Grant$ for Lunch
Research Funding Service
November 22, 2006

- Interpreting and Responding to NIH Summary Statements

Interpreting NIH Summary Statements: 1st Page Provides Basic Housekeeping Details

- Program officer name, phone number, & email
- Release date
- Your name & address
- NIH application number
- Study Section name, meeting date; Council meeting date; your requested start date
- Title of your proposal
- Priority score; percentile (R01s only)
- Recommendations regarding human subjects & research animals
- Budget recommendations

Sample Summary Statements NIH Website

Annotated grant funded by NAIAD and its Summary Statement

www.niaid.nih.gov/ncn/grants/app/default.htm

Sample R01, R03 and K08 grants, discussed in mock Study Section video, and their Summary Statements

www.drg.nih.gov/Video/Video.asp

Interpreting NIH Summary Statements: Where to Begin

- You will have the grant's priority score long before you get the Summary Statement; try to keep an open mind about the written critique.
- If you know/suspect that funding is unlikely, read the Summary Statement once, then set it aside for a few days.
- Strive to read everything that is written, not just what you want to see; look for common elements in the comments of the different reviewers .

Interpreting NIH Summary Statements: Next Steps

- Ask 2 or 3 experienced grant writers and reviewers to read your Summary Statement after you have read it once, before you dwell on it.
- After early emotions have subsided and you and your colleagues have calmly discussed the review, call your Program Officer to gain deeper insight.

Interpreting Summary Statements: How do you know when the reviewers simply are not excited by your idea?

- Reviewers won't say your idea is stale, unexciting, or over-investigated.
- If each reviewer picks out different, seemingly minor flaws to criticize, pushing the score outside the payline, he/she is not excited.
- If you revise a grant, respond to all reviewers' comments, and the score barely moves, this suggests lack of excitement about your idea.

Interpreting NIH Summary Statements: Understanding the Reviewers

Reviewers are:

- Intelligent, knowledgeable about science, experienced grant writers, and overworked
- Mostly sympathetic to compelling ideas and new investigators
- Frustrated by “too many good proposals, too few dollars”
- Will typically choose only one or two grants to champion

Interpreting NIH Summary Statements: Attitudes That Work in Your Favor

- Assume reviewers' comments are intended to be helpful.
- Be open-minded and self-evaluative, not defensive.
- View the Summary Statement as a document you can mine for information.
- If the reviewer "just didn't get it," the reason probably is unclear writing.

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Keep a Constructive Attitude Towards Reviewers

- In Sales: The customer is always right.
- In Grant Review: The reviewer is always right.

(In reality, some customers behave like jerks but it is always good business to treat them respectfully.)

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Keep a Constructive Attitude Towards Reviewers

- If the reviewer is wrong, most likely it's because there is a problem with the application:
  - Lack of clarity?
  - Unfocused writing?
  - Essential details missing, esp. in Methods?
- Let reviewers help you; use their feedback to improve the application.

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Basics

- Use the 3 page Introduction to a revised proposal to respond thoroughly to the critique.
- The Introduction should make sense by itself.
- Respond to <u>each</u> criticism:
  - Agree and make changes, OR
  - Disagree diplomatically, on scientific grounds, explain why
- Distinguish unchanged from revised text in the proposal (italics, vertical line in the margin)

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Dealing with Common Criticisms

Problem	Solution
• Lacks innovation	• Point out specifically what is innovative; be sure you are right!
• Problem not important	• Make sure colleagues agree the problem is important; explain its importance in the Intro to the revision, also in the Background section.

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Dealing with Common Criticisms

Problem

- Lacking detail in Methods
- Unfocused

Solution

- Provide more detail; get expert advice from reviewers of your drafts
- Revise the proposal (2-3x) with input from experienced grant writers and reviewers

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Dealing with Common Criticisms

Problem	Solution
• Does not fit NIH priorities	• Review NIH priorities before resubmitting; revise accordingly
• Approach or methods not appropriate	• Ask experts in your field to help you revise Research Design and Methods
• Too ambitious	• Limit the number and scope of Specific Aims; match them with your budget ($$ and time)focus your writing

Problems in Grants NRFC (Not Recommended for Further Consideration) or Streamlined by NCI

- **98% Preliminary Data** – Quality, relation to project
- **85% Experimental plan** – too ambitious*, no preliminary data to support project, project not feasible, conceptual flaws, lack of detail in plan or methods, lack of alternative strategies, necessary reagents not available or not characterized
- **70% Not innovative**
- **58% Hypothesis** not clear

*Items in yellow are correctable writing flaws; other items require more drastic action.

Problems in Grants NRFC (Not Recommended for Further Consideration) or Streamlined by NCI

50% Significance not clear

40% Expertise not clear – needed letters from collaborators or needed input from collaborators during preparation of application (often for analysis, interpretation)

25% Statistics - inappropriate or lacking

*Items in yellow are correctable writing flaws; other items require more drastic action.

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Moving On

- Consider changing Study Sections if:
  - The first one clearly lacked appropriate expertise: ask for a change in a covering letter <u>after</u> reviewing SS charters.
  - Your grant was assigned to a “second best” SS because a co-investigator serves on the preferred group. Consider removing that person from the grant. (Add him/her back after the project is funded.)

Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Moving On

If the Study Section lacked enthusiasm for your idea:

- Consider changing the proposal dramatically so you can honestly submit it as a new grant.
- Seek serious, honest advice from respected persons in your field about how good your idea really is--be willing to change it if needed.

Interpreting and Responding to NIH Summary Statements: Last Words

- Learn as much as possible about the review process before submitting, to lay the groundwork for interpreting and responding to Summary Statements.
- Seek advice from experienced colleagues to interpret and respond.
- Respond completely and diplomatically to these reviews, no matter how you feel.