

Tips from NIH reviewers on writing successful applications

Know your obligations as an applicant

- Your obligation is to convince the reviewer that you:
 - Are addressing an important problem
 - Can do the work
 - Have a deep and unbiased perspective on the problem
 - Are the most suited investigator to do the work
- You must clearly lay out your proposal within the page limits
 - The reviewer has no obligation to evaluate *anything* outside of the page limits, but most reviewers will examine the appendixes
 - Only a few reviewers will read background articles to understand your topic
- Grantsmanship is very important
 - Follow the instructions exactly
 - Make sure all the parts fit together (no room for a “Franken-grant”)
 - Make the document look attractive
- **MAKE YOUR WORK EXCITING**
 - Bored reviewers don’t give good scores

Keep it simple

- Write precisely and concisely
 - Remind yourself that *nobody* really wants to read the application
 - Avoid the verbosity that plagues most scientific writing
 - More often ends up meaning less
- Be judicious about the background material that is included
 - Grants are not review articles
 - Include only the key information needed to understand the actual grant that is being proposed
- Be judicious about the preliminary data you include
 - Do not try to awe the reviewer with huge amounts of data
 - Include only the key information needed to understand the actual grant that is being proposed
 - Guide the reviewer to the conclusion you wish them to reach
 - Be liberal in referencing pertinent supporting articles
- Limit the amount of experimental detail
 - Use published references to describe technical details, but keep the essential aspects of the experimental descriptions

Know what goes on in a study section

- Each reviewer will have ~10 grants to read
 - Your grant is *not* special
 - Only 1 of the 3 reviewers assigned to your grant is likely to be a member of your narrow specialty
 - Write the grant so it is exciting to both a specialist and someone from a more distant specialty
- Each grant is considered by the committee for only 10-15 minutes
 - Usually only 3 people will read the whole grant
 - Most of the committee will read the abstract, and many will read the specific aims
 - The abstract/aims will often be read while the reviewers are listening to the primary reviewer, so make your points stand out by structuring the text
- Irritating just one person on the committee is enough to sink your grant
 - Don't exaggerate
 - Be evenhanded when discussing controversial issues
- Only 1 grant in each reviewer's stack will be funded on average
 - Give the reviewer a reason to push your grant over all the others