

On Writing Grant Proposals: Confessions of Two Grant Reviewers

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In theory it is easy to obtain National Eye Institute (NEI) funding for your research. Just have a great idea and tell the NEI about it. However, in our experience, it seems to be somewhat more difficult. We have submitted a few grant proposals, reviewed a slightly larger number, and have seen quite a few reviewed at the Visual Sciences B Study Section. From this we have extracted a few principles to guide the writing of our future proposals.

1. Find out who is on the study section that will review your grant and take a guess at which two members might review your proposal. They may not be in your sub-specialty, so write your proposal clearly enough to convince these non-experts. If they are biased, try to address their biases. Of course the expert in your area may be brought onto the committee as an ad hoc member to review your proposal, but clarity never hurts.
2. The most important section is *significance*. Do not waste time talking about the badness of blindness; convince the reviewers that they really want you to do this project.
3. In your *methods* section, do not propose to do anything that you have not done before. Do a pilot experiment. If necessary, visit someone who has the necessary equipment or technique. Failing that, convince an expert to collaborate on the project, and include a written commitment with the application.
4. Do not cite your references by number; this may irritate the reviewer. Cite authors by name and list the references in alphabetical order.
5. It is all right to be faddish as long as you are first.

6. Do not propose to use the same paradigm that you have been using for the past ten years, even though you are the expert.
7. Do not cite this paper.

If you already have a grant, submit your competitive renewal about eight months (two cycles) before the deadline. In this way, if you get turned down, you still have time to revise it and resubmit without a lapse in funding.

If your proposal is approved but not funded, and your pink sheets tell you how to revise it, do it right away. Try to accept all the criticisms as constructive. If the same study section receives your proposal, with all the changes they asked for, they will feel some moral obligation to give you a good score, and that may get you over the edge.

After your grant is funded, when you submit your non-competitive continuation, use exactly the budget that was committed for that year in the original award notice. If you deviate, you risk an administrative cut guided by rules that only the administrators know. You can always use your rebudgeting authority later, after your continuation is funded, to shift the money among categories.

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