Grant Writing Tips

NIH encourages applicants to describe their research in terms that are easily understood by peer reviewers, scientists, Congress, and the public. Titles, abstracts and statements of public health relevance should:

- Convey the value of the research in plain language – clear, succinct, and professional
- Be comprehensible to both scientists and the public
- Relay the potential impact of the research on health

For more information and writing examples, see Communicating Research Intent and Value in NIH Applications.

Format

The instructions require that materials be organized in a particular format. Reviewers are accustomed to finding information in specific sections of the application. Organize your application to effortlessly guide reviewers through it. This creates an efficient evaluation process and saves reviewers from hunting for required information.

Think like a reviewer

A reviewer must often read 10 to 15 applications in great detail and form an opinion about each of them. Your application has a better chance at being successful, if it is easy to read and follows the usual format. Make a good impression by submitting a clear, well-written, properly organized application.

Outline

- Start with an outline following the suggested organization of the application. Be complete and include all pertinent information.
- Be organized and logical. The thought process of the application should be easy to follow. The parts of the application should fit together.
- Write one sentence summarizing the topic sentence of each main section . Do the same for each main point in the outline.
- Make one point in each paragraph. This is key for readability. Keep sentences to 20 words or less. Write simple, clear sentences.

Budget

- Before you start writing the application, think about the budget and how it is related to your research plan. Remember that everything in the budget must be justified by the work you've proposed to do.
- Be realistic. Don't propose more work than can be reasonably done during the proposed project period. Make sure that the personnel have appropriate scientific expertise and training. Make sure that the budget is reasonable and well-justified.

Be Persuasive

- Capture the reviewers' attention by making the case for why NIH should fund your research. Tell reviewers why testing your hypothesis is worth NIH's money, why you are the person to do it, and how your institution can give you the support you'll need to get it done. Be persuasive.
- Include enough background information to enable an intelligent reader to understand your proposed work.
- Although though not a requirement for assignment purposes, a cover letter can help the Division of Receipt and Referral in the Center for Scientific Review assign your application for initial peer review and to an IC for possible funding.

Grammar 101

- Use the active, rather than passive, voice. For example, write "We will develop an experiment, "not "An experiment will be developed ."
- Use a clear and concise writing style so that a non-expert may understand the proposed research. Make your points as directly as possible. Use basic English, avoiding jargon or excessive language. Be consistent with terms, references and writing style.
- Spell out all acronyms on first reference.

Details!

- Be sure to follow the format in the instructions and label sections as requested.
- Use an Arial, Helvetica, Palatino Linotype, or Georgia typeface, a black font color, and a font size of 11 points or larger. (A Symbol font may be used to insert Greek letters or special characters; the font size requirement still applies.)
- Type density, including characters and spaces, must be no more than 15 characters per inch. Type may be no more than six lines per inch. Use standard paper size (8 ½" x 11) . Use at least one-half inch margins (top, bottom, left, and right) for all pages. No information should appear in the margins.
- Use sub-headings, short paragraphs, and other techniques to make the application as easy to navigate as possible. Be specific and informative, and avoid redundancies.
- Use diagrams, figures and tables, and include appropriate legends, to assist the reviewers to understand complex information. These should complement the text and be appropriately inserted. Make sure the figures and labels are readable in the size they will appear in the application.
- Use bullets and numbered lists for effective organization. Indents and bold print add readability. Bolding highlights key concepts and allows reviewers to scan the pages and retrieve information quickly. Do not use headers or footers.
- Identify weak links in your application so the application you submit is solid, making a strong case for your project.
- If writing is not your forte, seek help!

Proofreading and Final Edits

- Allow sufficient time to put the completed application aside, and then edit it from a fresh vantage point. Try proofreading by reading the application aloud.
- Allow time for an internal review by collaborators, colleagues, mentors and make revisions/edits from that review. If possible, have both experts in your field and those who are less familiar with your science provide feedback. The application should be easy to understand by all.
- It is a good idea to have an independent expert provide an objective critique of your application. If possible, arrange for neutral third-party reviewers.
- If more than one investigator is contributing to the writing, it would be helpful to have one overall editor.
- Have zero tolerance for typographical errors, misspellings, grammatical mistakes or sloppy formatting. A sloppy or disorganized application may lead the reviewers to conclude that your research may be conducted in the same manner.
- Prior to submission, perform a final proofread of the entire grant application.

Finally

- How would you rate your application? Once you've finished your application, conduct your own review based on the NIH's five peer review criteria. Good Luck!