

## Insider's Guide to Peer Review For New Reviewers

### NIH Center for Scientific Review



To help new reviewers get a good start, CSR asked five current and retired study section chairs to share their insights on reviewing NIH grant applications. They responded with great enthusiasm and some expected diversity. We present their advice to new reviewers below in their own words to preserve their spirit and impact. More comprehensive and official reviewer guidelines and rules are available on [CSR's Web site](#).

**Relax:** “Even for those not easily intimidated, serving as a reviewer for the first time can be very intimidating. Always remember that you were asked to serve as a reviewer because you are a respected scientist. Voice your opinion on the merits of the proposals - especially if you disagree with other reviewers. The whole point of the process is to allow varying opinions to be shared so that all participating can provide more informed recommendations.”

**Talk About What Matters:** “Oral presentations at study section are not like anything most of us have done before. Study section time is valuable, so it is vital that the oral presentations focus on issues that help people arrive at a score. Sometimes the science is so good (or bad) that a reviewer wants to tell everyone all about it. But this brings down the energy level in the whole room and often diminishes our momentum. Just focus on the major strengths and weaknesses. Limit your description of the research and don't try to enumerate every minor flaw.”

**Don't Rehash:** “If you agree with everything the previous reviewer said, say so and then say what you see as different. Too many people who have worked hard on their reviews want to give a 15 min or 20 min presentation that will say exactly the same thing as the person before. This causes frustration on the panel.”

**Focus on the Applications:** “Always remember that the study section is about the applicants, and not about you. The first thing that I heard at my first major review was ‘The purpose of this meeting is to make decisions regarding the relative merit of the proposals, and not to show the committee how smart you are.’”

**What impressed you the most?**



How hard people work to really understand and how exhilarating a study section meeting can be. I was incredibly impressed at the rigor, honesty and quality in the review process. Though it was hard work, it was a lot of fun. And it was very, very enlightening!

Robb Krumlauf, Ph.D., Scientific Director Stowers Institute for Medical Research

**Don't Mince Words:** “They shoot horses, don't they? If you feel there is an immutable and fatal flaw, say so in your review. Otherwise the investigator may needlessly move the deckchairs and resubmit the Titanic.”

**Paint a Big and Balanced Picture:** “Sometimes it's quite easy for inexperienced people to focus on the weakness of things without providing a balanced review. You need to say what the strengths are and explain the big picture.”

**Don't Try to Rewrite an Application:** “You are a critic, not a mentor. Your comments should be generous when possible and polite at all times. They should be clear enough that an investigator has a sense of what needs to be done in order to craft a more competitive application if the current version is unfunded. However, your kindness should not extend to rewriting the application. Please don't suggest better methodologies or designs, or salient references.”

**Score the Application, Not Your Discipline:** “Try not to root for work in your own field, and don't give a 0.1 or 0.2 point handicap because you think there isn't enough funding going into an area.”

**Give Key Historical Facts:** “If you are reviewing a revised application, let us know if the investigators were responsive to the initial review group. If you are reviewing a proposal for continued funding, please comment on the progress the investigators made.”

**Don’t Make Unreasonable Demands:** “R21s are not R01s. They are vehicles that provide an opportunity to marshal the data needed to support a subsequent full-throated assault on federal funding (i.e., an R01). Therefore, by definition they don’t yet have the preliminary data required of an R01, and it isn’t fair to ask for it or to penalize them for the lack of it.”

**Let Go and Have Fun:** “Be very clear about the strengths or the weaknesses and try to give a sense of what you think will be learned by things . . . And don’t be afraid to say there was a part of an application you didn’t really understand. [Alert your SRO ahead of time if you feel unqualified to review an application so he/she can ensure it is reviewed thoroughly.] Don’t be afraid to say you felt most comfortable commenting on one aspect of a proposal or that you didn’t feel as comfortable evaluating another aspect. And don’t be afraid to change your mind—it’s not a turf war. It’s about being fair in evaluating the science. If we keep this focus, it’s both fun to do the review and scholarly.”

	<b>In appreciation for their many contributions . . .</b>
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