:**  
Projects focused **only** on education or workforce are not competitive unless tied to environmental outcomes.
- **Application requires selection of GLRI measures**  
Examples:
  - Acres restored
  - Phosphorus reduction
  - Stormwater runoff reduced
  - Stream or shoreline miles restored

# Stakeholders & Community-Led Approach

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- **Application asks:**
- Who benefits
- How the project is community-led
- **Training focus**  
Applicants learn to:
- Identify **direct vs indirect beneficiaries**
- Explain how community voices shaped the project
- Show ongoing engagement, not one-time input
- **Strong proposals demonstrate:**
- Community members as co-creators
- Local leadership embedded in planning and execution

# Stakeholders & Community-Led Approach Example

## **Stronger Example**

- Community partners and residents co-designed project priorities through listening sessions and site walks, which directly informed site selection, access improvements, and stewardship strategies. A community advisory group will meet quarterly, and partner stipends are budgeted for outreach, translation, and stewardship coordination

## **Bad Example**

- We will talk to the community about the project and get feedback.

# Workplan & Deliverables

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- **Application requires:**
- Clear purpose and goals
- Scope of work
- Principal tasks, deliverables, timelines
- **How I teach this section**  
Applicants are guided to:
- Think like a project manager
- Break work into logical phases
- Match tasks directly to budget line items
- **Reviewer red flag:**  
A workplan that sounds aspirational but not operational.

# Project Readiness

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- **Application asks for:**
- Status of design, hiring, procurement, permitting
- **What reviewers want to see**
- Evidence that the project can start on time
- Awareness of regulatory and logistical realities
- **Training emphasis**  
Applicants learn to:
- Be honest about what's completed vs planned
- Demonstrate momentum without overstating readiness

# Engagement Strategy

- **Application asks:**
- Primary audiences
- Engagement and communication strategies
- **How I coach applicants**
- Engagement must be intentional and resourced
- Activities must appear in:
  - Workplan
  - Budget
- **Strong proposals show**
- Multiple audiences
- Tailored communication strategies
- Equity-centered engagement methods

# Budget Strategy

- Use correct federal cost categories
  - Include all partner-related costs
  - Account for rising construction and material costs
  - Consider indirect costs and working capital advances
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- Budgets must be:
    - Realistic
    - Defensible
    - Aligned with tasks
  - Common mistakes:
    - Underestimating costs
    - Misclassifying construction-related work
    - Forgetting partner costs

# What Makes a Proposal Compelling

- One cohesive, easy-to-follow narrative
  - Strong alignment with GLRI priorities
  - Credible partners and implementation team
  - Realistic scope, timeline, and budget
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- **Across all sections, strong proposals:**
  - Tell one cohesive story
  - Use consistent language
  - Align problem → solution → metrics → budget
  - Reflect preparedness and community trust

# Final Takeaway

- Strong proposals clearly show how community-led action
- Creates measurable restoration outcomes
- That benefit both ecosystems and people