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How to Become a Grant Reviewer

By Karen M. Markin

Catalyst

Career advice for scientists

Do the people who review grant proposals really care about the font size when the science is brilliant? Do they actually notice the laptop that you included in your budget plan?

When reviewers gather to evaluate grant proposals, they usually do so privately, making those sessions a rich source of academic folklore. The best way to find out what a review session is really like is to participate in one yourself. Being a junior faculty member need not be an obstacle. Many different organizations need grant proposals reviewed, and with a little effort, you can probably find a gig.

Agencies typically look for people with expertise in the field of activity that a given round of proposals will support. That field of activity, though, may be broadly defined, so don't fret about not specializing in the same subfield, such as organic versus analytical chemistry. A proposal for an organic-chemistry project may not be reviewed by a panel consisting entirely of chemists, let alone chemists in the same area of specialty. Also, research is becoming increasingly multidisciplinary, and review panels often cover a range of disciplines rather than a few highly specialized subfields.

An agency seeks out reviewers in several ways. Sometimes it actively recruits them. It scans lists of the authors of papers at major scientific conferences or the authors of recent scholarly articles in the field. Agencies have been known to find reviewers through Google searches. In addition, many agencies accept applications to be a reviewer. Information and tools on their Web sites have made it easier to volunteer your services.

Reviewing proposals can require a substantial amount of work, so be sure you have the time before accepting an invitation to serve as a panelist. Find out how many grant proposals you will have to read, how long they are, and how much time you will get to review them.

It's important that you be able to spend an adequate amount of time on the task. Have you ever gotten back a review of your grant proposal that made you think, "They didn't even read this"? A cursory review helps no one. Budget your time accordingly.

The Review Process

Proposals reviews are carried out in several ways. In some cases, the agency assembles a panel of reviewers at its office. As a reviewer, you receive a batch of proposals ahead of time so you can read and evaluate them. Each reviewer is likely to be responsible for presenting several of the proposals to the panel as a whole, with a recommendation about whether to fund it. The whole panel then considers the project and makes its decision.

A number of scenarios can develop in panel discussions. The lead reviewer may support a proposal, but a fellow panelist may find a problem with its methodology or some other aspect of the project. Depending on how severe that problem is -- or whether other panelists perceive it as a problem -- the proposal may ultimately be rejected.

Sometimes the lead reviewer recommends rejection, in which case the project's only hope is that someone else will read it and feel strongly enough to advocate for it. Occasionally, a majority of panel members support a proposal, but one person is vehemently opposed to it for a flaw that others don't see. That person may have expertise in an area that no one else does. One strong detractor can sink an otherwise popular proposal.

As you can see, the process is not easily predictable, and it is subject to the influence of the personalities of those involved. Keep that in mind the next time a proposal you have made is rejected: It probably had nothing to do with you personally and a lot to do with the mix of people serving on that particular panel.

That is not to say that proposal review is purely a game of chance. Most of the time the outstanding proposals shine through, and the clunkers are quickly identified and eliminated.

But there are a lot of proposals in between, with a mix of strengths and weaknesses, and that's where much of the debate takes place. And as grant money gets tighter due to shrinking federal appropriations, review panels will be forced to split finer and finer hairs to make funding decisions.

In some review sessions, panelists stay at their own offices and evaluate grant proposals by conference call. In other cases, they mail in their critiques. As budgets are cut, agencies are looking for less expensive ways to conduct reviews.

You won't make much money reviewing grant proposals, but the work will pay off. The agency typically will cover your expenses if you need to travel to a panel, and it may give you a small honorarium.

The value is in the experience itself. You will see what is expected of successful grant requests. You will meet other faculty members active in your field, and read proposals for work at the vanguard of the discipline. You can have the kind of intellectual discussion that many are seeking in academe but seldom have, what with grading papers and serving on committees.

Ultimately, the experience can help you to prepare better proposals and obtain grant money for your own work.

Web Sites for Potential Reviewers

Federal agencies are making it easier to volunteer to review grant proposals by allowing people to sign up via the Web. Agency Web sites generally request information on the prospective reviewer's educational and professional background and area of expertise.

The National Science Foundation has a Web page that urges experts to volunteer to [review grant proposals](#). Examine the site, identify a program officer who oversees grants in your area of expertise, and provide that person with some brief information about your background.

The National Institutes of Health outlines a more formal and complex process for selection of its reviewers, particularly those who serve as permanent rather than temporary reviewers. Details of the [review process](#) are available online, along with [panelist-selection information](#) (see <http://cms.csr.nih.gov/PeerReviewMeetings/BestPractices> and click on "How Scientists Are Selected for Study-Section Service").

The NIH will accept volunteer reviewers, but a look at its panel membership indicates that assistant professors are in the

minority. The agency provides a lot of useful [information for new grant seekers](#), including a 39-minute video of a mock proposal-review session, known in NIH parlance as a "study section."

Other sites to consider:

The [peer-review system](#) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service offers online tools for reviewers to update their personal information and submit reviews.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education calls its [database of reviewers](#) the Field Reader System, or FRS. "Field reader" is another name for a peer reviewer.

The National Endowment for the Humanities maintains the [PRISM database](#) of potential reviewers and panelists.

Check the Web sites of other agencies for the names of program officers in your area of interest and their contact information.

First Steps

The first time you participate in a review session, try taking notes on your reactions to the proposals. For example, are you looking with dismay at a big stack of applications, wondering how you'll get through them all? Are you irritated that an applicant included letters of support when the instructions explicitly said not to? How do you feel about that misspelling in the abstract?

Those are the things that go through the heads of other reviewers, too, including the people reviewing your own proposals. Next time you write one, look at your notes to remind yourself not to do those things that detracted from the project.

Also, as you review the proposals, take note of what impresses you. Perhaps the proposal includes a timetable for completion of the project that is easy to understand at a glance. Make a note about that format if you need to create a timetable for a project of your own.

If you are unable to review proposals for a federal agency, seek out local opportunities. Look for campus programs that make small grants to students or professors for research or other types of projects. Just adopting the mind-set of a reviewer will help your own proposal writing immensely. Although you won't learn about the scholarly expectations of your discipline, you will get to observe the dynamics of the review panel, which is valuable in itself.

You may witness the power that a strong advocate or detractor for a particular proposal can wield with the group. You may see someone with an eagle eye for the budget in action -- there seems to be one in every crowd, no matter how little money is involved.

And you will then be able to separate academic myth from reality.

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