

**Subject:** SERCC Newsletter

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**From:** Scientific Editing and Research Communication Core

**To:** Widmayer, Heather A



## Scientific Editing and Research Communication Core



# Strategies for Addressing Reviewer Feedback on a Research Proposal

After you submit a research proposal, you hope that it is funded. But if not—as is often the case—what should you do next? Below we provide some strategies for reviewing and interpreting reviewer feedback and how to use that information to determine your next steps.

### Take time to process your feelings

- Immediately after initially reading reviewer critiques, it is normal to feel a variety of negative emotions.
- Taking a break from thinking about the critiques can help you approach them later with an open mind.

- Try not to take the rejection personally. Funding is extremely competitive, and rejection of the first submission is common. In fact, many grant writing strategists recommend factoring in time for a resubmission when planning a long-term funding strategy.<sup>1</sup>
- A critical review may be an indication that an issue was not dealt with or explained clearly in the proposal. This is good because it can be fixed.

### **Analyze the feedback strategically**

- First identify comments that should be prioritized in the resubmission (also see previous SERCC Newsletter on [Writing an NIH Introduction](#)). Here are a few approaches to consider.
  - Create a table of review criteria that lists both the strengths and weaknesses brought up by each reviewer.
  - Organize the strengths and weaknesses by topic to identify shared criticisms.
  - Identify ideas that received a poor score because of fixable flaws in the proposed approach. It is easier to address these than to come up with new ideas.
- Contact your Program Official (PO). They can help you interpret the reviewer comments, and if they were present during the review session, they may be able to provide insight regarding the focus of the discussion (also see previous SERCC Newsletter on [The Advantages of Contacting your NIH Program Official](#)).
- Seek feedback from mentors and colleagues, especially those who have been funded by your target sponsor.
- If you feel that the review was flawed procedurally, you may contact the appropriate PO to determine whether an appeal is appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

### **Revise your application strategically**

- Try to respond to all reviewer comments, even if you don't have space to fully describe the changes you made to address these in a summary (e.g., the Introduction of an NIH application).
- If one reviewer's feedback conflicts, or is inconsistent, with that of the other reviewers, try to determine why and identify ways to remedy any confusion.
- If reviewers critique your expertise, consider collaborating with another PI.
- If reviewers don't find the project significant, consider targeting a different funding agency or institute/division whose mission better aligns with the goals of your project.
- For early-career investigators, consider submitting to multiple sponsors throughout the year rather than only resubmitting to the same sponsor.

### **Do your homework**

- Confirm that the sponsor accepts resubmissions and check their requirements (e.g., timeline, policies).
  - NIH requires resubmission within 37 months of the due date for the original proposal.
  - Some NSF programs require a one-year wait before they will consider a resubmission.
  - The Department of Defense does not allow resubmissions.
- For some funding agencies, resubmissions have a higher likelihood of being funded than new applications.
  - E.g., R01 A1 applications **tend** to have higher success rates than A0 applications; however, this depends on the quality of the initial submission, revisions made to address reviewer concerns, and the competitiveness of other applications reviewed during that round.<sup>3,4</sup>

### **Decide whether to resubmit your application or to submit a new one**

- Consider resubmitting your application to the same sponsor if
  - your reviewers were enthusiastic about your idea,
  - your reviewers commented on fixable problems, and
  - you can readily address the reviewers' concerns.
- Consider submitting to a different sponsor (or institute/division) if reviewers were not enthusiastic about the ideas and
  - their expertise did not fit your topic,
  - they were not knowledgeable about the methods you proposed,
  - they did not understand the rationale for your proposal,
  - a considerable amount of time has passed, or
  - the science has changed substantially.
- Regardless of where you resubmit, remember that
  - reviewers rotate on and off review panels, so you have no guarantee who will evaluate your revised application; and
  - it is useful to address reviewer critiques from your initial submission, particularly if reviewers have access to these (as they do at NIH).

### **If you opt to resubmit, decide on the best time**

- Try to submit as soon as possible after receiving reviews, but not until you can effectively address all of the reviewers' concerns.
- Strengthen the application as much as you can (you aren't limited to revising only the issues raised by the reviewers).
- Even if you start revising your application before you receive the reviewer comments (e.g., if you obtain new preliminary data), be sure to adequately address the reviewers' concerns once you do receive them.
- Use the time between submitting your application and receiving your reviews

to solidify your collaborations, obtain more preliminary data, and/or publish more papers.

- Confirm that the original funding solicitation hasn't expired, that your project is still a good fit, and that you still meet eligibility requirements.
- If the original solicitation has been updated, use the most recent version, even if it is different than what you used initially.
- If you are just above the pay line or on the list for possible selective pay or end-of-year funding, don't wait to see what happens. Revise as soon as you can and resubmit when ready.

Rejection is difficult. But remember, individuals who persevere through early setbacks systematically outperform those with narrow wins in the long run.<sup>5</sup>

Best of luck with your next proposal submission or resubmission!  
Jennifer Barr and the SERCC Team

## References

1. AtKisson, MS. [\*Handbook for Planning and Writing Successful Grant Proposals: Strategic Planning and Timelines.\*](#)
2. [NIH Grants Policy Statement: 2.4.2 Appeals of Initial Scientific Review](#)
3. Bouvier Grant Group. [R01 Resubmission Success Rates.](#)
4. NIH Data Book. [R01-Equivalent Grants: Success Rates, by Gender and Type of Application.](#) 2024
5. Wang, Y., Jones, BF, Wang, D. [Early-career setbacks and future career impacts.](#) Nat. Comm. 10(4331).

## Additional Resources

1. NIH: NIAID [Revise and Resubmit an Application](#)
2. NIH [Frequently Asked Questions: Resubmissions of NIH Applications](#)

## Announcements

### [Updated NSF Proposal Award Policies & Procedures Guide \(PAPPG\) effective May 20, 2024](#)

The NSF has updated its Proposal Award Policies & Procedures Guide (PAPPG) (NSF24-1), which went into effect on May 20, 2024. Details can be

### [Changes Coming to NIH Applications and Peer Review in 2025](#)

The NIH is instituting many changes in 2025. The webpage linked above serves as a central location where you can learn about how the coming changes

found on the website linked above.

will affect the submission and review of your next NIH grant application.

### [Let us know what you think of iThenticate](#)

Do you have experience using iThenticate to check the originality of your academic publications, theses, dissertations, grant applications, or other scholarly work? If so, we'd love to hear about it and potentially write about it (without identifying you) in a future newsletter. Email us at [com-scientificediting@uiowa.edu](mailto:com-scientificediting@uiowa.edu).

### [Read Our Recent Publication in PLoS One!](#)

Geyer PK, Hoffmann DS, Barr JY, Widmayer HA, Blaumueller CM. Granting Access: Development of a formal course to demystify and promote predoctoral fellowship applications for graduate students. PLoS One. 2024 Apr 26;19(4):e0301480. PMID: PMC11051599.

## Upcoming Opportunities

[Have a question about writing grants or research articles? Contact us and we will answer it in a future newsletter.](#)

### **Iowa Mentoring Academy**

[June 4–July 23 | 10:00–11:00 a.m. | Zoom](#)

The Institute for Clinical and Translational Science (ICTS) is hosting a summer session of the Iowa Mentoring Academy for graduate students and postdocs. Eight sessions will cover topics including: maintaining effective communication, setting expectations, and promoting independence.

[More Information](#)

### **Webinar: Update to NIH Training Grant Applications**

[June 5 | 12:00–1:00 p.m. | Zoom](#)

The NIH Institutional National Research Service Award (NRSA) Training Grant Program application is undergoing changes that take effect for submissions due on or after January 25, 2025. Participate in this live, virtual event with NIH experts to gain insights and updates on these changes. Concludes with a live Q&A session.

[More Information](#) | [Register](#)

### **Ask the Editor: SERCC Virtual Office Hours**

[2nd and 4th Friday of every month | Next session June 14 | 9:30–10:30 a.m. | Zoom](#)

The SERCC hosts virtual office hours twice a month. If you have a question related to writing a grant, manuscript, or other scientific document, "stop by" to talk with a scientific editor. We are also happy to answer any questions you have regarding our

services. Open to all faculty, staff, fellows, postdocs, and students.

[More information](#) | [Link to event](#)

### **Maximizing Pivot to Find Funding and Collaborators**

June 20, 2024 | 2:00–3:00 p.m. | Zoom

Do you want to maximize your time spent searching for funding opportunities or potential project collaborators? Join us to learn how Pivot can save you time and effort in identifying the right funding opportunities for your research program as well as identifying collaborators with the relevant expertise.

[Additional information](#) | [Register](#)

### **Write Winning Grant Proposals**

Phase 1 Seminar: September 20 | 8:30 AM–4:30 p.m. | Iowa Memorial Union

Phase II Intensive Workshop: January 7–8, 2024

The Research Development Office in the Office of the Vice President for Research is pleased to partner with Dr. John Robertson from Grant Writer's Seminars & Workshops (GWSW) to conduct the Write Winning Grant Proposals seminar and intensive workshop. The seminar is a prerequisite to the Phase II workshop. Appropriate for faculty members, postdoctoral researchers, and administrative staff with exposure to grant writing.

[More information and link to register](#)

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