Learning from Reviewer Comments:
Tips for Resubmitting External Grant Proposals

Frequent comments from reviewers one might receive are summarized below to provide insights to potential applicants in resubmitting grant proposals – *or in preparing a new proposal*.

Sponsor Fit

A grant proposal *must* support the mission of the sponsor *and* be suited for the specific program to which you are applying. The examples below are reviewer comments often received when the fit is poor.

Sample Comments:

- Lack of innovation
- Lack of potential for broad dissemination Insufficient relevance to the topic
- Lack of cohesive project with significant input from each collaborator

- Insufficient or unclear project methodology or evaluation
- Insufficient justification in terms of number of users/hours needed/project demands

> **Tips:** Review the mission of the sponsor, this information can usually be found on their website, and the guidelines of the specific grant program to which you are applying. Make sure your project is a good fit. Contact the sponsor with questions regarding suitability.

Communication

Remember, reviewers have limited time and energy to devote to your proposal. If you make them work too hard just to understand what you are trying to say, they will have little energy left to assess your ideas. Good ideas can be overlooked if the reviewer becomes distracted by typos, poor grammar, or other errors in construction. Clear, concise language is key to a good proposal.

Sample Comments:

- Proposal is poorly written (confusing, not logical, poorly organized, typos, etc.)
- Lack of detail
- Lack of a thorough thought process and clear story; lack of focus

- Improper or inadequate literature citations
- Improper use of certain terms
- Making assumptions/statements without having citations or preliminary data to back it up

> **Tips:** Have colleagues from both within and outside your field read your proposal for clarity. Pay attention to their feedback. If your colleagues have trouble understanding something, reviewers may as well. Be sure to follow sponsor guidelines – follow their outline if provided.

Idea or Conceptual Analysis

A strong external proposal takes an innovative idea and shapes it into a coherent plan that includes sufficient data and references. Reviewers often cite PIs for failure to provide detail on the thought process behind the experimental plan. The proposal should also include contingency plans to address potential obstacles. If you have not thought about the potential pitfalls, a reviewer will!

Sample Comments:

- Objective/Outcome needs to be more focused
- Project is too ambitious (unrealistic goals)
- Not sure what new insights will be gained from the proposed research
- Lack of supporting preliminary data to demonstrate feasibility
- Proposal does not address obstacles encountered by others
- Plan is not logical
- Successive goals rely on unproven assumption
- Sticks to a narrow hypothesis without discussing or making allowances for alternative possibilities or approaches
- Too big a leap from preliminary data to the proposed hypothesis; failure to provide sound scientific data for the support of the hypothesis
- Idea is a solution in search of a problem
- How does the idea address the literature, the discipline at large, or lead to further discovery/application/innovation?

> *Tips: Do not assume that the reviewer will think as you do. Demonstrate that your goals are realistic with data from fundamental preliminary experiments. Conduct a thorough literature review to make sure you have addressed possible pitfalls. Include information on how your project fits into the broader picture outside the scope of the proposal.*

Work Plan or Methodology

Reviewers look for a logical, well-designed work plan that includes sufficient detail to describe (1) how, when, and by whom the work will be done, (2) how the data will be analyzed, and (3) that the necessary skills and resources are available to complete the proposed research.

Sample Comments:

- Serious flaws in the project design; additional experiments are required
- Using sub-optimal techniques: i.e., using out-of-date techniques, or conversely, using unnecessary new techniques when standard techniques will work just as well
- Equipment is ill-suited for the proposed projects
- Essential piece of equipment or system not requested/available
- Timeline is overly optimistic
- Failure to provide a reasonable plan for exchange of information and coordination among investigators
- Lack of expertise in a specific area of the research (usually with respect to technology/ protocol)
- Long-term equipment maintenance and sustainability plans are insufficient

> *Tips: Think through your project step by step and be realistic about the timelines. Include the proper expertise on your team. Design experiments that include proper controls and analysis.*

More Information on Preparing Successful Grant Proposals

Sponsored Projects Administration offers proposal development resources on the web at bsu.edu/spa

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