2027-2028 National Endowment for the Arts Big Read

Application Guidelines

About this Opportunity

Through $5,000 to $30,000 cost-share grants to non-profit organizations, this opportunity supports community reading programs designed around a single National Endowment for the Arts Big Read book and a common theme.

The theme of this year's program is "Read Like a Champion: Celebrating Great American Sports Stories." Honoring of the role of sports in American culture, the 18 books in the Big Read Library invite communities to explore themes of competition and teamwork, perseverance and resilience, self-discovery and well-being, and the unique ways in which sports bring us together. Spanning poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and graphic literature—and set everywhere from playing fields to ice rinks, basketball courts to open water, boxing rings to bowling alleys—these books illuminate sports as both a deeply personal pursuit and as a shared collective experience.

These awards require a nonfederal cost-share of 1 to 1.

Programming must take place between September 1, 2027, and June 30, 2028.

How to Apply at a Glance

1. Read the Guidelines

Download a copy of the guidelines, which includes all the application questions.

2. Prepare Your Application

Visit our grants portal, SmartSimple, to begin this process.

3. Complete the Application Form

Phase 1 (Eligibility Review) is due January 12, 2027, at 12:00 pm (noon) Central Time.
Phase 2 (Full Proposal) is due January 26, 2027, at 12:00 pm (noon) Central Time.

Accessibility

We want this opportunity to be accessible to all and will work with applicants who need to use other means to apply. Alternative application options may include, but are not limited to:

- Using an adapted form in Microsoft Word (available upon request)
- Sharing a video application (available upon request)
- Working over the phone with a grants manager on any questions about the application

Please contact Arts Midwest as early as possible with accessibility requests. We may not be able to accommodate requests made after January 5, 2027. The team can be reached at grants@artsmidwest.org, or you can sign up to attend an informational session or office hours (see schedule and details below in 'Timeline' section).

You may also enlist assistance from another person to complete the application. Please see the "How to Use SmartSimple" section for more information.

Eligibility

Who Should Apply?

- 501c3 non-profit U.S. organizations and other federally tax-exempt entities including, but not limited to: universities/colleges, school districts, public libraries, tribal organizations, museums, and community service organizations.
- Within United States, U.S. Territories, or the Native Nations and communities that share this geography.
- Focused on driving community engagement: Project grants, requiring a 1 to 1 cost share, ranging from $15,000 - $30,000 to support community-wide reading programs.
- With a UEI: Organizations will need to have a UEI number from SAM.gov in order to receive funding. Apply for a free UEI at SAM.gov.
- In good standing: Organizations must not have overdue reports or funding restrictions with Arts Midwest.
- In compliance with Federal requirements: These funds originate with the National Endowment for the Arts and require that applicants comply with federal eligibility requirements and the National Endowment for the Arts' Assurance of Compliance.

What is the Timeline?

Date	Activity
January 12, 2027	Phase 1 (Eligibility Review) due

January 26, 2027	Phase 2 (Full Proposal) due
February - April 2027	Panel review
May 2027	Award notifications
September 1, 2027 – June 30, 2028	Project period

What are the Project Requirements?

Each Big Read project must meet these requirements:

1. Feature a book from this year's National Endowment for the Arts Big Read library.

There are 18 books on this year's list. You must select one of these titles for your programming. Grantees may program multiple books from this list, however, you must select one title as the primary title for your programming.

In your application, you will be asked to describe why you chose the book, how the book and the theme resonate with your community, and how the book and the theme will be included or reflected in community activities.

The National Endowment for the Arts Big Read is an initiative intended for adult audiences. Applicants who wish to extend the reach of their programming to local schools and other youth audiences should:

- Choose a title on the Big Read list that is age-appropriate for those audiences.
- Select a companion title that aligns with your primary Big Read selection and conduct programming around that companion title for younger audiences. These companion titles may be of your choosing but must relate to the primary text thematically.

2. Engage with community partners

Each National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grantee must work in collaboration with local partners and artists to develop, conduct, and promote engaging literary and artistic programs that illuminate the book and theme.

These partners are required:

- A library, unless the applicant itself is a library. Higher education applicants must partner with a library that is not directly affiliated with their institution.

- At least one community organization or group that expands the applicant's existing audience to include new participants of various abilities, backgrounds, education levels, and occupations.

Each applicant will be asked to describe its intended partners, the role each partner will play, and whether these partnerships are confirmed or pending. Examples of community organization partnerships include: YMCAs, schools, parent/teacher associations, parks and recreation departments, places of worship, unions, Kiwanis, Lions Clubs, local historical societies, etc.

3. Offer events and activities related to the theme and chosen book

National Endowment for the Arts Big Read programs vary and can be as short as a week or as long as several months. Beyond discussions of the book, organizations may choose to include a kick-off event, invite the author for a visit, or have other events inspired by the content and themes of the book. These may include panel discussions, lectures, film screenings, art exhibitions, theatrical and musical performances, poetry slams, writing workshops and contests, and community storytelling events.

We encourage you to be imaginative with your programming. At a minimum, applicants must include the following in their plan:

- One (1) public kick-off event to launch the program (e.g., a book giveaway, mayoral proclamation, etc.).
- At least three (3) book discussions.
- At least one (1) presentation inspired by the book (e.g., a Q&A with the author, panel discussion, lecture, film screening).
- At least one (1) artistic project or activity that engages the community and/or responds creatively to the theme and, if applicable, your chosen book (e.g., a visual art exhibition, theatrical performance, concert, poetry slam). *Murals, as well as costs to present or attend sporting events, participate in physical fitness classes, or purchase or rent sports equipment for recreational use, are not allowable.

Several of these requirements can be met in one event (e.g., a presentation inspired by the book could include a book discussion.). Events and activities may take place virtually and/or in-person, must be conceived with accessibility in mind for participants of all abilities, and must strive to reach audiences with limited access to the arts.

Applicants will be asked to describe their target audiences, plans for reaching underserved audiences, and plans for promoting their programming throughout their community.

Grant Awards

In total, Arts Midwest will be awarding $1,476,500 in project grants through the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read this year. We anticipate making approximately 65 grants.

Applicants may request a grant between $5,000 and $30,000.

These grants are federal funds that derive from the National Endowment for the Arts. Project budgets must show at least a one-to-one cost-share, or match, for the requested amount.

To demonstrate the cost share, your expenses should be at least double your grant request.

If you are unfamiliar with federal grants or matching budgets, we recommend reading our three-part guide on Understanding Federal Grant Requirements before applying.

Funds used for your cost share may include:

- Staff salaries and wages
- Volunteer time and in-kind contributions
- Donations, non-federal grants, and ticket revenue
- Cash contributions from the applicant or partners.

Federal funds cannot be used as your cost share.

Eligible expenses

Project budgets must include only eligible expenses. Eligible expenses are those that directly relate to conducting your program.

Examples of eligible expenses include, but are not limited to:

- Speaker and artist fees
- Book purchases
- Supply costs
- Promotional fees
- Project staff salaries
- Venue rentals
- Other expenses directly related to conducting your program

Ineligible expenses

Please do not include unallowable costs in your budget. Unallowable costs include, but are not limited to:

- Refreshments, concessions, food, and alcohol
- Fellowships or cash prizes
- Purchase of capital equipment
- Overlapping project costs between federal awards, whether received directly from a federal agency or indirectly, such as through a state agency or other entity
- Entertainment costs, such as opening parties, receptions, or fundraisers designed to raise funds for your own organization and on behalf of another person, organization, or cause
- Costs to present or attend sporting events, participate in physical fitness classes, or purchase or rent sports equipment for recreational use

Awards are federally funded, so all costs must be allowable per 2 CFR 200, also known as the Uniform Guidance.

How to Use SmartSimple

Arts Midwest uses SmartSimple grants portal for applications. You must register in the system before you apply, if you are a new user. Please follow the steps below to complete your registration and your application.

Step 1: Registration (for new users only)

1. Register in our SmartSimple grants portal
2. On the registration page, click "Registered Non-profit Organization."
3. Input your information.
4. Once you have filled out your registration and submitted, you will receive an email with a login link. Click on the login link.
5. The link will take you to a screen where you will create a new password for your account. Then click submit.
6. Once you have created the password, you will receive a verification code in your email. Copy the verification code from that email, and paste in the box on the login page.
7. Now you're in the SmartSimple portal! Make sure your profile is correct. Go to the top right corner with your name letter symbol and click on Personal Profile. Confirm the info is correct from your registration.

Step 2: Application

Navigate to the Organization Portal Home. To begin the application, click on "Begin a new application." Click "Apply Now" on NEA Big Read 2027-2028.

1. Click save and begin your application.

Application Questions

Application Phase 1: Eligibility Review (Due January 12, 2027)

Questions and requirements:

- Applicant organization details (EIN, UEI number from SAM.gov, annual operating budget, mission statement, organization location information, etc)
- Primary contact information
- How did you hear about this opportunity?
- Publicity name
- Short summary of project activities (100 words)
- Brief description of the project (250 words)
- Have you received a grant from Arts Midwest before?
    - (yes/no)
- What is the population of the city where you are located?
    - (0-9,999; 10,000-49,999; 50,000+)
- Is your organization based in or within 25 miles of a city with a population of 50,000+?
    - (yes/no)
- Project start and end dates (must be between 9/1/2027 – 6/30/2028)
- Chosen Big Read book
- Approximately how many books you intend to order for your programming?
- Grant request amount
- Provide a rationale for your chosen Big Read book and your plans for using the theme in your programming. (400 words)
- Did your organization expend $1,000,000 or more in federal funds during your most recent fiscal year? (yes/no)
    - If yes, please provide your most recently completed Single Audit financial statement. (upload field)
- Please provide your most recently completed Financial Statement Audit.
- Within the last three years, has your organization experienced any of the following related to grant funding?

    - Single and/or Financial Statement Audit findings, Repayment of grant funds, Revocation of a grant award, Corrective action required by a funder (select all that apply)
        - Please briefly describe the issues and any corrective actions taken (text field)
- If grant funds are provided on a reimbursement basis, does your organization have the financial capacity to pay project expenses before requesting reimbursement?
    - (yes/no)
- Please review the following assurances, which are current as of September 14, 2026. If funded, you will need to comply with these assurances.

Application Phase 2: Full Proposal (Due January 26, 2027)

Once Arts Midwest reviews your eligibility from Phase 1, you can move on to Phase 2.

Summary and statistics for proposed activities

- Proposed number of partner organizations
- Proposed number of book discussions
- Proposed total number of events (including book discussions)
- Anticipated adults served
- Anticipated youths served

Narrative Questions

1. Describe your organization's history and achievements. (400 words)
2. Provide a description of your programming. (700 words)
    - Describe your programming plans in detail, including types of activities and locations, the involvement of local talent (e.g., writers, artists from other disciplines, teachers, field experts) and art works (e.g., companion books, films, visual art, etc.). Please do not include murals in your project plan or costs to present or attend sporting events, participate in physical fitness classes, or purchase or rent sports equipment for recreational use. Be sure that your plans meet the minimum project requirements.
    - Explain how your programs meet your goals and the goals of the Big Read: to inspire meaningful conversations, celebrate local creativity, elevate a variety of voices and perspectives, and build stronger connections in each community. Explain how you plan to assess those goals to determine if they are met.
3. Provide a description of project partners. (500 words)
    - Describe your partnerships with libraries (as applicable) and community organizations. Indicate if these are new partnerships or describe your history of working with these partners.

- Explain the role each partner will play in your program.

4. Provide a description of community outreach. (500 words)
    - Describe the community you plan to reach with your programming and explain how you will engage individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, income levels, and abilities.
    - Describe how you will make your proposed activities accessible to people with disabilities.

Other required information

- Project Budget
- Additional details about your budget (optional)
- Did you use AI to help you complete your application?
    - If yes, please describe how you used AI.
    - Applicants may use AI in editing or proofreading narratives. Arts Midwest does not allow AI-generated artwork to be submitted as part of an application.

Review Criteria

Applications are reviewed by an independent panel using four equally weighted criteria:

- Artistic excellence and merit of programming.
- Depth of audience engagement.
- Planning for success.
- Resource management.

Geographic spread of final awards will also be considered.

Reporting and Crediting Requirements

Grantees must submit:

- An activity listing at least 30 days before the project begins.
- A final report within 30 days after project completion. To view final report requirements, check out this Guide.

All funded projects must acknowledge both the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts Midwest in promotional materials.

Drop-in Office Hours or Webinar Info

Before applying, review the Frequently Asked Questions.

Applicants are also welcome to attend Office Hours:

- 11am-12pm CST, Tuesday, November 17, 2026. Sign up here.
- 1-2pm CST, Wednesday, December 2, 2026. Sign up here.
- 1-2pm CST, Tuesday, December 15, 2026. Sign up here.
- 10-11am CST, Wednesday, January 6, 2027. Sign up here.

If you are unable to join the office hours, please send your questions to grants@artsmidwest.org

Other Guides, Tools, Resources

Here is a list of helpful resources for planning and conducting your National Endowment for the Arts Big Read.

Arts Midwest Resources

- National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Frequently Asked Questions
- Understanding your Federal Award Requirements
- How to Build your Federal Award Budget
- Reporting on your Federal Award
- Five Tips for Linking Sports and Big Read Programming

Sample applications

- Sample Application 1: Gateway Regional Arts Center
- Sample Application 2: Delaware Division of Libraries
- Sample Application 3: Teatro Yerbabruja

Accessibility Resources

- Section 504 Self-Evaluation Workbook
- Arts Midwest's Accessibility Center

Crediting and Visibility

- Downloadable Logos for crediting.

Other Resources

- Bulk Book Orders – Need a place to start for buying bundles of books? This document contains information for a few different options.
- National Endowment for the Arts Big Read on arts.gov – Find content about the Big Read books and authors.
- SmartSimple Registration Instructions
- Getting a UEI from SAM.gov Instructions

Contact

For any questions, please email grants@artsmidwest.org.