

CHAPTER 4

THE NIH REVIEW PROCESS and HOW TO WRITE FOR SUCCESS

THE NIH REVIEW PROCESS

While your proposal will ultimately be funded by one of NIH's Institutes, Centers or Offices, the proposal will first be evaluated for scientific and technical merit by a review panel (i.e., a study section, as most review panels are called at NIH). Consequently, the application must be written to appeal to the reviewer. Your proposal will be read by individuals who are assigned this task by the study section's Scientific Review Administrator (SRA), usually in collaboration with its Chairperson. In most cases, three persons – a primary, secondary and tertiary reviewer – will be assigned to review your application. Their objective will be to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your proposal. The primary reviewer will be the person on the study section who is judged by the SRA to be the most qualified to review your application. The secondary reviewer will be the next most knowledgeable person, and so on. Occasionally, applications are assigned to reviewers who are not the most qualified ones to review them. This usually occurs when there are just too many applications of a given kind for the most qualified reviewers to evaluate all of them.

Become Aware of How Study Sections Operate. Understanding the NIH review process is very important to your success. A videotape of a mock study section meeting can be downloaded from <http://www.csr.nih.gov/Video/Video.asp>. We strongly recommend that you view it, because if you haven't acted as an NIH reviewer before, by doing so you will obtain a very good impression of what goes on during the meeting of a study section. Knowing what panel members have to contend with will help you to make your application more reviewer friendly.

Understand the Criteria Reviewers Must Use. A very helpful Center for Scientific Review Web site (<http://cms.csr.nih.gov/ResourcesforApplicants/PolicyProcedureReview+Guidelines/>) is the one that pertains to peer-review. As you will see, five review criteria are used to evaluate applications. They were updated in October 2004 (<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-05-002.html>) and include: "**Significance:** Does this study address an important problem? If the aims of the application are achieved, how will scientific knowledge or clinical practice be advanced? What will be the effect of these studies on the concepts, methods, technologies, treatments, services, or preventative interventions that drive this field? **Approach:** Are the conceptual or clinical framework, design, methods, and analyses adequately developed, well integrated, well reasoned, and appropriate to the aims of the project? Does the applicant acknowledge potential problem areas and consider alternative tactics? **Innovation:** Is the project original and innovative? For example: Does the project challenge existing paradigms or clinical practice; address an innovative hypothesis or critical barrier to progress in the field?"