ILLINOIS
INNOVATION
VOUCHERS

HOW TO
IMPROVE YOUR
VOUCHER
APPLICATION

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ILLINOIS SCIENCE &
TECHNOLOGY COALITION
from idea to impact

Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

Tips from the Review Panel

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR VOUCHER APPLICATION

Your application wasn't selected for funding this round—but that doesn't mean your project lacks potential.

This guide is based on real feedback from reviewers and includes common pitfalls to avoid, and practical ways to strengthen your application before you resubmit.

Tips from the Review Panel
DOS & DON'TS

1. COMPLETE EVERY SECTION (AND USE OUR TEMPLATES)

✅ **DO**
fill out each section of the narrative and budget templates provided by ISTC.

❌ **DON'T**
skip sections like Project Description, Timeline, or Personnel. Don't reuse a proposal written for a different funder.

💡 **Why it matters**
When applicants skip required pieces or use non-ISTC templates, it signals a lack of alignment. Even a strong idea can fall short if reviewers don't have the information they need to evaluate it.

Tip
This program has specific goals and criteria. Applications written for federal or other state programs usually miss key elements we're looking for.

2. USE VOUCHER FUNDS FOR THE RIGHT PIECES OF THE PROJECT

✅ **DO**
show us the full scope of your project—even parts the voucher won't fund.

❌ **DON'T**
ask the voucher to cover costs outside the program's guidelines (like equipment, marketing, or IP work).

💡 **Why it matters**
We do want to understand the full scope of your project, but we need to be clear about which parts the voucher is funding. Reviewers are looking to see how voucher-eligible activities fit within the broader plan.

Tip
Think of the voucher as one tool in your toolbox. Show us how you'll use it strategically, alongside your other resources. Additionally, make sure you use the accepted and unaccepted uses of the voucher table that sits on the website.

DOS & DON'TS

3. BREAK DOWN YOUR BUDGET—AND JUSTIFY IT CLEARLY

✅ **DO**
give detailed explanations for each budget item. Break them down into specific components and tell us how you got your cost estimates.

❌ **DON'T**
lump costs together in vague categories like "supplies" or "personnel" without explanation.

💡 **Why it matters**
Budget justifications often separate strong applications from average ones. They give reviewers confidence that you understand your project, know what it will cost, and have thought through how to execute it.

Example
Instead of "Supplies – $5,000," say "Charcoal filters (20 @ $15), pipettes (3 packs @ $250), testing reagents (quote attached)."

4. CLEARLY DEFINE THE ROLES OF THE COMPANY AND THE UNIVERSITY

✅ **DO**
explain how your company and the university are working together—who is doing what, and when.

❌ **DON'T**
treat the university as an afterthought or leave their contributions vague.

💡 **Why it matters**
Reviewers need to see a well-thought-out collaboration. The university isn't just a service provider—they're a technical partner. Be specific about how that partnership functions across the project.

Tip
Use the Project Timeline section to show who is leading each phase. In the Participating Personnel section, identify the key team members from both the company and the university, along with their roles and level of effort.

Bonus Tip
The budget can also reinforce this clarity. If we see university personnel listed with associated effort, it shows us that the partnership is real and intentional—not just a letter of support.

DOS & DON'TS

5. CONNECT THE DOTS TO IMPACT

✅ **DO**
explain how this project will move your business forward and why it matters.
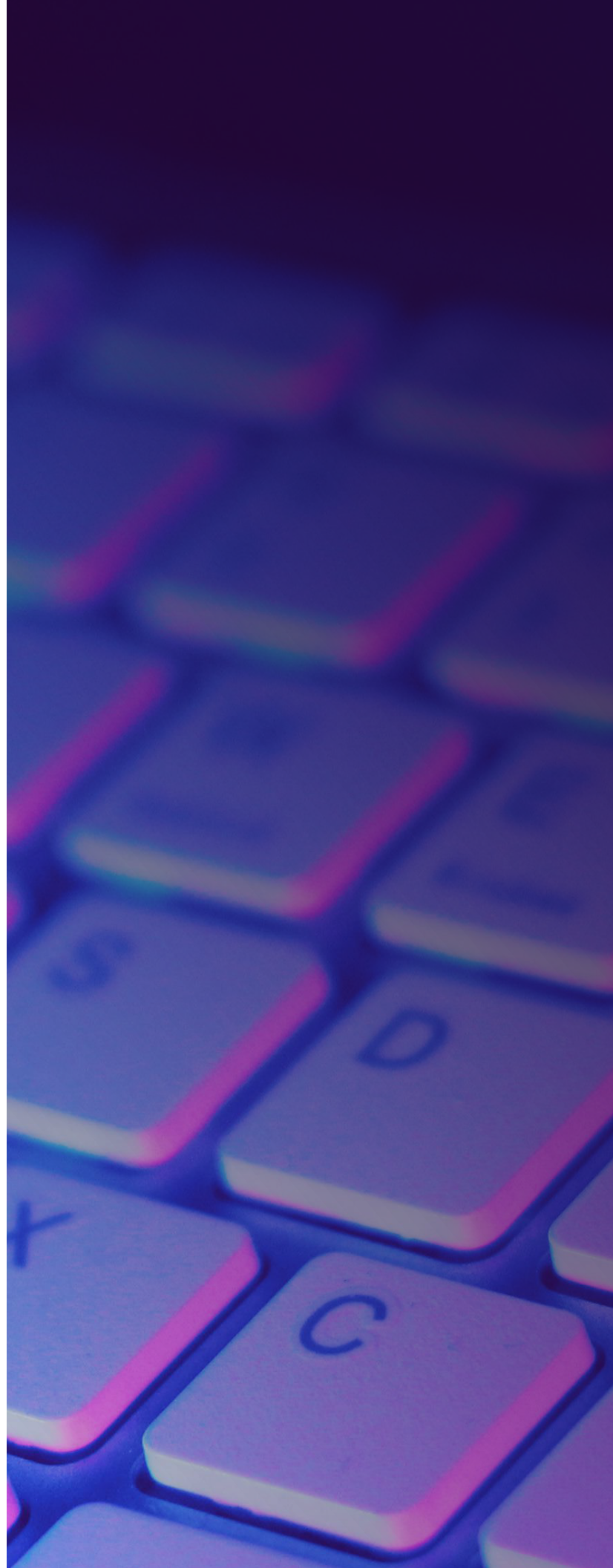
❌ **DON'T**
leave out the bigger picture, or assume we'll figure it out.

💡 **Why it matters**
Reviewers want to see that you've thought about both the technical and business outcomes. A good application shows how this project is part of a bigger effort to scale, launch, or improve a product.

FINAL TIP:

REVIEW BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

Before resubmitting, ask yourself:

- Have I clearly described the technical challenge and how we'll tackle it?

- Did I complete all sections using the correct templates?

- Does the budget align with the scope—and is it explained well?

- Did I provide enough context for someone outside my company to understand the project?

- Did I use the budget to reinforce how the project will be carried out—who's doing what, when, and with what resources?

- Are links, quotes, or sources included to back up major costs or technical claims?

- Would a reviewer with no prior knowledge walk away understanding what this project is, how it works, and why it's worth funding?

We encourage you to reapply. A clear, complete, and specific application—aligned with program goals and focused on research—has a much better shot.