Knowing the review process and being a reviewer in 10 minutes (an NIH bias)

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In my experience …

- First, get in the loop on what the funding agency is looking for
- Second, identify where you want to get funded (more later)
- Third, communicate with that funding source
- Fourth, identify who you want to review your proposal
- **Fifth, understand the reviewer and the process**
- Understand your ‘pink sheets’ (or review summary) and what to do if you are not discussed
For the NIH, know what the NIH is looking for!

- First, get on the NIH Guide TOC mailing list:
  - All notices, RFA’s and PA’s for the NIH
  - RFA – request for applications
  - PA – program announcement
  - Read this religiously
Identify where you want to get funded

- The NIH is 27 separate institutes and centers, they all have their own culture, funding success rates (paylines) and application requests

- You need to identify your institute. Common ones:
  - NIGMS – National Institute of General Medical Sciences
  - NCI – National Cancer Institute
  - NLM – National Library of Medicine
  - ETC

- Although they follow different models, all federal agencies have different divisions
Third, communicate with that funding source, particularly if solicited

- Every RFA/PA/unsolicited proposal has a ‘Program Officer’
- They are your friend. Talk to them first! See if they are interested, see who they recommend reviewing

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Identify who you want to review

- Review for unsolicited applications (those not responding to an RFA or PA) is usually given to a standing study section that is separate from the Institute.

- The Center for Scientific Review (CSR) covers this.

- Sitting on a study section is a great experience!

- Standing committees are public and google-able. Your program officer can direct you to an appropriate committee.
The reviewer

- I’ve sat on many NIH committees:
  - grants such as R01’s both that are responding to a specific RFA and those that are not
  - Small business grants (SBIRs)
  - Program projects (large multi-investigator proposals)
  - Cooperative agreements focusing on a specific area (such as U54s)
  - NIH contracts
The initial review

- As a reviewer, we typically get proposals a few weeks before, each major component (R01-like project or core) gets 2-4 reviewers. One is assigned as the primary reviewer.

- We read them and make initial reviews and initial scores. If you don’t give the proposal a ‘1’ on a specific component you have to list a weakness!

- **Important!** Although we are often selected to sit on a panel based on some expertise (such as bioinformatics or statistics), each reviewer reviews *all* aspects of the proposal, even areas they maybe unfamiliar with.

- Initial reviews are uploaded and all members of the committee review the other reviews and scores
Interpreting your review sheet

• Scores range from 1-9 on several criteria:
  • Investigators
  • Significance
  • Innovation
  • Approach
  • Environment
  • Overall Impact

• Strengths and weaknesses will be described from 2-3 reviews along with a summary from the Scientific Review Administrator (SRA) of the following discussion

• Contact your program officer after you receive the review sheet
Some hints

• As a writer:
  • Don’t confuse us with your proposal or make it hard. That makes me unhappy and you don’t want me to be unhappy! (hulk smash)
  • I have to read as many as 8 R01s. Trying to piece a puzzle together is really hard and time consuming
  • There are two types of people: detail-oriented people and big-picture people. Write for both of them!

• As a reviewer:
  • Review you proposals and other reviews before the meeting. Take notes, be prepared to talk about them
  • If you live on the west coast, sorry, but meetings start at 8am SHARP. Don’t show up late.
There are several models for review

- Mail review – reviewers submit scores and do not discuss directly
- Electronic review – reviewers use an electronic system for discussion.
- **Discussion panel review** – face to face
- Trade-offs between mail review and electronic review
A note on COI: Conflicts of Interest are taken very seriously

- Err on the side of caution and report immediately to the review administrator if:
  - You have a collaboration with anyone involved with proposal
  - You have an appointment with administrative unit/university listed in the proposal
  - You receive money from any person/administrative unit/etc involved in the proposal
  - Don’t review a proposal where you, your collaborators, your family members, your investments or your administrative host could benefit from a favorable review. If you have a COI, you will be assigned a different proposal and will not be involved with any part of the review

- When in doubt: ask!
Triage

• In order to maximize time discussed on the most meritorious proposals, at the NIH the bottom 50% of the proposals based on average initial scores are triaged and not discussed further.

• Any panelist can save a proposal from triage, but once the proposals are triaged that’s it for it.
After the initial review

• Typically the committee meets in person on a single, or a couple, of days

• Each component is reviewed verbally, starting with the primary reviewer who summarizes the proposal.

• After everyone gives their initial scores (usually only overall impact, depends on the chair) a discussion ensues and the entire rest of the panel asks questions.

• This discussion can be heated if two or more reviewers disagree.

• **Hint:** Be prepared other panel members will ask questions that may be very detailed and out of the blue
After the discussion

- Every panelist on the committee casts an overall impact score. If you vote/score outside of the range of the reviewers who discussed, you are usually required to justify it.

- At this point, the budget is discussed if any reviewer has an issue with it.

- In my experience, each R01-like component can take 30 minutes to 3 hours to review.

- After the meeting: Update your reviews such that they reflect your final scores!
Putting it together and review

- Make a cover letter for your proposal and simply state that you spoke with a program officer (name them) and say that you both believe that the proposal is appropriate for institute X and study section Y.

- Review timeline:
  - 4-6 months for study section initial score
  - 3-4 weeks later, review ‘pink sheet’ posted
  - 3 months for counsel (recommendations of funding)
  - 1 more month or longer for NGA (notice of grant award)