

Insider's Guide to Peer Review for New Study Section Chairs



To help new study section chairs get a good start, CSR asked five current and retired study section chairs to share their insights on serving as a chair. They responded with great enthusiasm and some expected diversity. We present their advice to new chairs below in their own words to preserve their spirit and impact. CSR also received and posted advice for new reviewers that could be helpful for new study section chairs. See the [Insider's Guide to NIH Peer Review for New Reviewers](#). More comprehensive and official guidelines and rules for both study [section chairs](#) and [reviewers](#) are available on [CSR's Web site](#).

Before the Meeting

Help Recruit Reviewers: “Play an active role with your [Scientific Review Officer](#) (SRO) in helping to suggest new panel members. Try to find people who are adept or are willing to see a big picture and are really interested in a scholarly review and try to find appropriate senior and minority reviewers.”

Do Your Homework: “If there are a small number of applicants, you can read all of the applications. For a large number of proposals, this is generally impractical. At a minimum, you should thoroughly familiarize yourself with the critiques of all of the proposals likely to be reviewed, and also with the proposals that have widely discrepant scores (e.g., 1.2 and unscored). Doing this will give you, and your committee, the confidence needed to proceed efficiently.”

Rely on Your SRO: “They can spot applications where there are problems ahead of time, and you can read, focus and be prepared for them. And they will provide you information before and during the meeting to prepare you to facilitate discussions. They really foster success and make everyone very proud to be a member of the study section.”

Work with Your SRO to Prioritize the Reviews: “At the outset of the meeting, we found it helpful to define three categories of proposals that allowed us to predict how much discussion each proposal might require. One category included proposals in which all three preliminary scores were excellent and in agreement (e.g., all scores < 2.0, range < .3). These proposals, although scientifically fascinating, didn't need much discussion, because in my experience, even extended discussions didn't change their scoring. A second category included proposals with no excellent preliminary scores (e.g., all scores \geq 2.0), regardless of the range. These proposals had many flaws and also didn't need much discussion. Finally, the third category included proposals with at least one excellent preliminary score, but substantial discrepancy in those scores. These were the proposals that needed our attention. Limiting our discussion on the first two categories allowed us to devote more discussion time to proposals in this category.”

During the Meeting

Set the Stage: “You will have some ad hocs at every meeting, so explain at the beginning how the process works, what you hope to achieve and how you will run things. Remind everyone why they are there: It's about being fair in evaluating the science in the applications. If everyone keeps this focus, it's both fun to do the review and scholarly.”

Set the Tone: “NIH encourages spirited and vigorous discussion of each proposal, so that all views can be aired, and differences of opinion noted. Let the committee know that all relevant and informed opinions are welcome, but those that do not add to the discussion will be discouraged. On the same token, it is perfectly proper to curtail the length of the discussion of a proposal in

which there is unanimity of opinion and scores, and to extend discussion of those which are particularly controversial. Also, remind everyone it is all about the applications”

Keep Your Focus: “Have an open mind and play a guiding role. It won’t work if you try to micromanage or run everything. Stay focused on what the issues are in trying to bring consensus together.”

Know When to Move On: “Try to achieve consensus when possible, but realize that there will be times when the study section members just don't agree, and you have to be prepared to stop the discussion. One of the hardest things to do is to maintain the balance between keeping the discussion moving and giving sufficient time for full committee input and differences in opinion; knowing when to wrap up the discussion is important so that all proposals can be fairly discussed.”

Be Sensitive “to the fact that all of the reviewers have worked hard to prepare their reviews and take frequent opportunities to say this.”

Help the SRO Coach New Members: “When new panel members came on, I often would have private discussions to help them understand how the panel works and what we’re trying to achieve. They often would very much appreciate that. And if someone was having difficulty in the meeting . . . like being repetitious or not advancing the evaluation . . . I would often have a private word at a the first lunch or break.”

Keep an Eye on the Clock: “One of the biggest problems with review meetings is running over time. As chair, you can help by keeping the meeting moving forward at all times. Be judicious in allocating breaks and meals, and adhering to the set order. I brought in a timer to the meeting with the purpose of gauging how long it took to review a proposal from announcement of conflicts to end of discussion. Just having the committee know that you are keeping track of the time provides a good incentive for them to keep moving as well. Remember, longer is not necessarily better.”

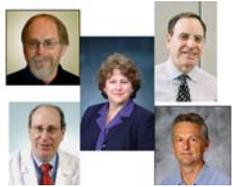
Have Fun: “Deliberations of a study section are by nature intense and draining. Nevertheless, a lighthearted demeanor is an excellent means of increasing participation. A little humor (though never at the expense of any PI or member), socialization after the meetings, and an open style all contribute to the enjoyment—and therefore participation—in the meeting.”



Would you serve again?

“Absolutely! The benefits of serving go far beyond the standard service to science. I made many lifelong friends . . . and it is an extremely valuable educational experience that cultivates your ability to write better proposals, do better science, think strategically and broaden your perspectives.

Alice Clark, Ph.D.
Vice Chancellor for Research and Sponsored Programs
The University of Mississippi



In appreciation for their many contributions . . .

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