

# CHAPTER 12

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## ***BACKGROUND – Review of Relevant Literature, Results from Prior NSF Support, Preliminary Studies – and REFERENCES CITED SECTIONS***

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### **“BACKGROUND” SECTION**

This section of the application will help you to both justify the need for what you intend to propose (Review of Relevant Literature subsection) and establish that the studies are feasible in your hands (Results from Prior NSF Support and Preliminary Studies subsections).

### **"REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE" SUBSECTION**

*“The Project Description should provide a clear statement of .... the relationship of this work to the present state of knowledge in the field, as well as to work in progress by the PI under other support.”* Proposal and Award Policies and Procedures Guide, Chapter II, Section C.2.d.(i)

**General Points.** In our opinion, this subsection is one of the least well understood parts of the grant application. Most applicants don't appreciate that the purpose of this subsection is to *justify the need* for what they want to propose. Not understanding that, they incorrectly assume that the purpose is to impress reviewers with the comprehensiveness of their grasp of all aspects of the field's literature, which is virtually impossible when you think about practicalities. As a rule of thumb, this part of the proposal should be approximately 10% of the total page allocation for the Project Description, i.e., approximately 1½ pages. It is simply not possible to be comprehensive in such a small amount of space. Thus, the review that must be written here should be a highly selective one – use of the existing literature to support the need for what you will propose.

This subsection must substantiate all of the relatively unsubstantiated assertions that you made in the first, introductory paragraph of the Overview & Objectives section. What you want to do here is detail and expand upon the fact that there is a gap in the knowledge base/unmet need, and that such a gap/need represents an important problem. For example, this is where you will provide much more detail regarding evidence published by others that objectively supports existence of the need that you assert is a problem. This approach is another example of gradually ratcheting up detail as the reviewer reads more deeply into the proposal.

**Specific Tips.** We recommend that you write this subsection *after* you have written the *Research Plan* section. Why? Because, if you think of the *Research Plan* as the “plug” that will fill the gap in the knowledge base, once you know what that part of the application contains, it