The NIH Grant Review Process – Knowing Your Audience and How They Approach a Very Difficult Task

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Why so much focus on grant reviewing before talking about grant writing?

In science we write for reviewers. To be a successful writer you have to start from an understanding of:

- What reviewers are used to seeing
- What they want to see
- The criteria they are using to judge what they read
- Their likely approaches to their task

Your task is to turn the reviewer into your advocate:

- Make the work of the reviewer as simple as possible
- Convince them your work is very important
- Convince them you know what your are doing and you can conduct the research you propose
You are writing for different kinds of reviewers

The expert, someone who knows as much, or more, about the topic as you do
The sophisticated non-expert
The skilled scientist who knows almost nothing about your specific topic
The technical expert – e.g. a biostatistician or epidemiologist
A non-scientist who may still have a lot of input into review decisions and outcomes

KNOW YOUR REVIEWERS!!! You are writing for THEM. Increasing expectations that reviewers put extra weight on Significance and potential impact on health

Don’t short-change these sections but must be real
The NIH submission and review process

A scientist comes up with a research question, hypothesis to test

Might be out of the blue, a new idea

Might be in response to an announcement by NIH of an area they would like people to study

Request for Applications – RFA
Program Announcement – PA

Following highly prescribed guidelines, you write a proposal

Electronically submitted to NIH

It is assigned to one NIH Institute based on scientific discipline/Institute mission

It is assigned to an Initial Review Group – IRG (Study Section) – might be Institute-specific or topic-specific
Submission and review continues

~4-6 months later peer review begins

Assigned to 3 reviewers – primary, secondary, reader

  Assigned by Scientific Review Officer (SRO) – NIH PhD or MD level staff person who leads the review process

Reviewers read proposals from electronic link to NIH eRA Commons and compile comments

Comments and initial scores submitted at least a few days before group meets

  Until a reviewer submits comments and the review period closes they can’t see scores or comments from others

Just before meeting, SRO and Peer Reviewer Chair of IRG confer and identify the bottom ~50% based on scores

  Those are not discussed but comments already written go to PI who submitted the proposal
Review continues

IRG meets – discusses proposals

Proposals grouped and discussed by stage of career

After discussion, every member of the panel gives confidential score, not just those assigned to read them

One paragraph summary of discussion also prepared

Proposals within the IRG are rank ordered to get a Percentile Ranking – normalizes among groups that have different absolute rating behaviors

Will not apply for Special Emphasis Panels or IRGs with small numbers of proposals

Reviews and scores go to the Program Official of the Institute it was assigned to for potential funding

Potential funding decisions reviewed by the National Advisory Council for the Institute – meets 3 times/yr
NIH Information and Videos on Grant Review

Link to Review Home Page

http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer_review_process.htm

Recently created videos really worth the time viewing viewing….

http://public.csr.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx

Finding and targeting your proposal to a Study Section – see link on the page above
Career Development (K) Review

Similar with a few exceptions

Great majority of F and K reviews done be panels specific to training and specific to NIH Institute

Review criteria VERY DIFFERENT

Review timing shorter to get feedback faster

ALL criteria and sections addressing them are equally critical – low score on one can doom proposal even with excellent other scores

The percentage of submitted proposals that get funded is generally higher than with R grants

Let’s look at the review scoring templates…
Targeting to an Institute or Review Group

Cover letter to submission can request either or both – not required and not necessarily honored

Best to do only after communication with NIH staff

Requesting Institute only useful if could fit mission of 2 or more and even then can be tough call

For IRG, first must know if it is being reviewed by Center for Scientific Review (CSR) or Institute

http://public.csr.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx

Integrated Review Groups

http://public.csr.nih.gov/StudySections/IntegratedReviewGroups/Pages/default.aspx

Special Emphasis Panels

http://public.csr.nih.gov/StudySections/SpecialEmphasis/Pages/default.aspx
Vast array of tools and advice out there

Each NIH institute has its own resources etc.
NAIAD has been one of the most active:

http://www.niaid.nih.gov/researchfunding/grant/Pages/default.aspx