

CHAPTER 7

SPECIFIC AIMS SECTION - CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

For reasons that we will now give you, more should be expected from this section than can be appreciated from the scant PHS 398 instructions that are quoted above. In our opinions, the *Specific Aims* section is the key to writing a truly first-class NIH grant application. It is our conviction that, if this section works well, the rest of the proposal will fall naturally into place. It is, therefore, one on which you should spend considerable time in order to get it right. Remember that this is one of two sections of your application that will be read by all of your reviewers. It must, therefore, engender enthusiasm and advocacy, most especially among those who have not seen it until the 15-to-20 minute window of time when it comes up for review at the meeting of the Study Section. As mentioned earlier, those who will be seeing your application for the first time will be simultaneously listening to the primary and secondary reviewers as they describe your proposal and state your case. Therefore, the *Specific Aims* section must be something that can be read and *understood* easily and quickly. The flow of logic must be unassailable and absolutely compelling, such that it leads the reviewers to a position of advocacy for your application — without their knowing that they have been led.

Key to making the Specific Aims section as effective as it can be is developing an understanding of the purpose of each of the thirteen components that collectively constitute this part of the application. Each component has to be linked logically to what comes before it and to what comes after it. If, for any reason, a reviewer has to stop and think about how one element relates to another, you have lost his/her concentration and have made it unnecessarily difficult to grasp what you are trying to convey. Most writers of grant applications fail to develop such linkages — such cohesion — when they write their *Specific Aims* section. The principal cause for this is that they don't fully comprehend what they are trying to accomplish with each of the components. The explanations that follow are designed to give you a strong working knowledge of the purpose of each of the components and how each should relate to those around it.

First, Introductory Paragraph

Opening Sentence(s). This should be a real 'grabber.' It should be written to catch the attention of the reviewers immediately and, for an NIH application, it must highlight the medical importance of the area.

Important Knowns. This component is not meant to be a comprehensive review. Rather, you want to distill the most important knowns of your field into just a few sentences. These should establish the current state of knowledge for all of the reviewers – get everyone at the review-panel meeting on the same page, even those who are not immediate members of your field, and set the scene for presenting the gap in the knowledge base that you plan to address.

Gap in the Knowledge Base to be Addressed. This sentence is one of the most important that you will write in the application, because, as you will see, it sets up everything downstream with