National Endowment for the Arts Big Read FAQ

What types of programs or initiatives does the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grant support?

National Endowment for the Arts Big Read supports nonprofit and community organizations across the country in developing community-wide reading programs that encourage reading and participation by diverse audiences. These programs include activities such as author readings, book discussions, art exhibits, lectures, film series, music or dance events, theatrical performances, panel discussions, and other events and activities related to the community's chosen book. Activities focus on one book from the Big Read library.

What do organizations receive if they are selected to participate in the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read?

Selected organizations receive grants ranging from $5,000 to $30,000 to support their Big Read projects. Prior to starting their projects, Big Read grant recipients participate in a series of online activities to prepare them to host and promote the Big Read in their communities. Online presentations include grant award management and question-and-answer sessions featuring past grantees and experts on a wide variety of topics. Big Read grantees also have access to resources to help them conduct a successful program and downloadable public relations templates.

Can we choose any book to use for our National Endowment for the Arts Big Read?

The list of books available for National Endowment for the Arts Big Read programming changes each year and can be found in the Big Read library. Applicants that have received a Big Read grant in the past must choose a different reading selection from any previous awards.

How are books selected for the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read library?

Suggestions for new titles are collected from a variety of sources, such as Big Read grantees, past Big Read panelists, literary arts administrators, and readers from around the country. Books are selected for the program based on criteria including the capacity to incite lively and deep discussion; the capacity to expand the range of voices, stories, and genres represented in

our Big Read library; the capacity to interest lapsed and reluctant readers and/or to challenge avid readers and introduce them to new voices; and the capacity to inspire innovative programming for communities.

Who is eligible to apply for an National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grant?

Applicant organizations for NEA Big Read must be a 501c3 nonprofit; a division of state, local, or tribal government; or a tax-exempt public library. Eligible applicants include organizations such as arts centers, arts councils, arts organizations, colleges and universities, community service organizations, environmental organizations, fairs and festivals, faith-based organizations, historical societies, housing authorities, humanities councils, libraries, literary centers, museums, theater companies, trade associations, and tribal governments.

Local education agencies, school districts, and state and regional education agencies are also eligible applicants. We do not fund individual elementary or secondary schools—charter, private, or public—directly. Schools may participate as partners in projects for which another eligible organization applies. If a single school is also a local education agency, as is the case with some charter schools, the school may apply with documentation that supports its status as a local education agency.

Is our organization eligible even though we're not located in the Midwest?

Absolutely. As an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest, NEA Big Read grants are open to organizations across the nation. Since the program's inception in 2006, NEA Big Read activities have reached every Congressional district in the country.

Can individuals apply for National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grant funding?

No. Applicants for National Endowment for the Arts Big Read must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization; a division of state, local, or tribal government; or a tax-exempt public library.

Individuals can still participate in or benefit from Big Read by exploring books in the program, using related materials such as author bios, book descriptions, or finding programming through the list of awarded grants.

When does the application open and when is the deadline?

Each October, Arts Midwest posts a new set of Guidelines and Application Instructions and opens the online application. Applications are due at the end of January. Award notifications

occur in May and organizations conduct their National Endowment for the Arts Big Read programming at any point between September and June.

How are organizations selected to participate in the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read?

Organizations chosen to receive a grant are selected by a panel of outside experts not affiliated with Arts Midwest or the National Endowment for the Arts who review the proposed projects for artistic excellence and merit. Competitive applications demonstrate strong literary programming, experience in building effective local partnerships, reaching and engaging new and diverse audiences, working with educators, involving local and state public officials, and working with media. Geographic spread of grantees may be taken into consideration.

If we are not awarded a grant, can we apply again next year?

Yes, we encourage you to submit another application. If your first attempt at grant funding is not fruitful, for whatever reason, it will not negatively impact your likelihood of receiving a grant award for the next grant cycle.

How do we know if our organization is ready to apply?

If your organization has never applied or received federal funding, it is important to keep in mind that the grant application process, management process, and reporting requirements take some time and effort. Eligible organizations must be able to demonstrate their ability to effectively manage federal funding. We make every effort to ensure that applicants have adequate resources and information during each stage of the granting process.

What are the program requirements?

No two National Endowment for the Arts Big Read programs are alike, and we encourage grantees to think creatively about how to promote active reading and learning in their communities. However, we do require certain types of programs that can be found in the application guidelines. Several requirements can be met in a single event.

Programming for the 2027-2028 grant cycle will center around the theme “Read Like a Champion: Celebrating Great American Sports Stories.”

How do we begin planning our National Endowment for the Arts Big Read?

Before you begin planning your National Endowment for the Arts Big Read, we recommend that you assemble a planning committee made up of individuals with knowledge and experience in diverse areas that will contribute to your program’s goals. As the program committee develops these goals, you may want to start by thinking about the types of

programs with which your organization has already had success and the audiences with which you have already established relationships. Your Big Read could be a good opportunity to strengthen and expand these programs and relationships, and promote reading and active learning. Also, consider thinking beyond what your organization has done in the past. Your community boasts many assets. Be sure to look first at these assets and consider how to best leverage them in your effort to engage your community in literary-based programming. Don't place the burden of programming on one organization, if possible, have multiple organizations hosting events.

Do we need to partner with other organizations in our community?

Partnerships are strongly encouraged as they can expand the impact of your National Endowment for the Arts Big Read program and increase your capacity to deliver community-wide literary events and activities. The benefits of partnerships are many; most can bring additional resources, along with new or different ideas and perspectives, and can result in long-term relationships that last well beyond your Big Read.

Where do we find ideas for programming?

Your National Endowment for the Arts Big Read should promote active reading and learning in your community and you are the expert at determining what that should look like. Just like every community is different, so is every Big Read. What makes your community unique? What role does your organization play in your community? Ask yourselves how you can best utilize community assets and your organization's history of past programming success.

After you've done a thorough assessment of your organization and the assets and resources in your community, it may be helpful to do online research and find examples of literary-based activities and events that other organizations have delivered.

You can find articles on best practices for grant applications, ideas for programming, and other helpful tips and tricks in Arts Midwest's Guides and Tools.

Do we have to include an author visit as part of our National Endowment for the Arts Big Read?

No, author visits are not a requirement of the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grant. While some organizations do choose to use author visits to fulfill the keynote event requirement of the grant, there are a number of other events that you could consider for a keynote. Past grantees, for example, have hosted talks from scholars who have studied the title, delivered speeches by people associated with the author or book, and presented panel discussions with local luminaries.

If we would like to invite an author to speak as part of our programs, where can we find contact information?

Contact information for National Endowment for the Arts Big Read authors and their publicity agents is available from the grants team at Arts Midwest. If you are considering an author visit as part of your programming, please be aware that honoraria and availability vary by individual. Please contact us at grants@artsmidwest.org for more information. A visit from the author of the Big Read book is not required.

Are there any unallowable costs or pitfalls we should watch out for?

Costs to present or attend sporting events, participate in physical fitness classes, or purchase or rent sports equipment for recreational (not programmatic) use are NOT allowable. Also be mindful that certain expenses like prizes are unallowable. View the full list of unallowable expenses for federal funds here.