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## You need to see your grant proposal through the eyes of its reviewer.

Grant agencies (e.g. NIH, NSF or UK) select researchers to review applications. By evaluating the applications' technical and scientific merit, reviewers determine whether or not proposals will get funding. In their review summaries, they are required to provide arguments that justify their evaluation. Since reviewers are usually not allowed to provide helpful feedback for the purpose of improving an application, their feedback is somewhat limited. This makes it difficult for scientists to improve a rejected application. To increase your success rate, it is important to look at your grant application through the eyes of a reviewer. Some of the things reviewers usually don't share with applicants, but will help you to obtain funding for your research, will be discussed below.

1. Reviewers need to understand the scope of the project and evaluate whether the project fits the objectives of the grant program. You should therefore explain how the proposed project will help achieve the program's goals and objectives. Before submitting the final draft of your proposal, it is always useful to contact the program manager, discuss these goals and objectives and adjust your proposal accordingly. It may even be useful to get acquainted with the program manager on a more personal level.
2. The abstract must sell the grant. If you don't capture the reviewers' interest by the end of the first page, they will often stop reading and recommend rejection of your application.
3. The proposal should appeal to the reviewers and induce a level of interest and enthusiasm that matches the writer's. If you are not enthusiastic about the project, it is unlikely reviewers will feel otherwise.
4. Mistakes that reviewers frequently encounter include a dense academic writing style, wordiness and the inclusion of tedious and unnecessary information. Applicants often use small fonts and reduced margins to include as much information as possible. However, the inclusion of too much and unnecessary information, makes it difficult for

reviewers to recognize exciting and innovative ideas. It is therefore important to write your proposal in a clear and concise manner.

**5.** Proposals often appear to be “cut and paste” jobs, with inconsistent formatting and multiple writing styles. This makes it difficult for reviewers to understand the proposal. In addition, reviewers will get the impression that the applicant does not take grant writing seriously. If you don't take your research seriously, why should the reviewers? It is therefore important to ensure that each section logically follows from the previous one and that the writing style is consistent throughout your proposal.

**6.** Major, unnecessary errors in spelling and grammar are frequently encountered by reviewers. They will become annoyed and irritated when the writing is sloppy and the document hasn't been proofread.

**7.** The aims and hypothesis section is the most important section in a grant application. Information provided here should enable reviewers to understand the proposal's objectives. In addition, after reading these sections, reviewers should be able to understand why you want to achieve these specific goals. However, most applicants fail to convincingly argue the relevance of their research goals. The following questions should be answered in this section: a) What is the scientific relevance of your work? b) To which extend will your research expand our knowledge?

In addition, the objectives should be clear, realistic and achievable within the duration of the project. Applicants, however, often include aims that are either general in nature or too ambitious and unrealistic.

**8.** The use of strong nouns and active verbs helps to capture the reviewers' attention. While 'The house was on fire' is an example of a passive and boring sentence, 'Flames erupted from the house' is an example of a strong and active sentence.

**9.** Reviewers need to feel confident that an applicant is capable of successfully performing the proposed project and achieving the project's objectives. However, applicants often fail to provide evidence of their knowledge and expertise within their research field. It is important to include preliminary results in your proposal to demonstrate your expertise.

In addition, you should support your application by listing research papers you have published in peer-reviewed journals and are relevant to the project. Furthermore, to let reviewers know that you are an accomplished scientist in multiple research fields, it is important to also provide the total number of papers you published.

**10.** The proposed research strategy is often vague and unfocused. To the reviewers, this gives the impression that the applicant isn't qualified to perform the research

project. It is therefore essential to ensure that the scientific background of your project is sound and your approach is well thought-out, feasible and complete.

Finally, do not take rejection personally. Since the probability of success is always low, there's no shame in being rejected. Keep on writing and resubmitting grant applications. It should be doable to submit one new application and one revised application per round. If you continue to do this, an agency will eventually fund your research.