

NIH Reviewer Orientation

The peer review of grant applications is at the heart of the NIH grants process. As you enter the review panel meeting, recognize that you are playing a very important role in NIH's mission of 'making important discoveries that improve health and save lives.' You are tasked with evaluating the scientific merit of NIH grant applications in a fair, independent, expert and timely fashion that is free of inappropriate influence. Your assessment — coupled with that of other esteemed peer reviewers — will determine the most promising basic or applied research that NIH can fund and provide the lifeblood for biomedical research in the US and worldwide.

To orient you to the peer review process, this guide walks you through your pre-meeting responsibilities, activities at the meeting, and post-meeting responsibilities. All eligible Scientific Review Group (SRG) members, who have no conflict of interest, participate in the evaluation of an application. Members are designated as primary, secondary, or tertiary reviewers, and additional reviewers, as needed; mail reviewers; and discussants.

This guide orients you to the review process, providing information about reviewer tasks and responsibilities.

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PRE-MEETING ACTIVITIES

Summary

- Examine your review assignments, review materials (including Funding Opportunity Announcements and applications), and instructions.
- Review all applications pending review in the meeting for conflict of interest or the appearance of conflict of interest. If you perceive a conflict or have questions regarding a conflict, contact the Scientific Review Officer (SRO) immediately.
- Review your application assignments for match with your expertise. If you have questions regarding your assignment to an application, contact the SRO immediately.
- Review the “[NIH Conflict of Interest Rules: Information for Reviewers of NIH Applications and R&D Contract Proposals](#)” and complete the NIH pre-review Certification.
- Make sure that you have signed a Confidentiality Certification (usually in the Internet Assisted Review module).
- Read, evaluate and write a critique for each of your assigned applications (discussants may be asked to provide an ‘Overall Impact’ critique).
- Gain access to and upload critiques, preliminary overall impact scores and individual criterion scores to the Internet Assisted Review (IAR) site for the applications assigned to you; a deadline will be provided by the SRO.
- Read posted critiques for your assigned applications and other applications (you will be denied access to applications where you have a Conflict of Interest).
- Prepare for discussions at the meeting.

Reviewing the Applications

Written Critique

- Reviewers will use bullets to note strengths and weaknesses for each of the scored review criteria, and should provide context and an explanation for their comments based on the project (e.g., refer to a Specific Aim). While brevity is acceptable, bullets should express complete thoughts and be sufficient to inform the reader.
- Reviewers will write a paragraph summarizing the factors that informed their Overall Impact score (See Overall Impact below).
- Download the critique templates and enter bulleted comments directly into the document (if you prefer to compose your critique in a separate document, you may wish to “paste special” – as plain text - to retain the bulleted format).
- When finished, upload the document to IAR.
- Please see the [Critique Template Instructions](#) for more information on working with the critique templates.

Scoring

- The NIH [scoring system](#) uses a 9-point scale for the overall impact score and individual scores for (at least) five scored criteria.
- For both types of score, ratings are in whole numbers only (no decimal ratings).
- NIH expects that scores of 1 or 9 to be used less frequently than the other scores.
- 5 is considered an average score.

No formula is used to derive the overall impact score from the individual criterion scores, and reviewers are instructed to weigh the different criteria as they see fit in deriving their overall scores.

- Ratings are in whole numbers only (no decimal ratings).
- Reviewers enter scores into IAR (not on the template).
- Please see the [Scoring System and Procedure](#) for more information on scoring.
- Reviewers will score an application as presented in its entirety, and may not modify their scores on the assumption that a portion of the work proposed will be deleted or modified according to the SRG's recommendations.

Review Criteria and Considerations

- Each application is evaluated for scientific and technical merit according to the Scored Review Criteria, Additional Review Criteria, and Additional Review Considerations stated in the Funding Opportunity Announcement.
- More details about the Review Criteria for common award mechanisms are found in [Review Criteria at a Glance](#).

1. Overall Impact

- In reviewing Research Projects, reviewers will provide an overall impact score and critique to reflect their assessment of the likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field(s) involved, in consideration of the five (or more) scored review criteria, and additional review criteria (as applicable for the project proposed). For other activity codes (such as fellowships, career awards, training programs, and others), overall impact may be defined differently.
- Reviewers will provide a paragraph summarizing the factors that informed their Overall Impact score. This paragraph should be a stand-alone assessment of the strengths and weaknesses outlined for each of the five scored criteria below. It is not intended to be a restatement or summary of the specific aims or the bulleted comments outlined in the critique. Rather, this paragraph should succinctly inform the reader (e.g., the applicant, program staff, members of council) of the underlying rationale for the Overall Impact score in consideration with the scored review criteria.
- In reviewing Research Projects, reviewers should assume that basic and applied research are equally relevant to the mission of NIH and must evaluate overall impact in the context of the application.
- Note that an application does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged likely to have major scientific impact and thus deserve a good impact score. For example, an investigator may propose to carry out important work that by its nature is not innovative but is essential to move a field forward.
- The Overall Impact score is not necessarily the average of the individual criterion scores.
- Overall Impact and Significance are different entities. The distinction between Overall Impact and Significance is described [here](#).

2. Scored Review Criteria

- Reviewers will consider each of the scored review criteria in the determination of scientific and technical merit, and give a separate score for each.
- Most Funding Opportunity Announcements have the following five scored review criteria:

Significance, Investigator(s), Innovation, Approach, and Environment.

- In evaluating the Investigator(s) review criterion, reviewers are encouraged to focus on the qualifications and expertise of the members of the research team for the work proposed, including the Personal Statement in each Biosketch. Unless the application is for a fellowship or career development award, remarks about career tracks, titles, or salaries should be reserved for the Additional Comments to the Applicant box, or the Budget section.

Resources

- See [Review Criteria at a Glance](#).

3. Additional Review Criteria

- When applicable, reviewers will consider the additional review criteria in the determination of scientific and technical merit and an overall impact score.
- Reviewers will not give separate scores for these items.

Resources

Here are guidelines for:

- The review of the [Vertebrate Animals](#) section (PDF - 43 KB) — March 21, 2016
- The [Review of the Human Subjects Section](#) (PDF - 146 KB) — March 21, 2016
- The [Review of Inclusion on the Basis of Sex/Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Age in Clinical Research](#) (PDF - 81 KB) — March 21, 2016
- The review of use of [Human Embryonic Stem Cells](#) (PDF-69 KB)— March 21, 2016
- The review of [Revision Applications](#) (formerly Competing Supplements) (PDF – 47 KB) — Dec. 18, 2015
- [Revised Definition of Clinical Trials](#) and Clinical Trial [Decision Tree](#) (from the [Office of Science Policy](#) website)

4. Additional Review Considerations

- When applicable, reviewers will comment on each of the additional review considerations, but will not assign scores and should not consider these items when determining an overall impact score.
- Program staff will administratively handle any concerns on these items following the review.

Resources

Here are guidelines for:

- The review of the [Budget Information](#) (PDF - 284 KB) — March 5, 2012
- Considering [Information on Select Agents](#)

5. Additional Comments to the Applicant

- Reviewers may provide guidance to the applicant or recommend against resubmission without fundamental revision.
- These comments need not relate directly to the scientific or technical merit of the application, do not factor into the final impact score, are not binding, and do not represent a consensus of the review panel.

- Other reviewers may not agree with these comments.
- Applicants are not obligated to address these comments when writing an introduction to a resubmission application.

MEETING ACTIVITIES

Summary

- The SRO will begin the meeting by reviewing policies and describing meeting procedures.
- In some SRGs, applications are reviewed based on the preliminary overall impact score (beginning with the best scores).
- Applications will be grouped together when feasible (e.g., same mechanisms, new investigators, or clinical applications).
- In most cases, only the more meritorious applications (based on preliminary scores) will be discussed at the meeting. All fully participating members of the SRG must concur on the recommendation to not discuss an application.
 - Applications that are discussed at the meeting will receive a final impact score, individually assigned reviewer criterion scores, a summary statement with critiques, and a resume and summary of the discussion.
 - Applications that are not discussed will receive summary statements containing written critiques and individual criterion scores from assigned reviewers and in some cases discussants.

Presentation and Discussion

- Applications will be introduced by the Chair of the SRG.
- Assigned reviewers will share their initial overall impact score and should be prepared to explain the significance of the proposed research and the overall impact the research will have on the field.
- Group discussion follows assigned reviewer presentations.
- Open discussion of scientific merit may result in disparate levels of enthusiasm.
 - The reasons for any disparities should be made clear to allow for both an informed vote by all panel members, and also a high quality summary statement.
- Because consideration of human subject protections, inclusion plans, vertebrate animals or biohazards can affect scientific and technical merit, these elements are discussed before final scoring.

Final Score and Voting

Based on the presentation and discussion, and the preliminary critique and overall impact scores from each assigned reviewer, each discussed application is given a score by all reviewers who are eligible to vote on that application. Mail Reviewers do not attend the review meeting and their preliminary overall impact scores are not averaged in to determine the average preliminary score. Mail Reviewers' critiques and scores are considered by the review panel.

- Both regularly appointed and temporary members vote on each application for which they do not have a conflict of interest.

- Mail reviewers do not provide final, overall impact scores.
 - Reviewers may use non-numeric impact scores, as appropriate:
 - AB – abstain from voting
 - CF – conflict of interest; did not participate in the discussion and scoring
 - NP – not present during discussion
- The following scenarios require a committee decision
 - ND - not discussed
 - NR - not recommended for further consideration (may reflect a lack of substantial merit or serious ethical problems in use of human subjects, vertebrate animals, or the environment)
 - DF – deferred
- If a particular score is considered an outlier, the reviewer must have stated his/her concerns during the discussion so that they can be reflected in the final summary statement.
- The scores from all eligible reviewers for a given application are averaged (calculated to one decimal point) and multiplied by 10 to determine the final overall impact score.
- A final overall impact score and summary of the discussion will be included in the summary statement.

POST-MEETING ACTIVITIES

- After the meeting, the SRO sets an “Edit Phase” in IAR.
- Reviewers should edit their criterion scores and critiques to reflect any changes to their preliminary assessment.
- Reviewers must sign their post-meeting Conflict of Interest (COI) certification.

ETHICAL CONDUCT OF REVIEWERS

Conflict of Interest

- Check for potential conflicts of interest (or appearances of conflicts) and alert the SRO immediately of any conflicts of which you are aware.
- During the meeting, if a reviewer has a conflict of interest with any application or proposal, the reviewer must leave the room during evaluation and scoring of that application or proposal.
- In signing the post-review certification, each reviewer certifies that he/she did not participate in an evaluation of any application or proposal with which he/she knowingly had a conflict of interest.

Confidentiality

- Respect for the privacy of the investigators' ideas and reviewers' opinions is important; all applications and related materials are privileged communications that cannot be shown to or discussed with unauthorized individuals. (See [Confidentiality in NIH Peer Review](#).) This means that you are prohibited from:
 - Sharing applications, proposals, or meeting materials with anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process.
 - Granting access to any NIH secure computer system or advisory committee meeting to

anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process.

- Disclosing, in any manner, information about the committee deliberations, discussions, evaluations, or documents to anyone who has not been designated to participate in the peer review process or who has a declared conflict of interest.
- Using information contained in an application or proposal for his/her personal benefit or making such information available for the personal benefit of any other individual or organization.
- In signing the confidentiality certification, each reviewer certifies that he/she fully understands the confidential nature of the review process and agrees to confidentiality and non-disclosure.
- Reviewers are required to leave all review materials (that are not in the public domain) with the SRO at the conclusion of the review meeting.

Research Misconduct

- Research misconduct is defined as fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results, but not honest error or differences of opinion.
- It is vital that you do not make allegations of potential misconduct in the critique; instead, such concerns must be brought to the attention of the SRO in a confidential manner, preferably before the study section meets.

Resources

- More guidance on [Additional Comments to the Applicant](#).