

# How to write a strong (NRSA) grant

A primer with practical, crowdsourced tips

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# Disclaimers

- This focuses on the NIH NRSA (F30/F31/F32), and more specifically, the specific aims and research strategy component of that grant (though will touch on the other components)
  - It comes from the perspective of largely systems/behavioral neuroscience
  - This is a brief primer with tips, and is definitely NOT a comprehensive NRSA instruction guide
  - I'm one person. Get advice from lots of people (see resources at the end)
  - This outlines a fairly specific strategy for writing an NRSA (though also provides general advice). There is no one way to write a strong NRSA
  - This advice doesn't just relate to writing training grants
  - I wrote this on airplanes...
- 
- Not getting an NRSA is not the end of the world. There are other options (R36, K etc) and it won't make or break your career.

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[Super brief primer on the other components of the NRSA](#)

# **The basics of an NRSA**

# What is an NRSA?

The purpose of this Kirschstein-NRSA F31 program is to enable ***promising*** predoctoral students with *potential to develop into a productive, independent research scientists*, to obtain ***mentored research training*** while conducting *dissertation research*. The F31 is also used to enhance workforce diversity through a separate program.

F30: dual degree MD/PhD

F31: predoc

F32: postdoc

F33: experienced scientists making big shifts

F99/K00: Pre to Post-doctoral transition (some restrictions)

R36: dissertation award

K99/R00: postdoc-independent transition

2019 guidelines:

F31 <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-19-195.html>

F32 <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-19-188.html>

<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/fellowships>

<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/research-education/r36>

<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/career-development/k99-r00>

# What are the components of an NRSA?


Section of Application	Page Limits * (if different from FOA, FOA supersedes)
Project Summary/Abstract	30 lines of text
Project Narrative	Three sentences
Introduction to Resubmission or Revision Application (when applicable)	1
Applicant's Background and Goals for Fellowship Training	6
Specific Aims	1
Research Strategy	6
Respective Contributions	1
Selection of Sponsor and Institution	1
Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research	1
Sponsor and Co-Sponsor Statements	6
Letters of Support from Collaborators, Contributors, and Consultants	6
Description of Institutional Environment and Commitment to Training  Note: This page limit includes the Additional Educational Information required for F30 and F31 applications.	2
Applications for Concurrent Support (when applicable)	1
Biographical Sketch	5

<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/how-to-apply-application-guide/format-and-write/page-limits.htm#fel>

# What are the components of an NRSA?

- Project Summary/Abstract (limit 30 lines)
- Project Narrative (limit 2-3 sentences)
- Bibliography (literature cited, no limit)
- Facilities and Other Resources (no limit)
- Equipment (no limit)
- Cover letter (include list of references)
- Letters of Support
- Research Training Plan
- Introduction (resubmissions and revisions only, one page limit)
- **Specific Aims (limit 1 page)**
- **Research Strategy (limit 6 pages)**
- Vertebrate Animals (must answer all five points)
- Resource Sharing Plan(s)
- Respective Contributions (limit 1 page)
- Selection of Sponsor and Institutions (limit 1 page)
- Responsible Conduct of Research (limit 1 page)
- Current or Prior Kirschstein-NRSA Support (limit 1 page)
- Application for Concurrent Support (limit 1 page)
- Goals for Fellowship Training and Career (limit 1 page)
- Activities planned under this award (limit 1 page)
- Doctoral Dissertation and other Research (limit 2 pages)
- Sponsor information (limit 6 pages)
- Appendix (optional)

**This is what we will focus on, but don't take this to mean the other parts aren't important, they are, especially the training plan and sponsor info**





# When is the NRSA due?

F Series Fellowships (including F31 Diversity – NOT-OD-17-029) <i>new, renewal, resubmission</i>	<b>Individual</b> National Research Service Awards (Standard)  (see <a href="#">NRSA Training Page</a> )	April 8	August 8	December 8
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## Review and Award Cycles

	Cycle I	Cycle II	Cycle III
Application Due Dates	January 25 - May 7	May 25 - September 7	September 25 - January 7
Scientific Merit Review	June - July	October - November	February - March
Advisory Council Round	August or October *	January	May
Earliest Project Start Date	September or December *	April	July

# **NRSA review process**

# What is the review process?

- Assigned to a PO
- Assigned to study section
  - ~30 active investigators (PIs, usually NIH-funded) in your \*general\* area e.g., behavioral neuroscience
- Evaluated by 3 reviewers
- If in top 50% of scores (or rescued), then will be discussed at in person study section meeting
- Primary reviewer will introduce your grant: describing all criterion, strengths and weaknesses
- Then second and third reviews chime in
- Main reviewers state their final scores (which may shift depending on the discussion)
- Everyone votes on their score in the range of the primary reviewers, unless they say otherwise.
  
- Then it goes to program, who selects who to fund based on the scores and recommendations of the reviewers

# Review criterion

## Scored Review Criteria

Reviewers will consider each of the review criteria below in the determination of scientific merit, and give a separate score for each. An application does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged likely to have major scientific impact.

### Fellowship Applicant

- Are the applicant's academic record and research experience of high quality?
- Does the applicant have the potential to develop into an independent and productive researcher?
- Does the applicant demonstrate commitment to a research career in the future?

### Sponsors, Collaborators, and Consultants

- Are the sponsor(s') research qualifications (including recent publications) and track record of mentoring individuals at a similar stage appropriate for the needs of the applicant?
- Is there evidence of a match between the research and clinical interests (if applicable) of the applicant and the sponsor(s)? Do(es) the sponsor(s) demonstrate an understanding of the applicant's training needs as well as the ability and commitment to assist in meeting these needs?
- Is there evidence of adequate research funds to support the applicant's proposed research project and training for the duration of the research component of the fellowship?
- If a team of sponsors is proposed, is the team structure well justified for the mentored training plan, and are the roles of the individual members appropriate and clearly defined?
- Are the qualifications of any collaborator(s) and/or consultant(s), including their complementary expertise and previous experience in fostering the training of fellows, appropriate for the proposed project?
- If the applicant is proposing to gain experience in a clinical trial as part of his or her research training, is there evidence of the appropriate expertise, experience, resources, and ability on the part of the sponsor(s) to guide the applicant during the clinical trial research experience?

### Research Training Plan

- Is the proposed research project of high scientific quality, and is it well integrated with the proposed research training plan?
- Based on the sponsor's description of his/her active research program, is the applicant's proposed research project sufficiently distinct from the sponsor's funded research for the applicant's career stage?
- Is the research project consistent with the applicant's stage of research development?
- Is the proposed time frame feasible to accomplish the proposed training?
- If proposed, will the clinical trial experience contribute to the proposed project and/or the applicant's research training?

### Training Potential

- Are the proposed research project and training plan likely to provide the applicant with the requisite individualized and mentored experiences in order to obtain appropriate skills for a research career?
- Does the training plan take advantage of the applicant's strengths and address gaps in needed skills? Does the training plan document a clear need for, and value of, the proposed training?
- Does the proposed training have the potential to serve as a sound foundation that will clearly enhance the applicant's ability to develop into a productive researcher?

### Institutional Environment & Commitment to Training

- Are the research facilities, resources (e.g., equipment, laboratory space, computer time, subject populations, clinical training settings) and training opportunities (e.g. seminars, workshops, professional development opportunities) adequate and appropriate?
- Is the institutional environment for the applicant's scientific development of high quality?
- Is there appropriate institutional commitment to fostering the applicant's mentored training?

# Review criterion

Score for each criterion

And overall impact which is not necessary an average of the criterion sore

Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor
High	1	Exceptional
	2	Outstanding
	3	Excellent
Medium	4	Very Good
	5	Good
	6	Satisfactory
Low	7	Fair
	8	Marginal
	9	Poor

# Review criterion

- Fellowship applicant
- Sponsors
- Research training plan
- Training potential

## *It's about*

- *your qualifications (prior work & preliminary data, likelihood you will go on to be successful in an independent career)*
- *your sponsor's qualifications to mentor you in the proposed research AND to get you to the next stage of your career*
- *the quality of your research training (and, thus, the quality of the research and experimental design)*
- *the potential for new training that will launch you to the next phase of your career*

Notice what's absent: Significance & innovation (primary criterion on an R01)

- these will factor into the research training plan criterion
- but feasibility and training potential trumps significance for a training grant

## Tips

- Focus on the criterion when writing your proposal
- Avoid giving reviewers easy things to triage your grant over (see [common pitfalls](#) below)
- Reviewers will argue for a grant when there is disagreement; but they can't argue for ever single grant... make your grant worth fighting for
- If reviewers just don't like your grant, or don't get it, but can't put their finger on why, they are more likely to nitpick on smaller things. Keep this in mind when reading your reviews, i.e., read between the lines. See [Hot tips: Responding to feedback in a resubmission](#)

**The question, idea, and hypothesis**

# Where do I start?

- What's your question and hypothesis?
- What's the best way to test this question?
- What do you want to learn to launch you into the next phase of your career?  
(conceptual & technical)



# What makes a strong research proposal?

- ***Compelling*** question
- ***Clarity*** of thought & expression
- A strong, ***testable hypothesis***
- ***Logical*** and non-interdependent steps (aims) to address that question
- ***Rigorous*** experiments to answer the question

Nandita Mullapudi

- A question that is within the scope of your sponsor's funded research (ideally NIH funded)
  - The NRSA pays for you, not the science, so you need to propose a project that is within the scope of what is already funded in your lab

# The question, idea, and hypothesis



**Tom Kash** @superkash · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

in our grant writing class, the first thing is to get people up to the board and have them write big question, hypotehsis and aims. essentially a chalk talk. whole class participates, great for obtaining clarity of thought.



1



15



**Tom Kash** @superkash · Sep 20

it takes a while. but in teaching, we have found that if you start with clarity, writing is 'easier'



3



**Mattia** @Ciavenasc · Sep 21

Replying to @KateWassum

Describe the topic and the unmet need. Define the overarching question. Define the question that you aim to answer with each experiment/analysis. Be respectful of your colleagues that are going to read it: you won't away with poorly written or hastily put together proposals



1



**Laurens Witter** @gigaseal · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

In the midst of writing two now. structure: 1. Why is it important 2. What will you solve 3. How will you solve it. Then each aim: 1. Rationale, 2. Methods/approach 3. Expected outcome 4. Alternatives if 2 fails. Everything needs a backup plan. Make it 100% failsafe.



1



# The question, idea, and hypothesis

- The question and hypothesis are critical
- It should be clear & concise
- Imagine someone getting up and saying this grant proposes to ask XXX and is testing the hypothesis that XXX. They will do this by XXX.
  - This is what reviewer #1 will have to do, make it easy for them to sell your idea
- Ideally your data will be informative regardless of whether your hypothesis is supported



**Dr. Nicole Redmond** @DrNRedmond · 2h

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Also, actually state the hypothesis you're testing.



# The question, idea, and hypothesis

## What makes a good research question?

If you put this to leading researchers you are likely to get many different answers. So ask them! You will learn a lot from the process and from interacting with them. I think a good research question has to be *obviously good* to people from outside your research area. It has to be big enough for others to appreciate immediately why anyone should spend years of their life using large amounts of money from the public purse or charities to answer such a question. For many researchers, the question also has to be intellectually stimulating—if possible, thrilling! But at the same time a good research question has to be one which is likely to be answered within the time frame of the grant. It has to be a practical proposal, not something so grand that it would take decades to unlock.

Masud Husain

# The question, idea, and hypothesis

## Coming up with a good idea:

- Ask your mentor
- Ask PIs, postdocs, colleagues within and just outside your field
  - Don't steal anyone's idea though... duh
- What big question(s) have not been answered in your field?
- Are people eager to know the answer(s)?
- Go to conferences, read papers, get on twitter, see what's missing.
- Look at NIH reporter to see the types of things getting funding?

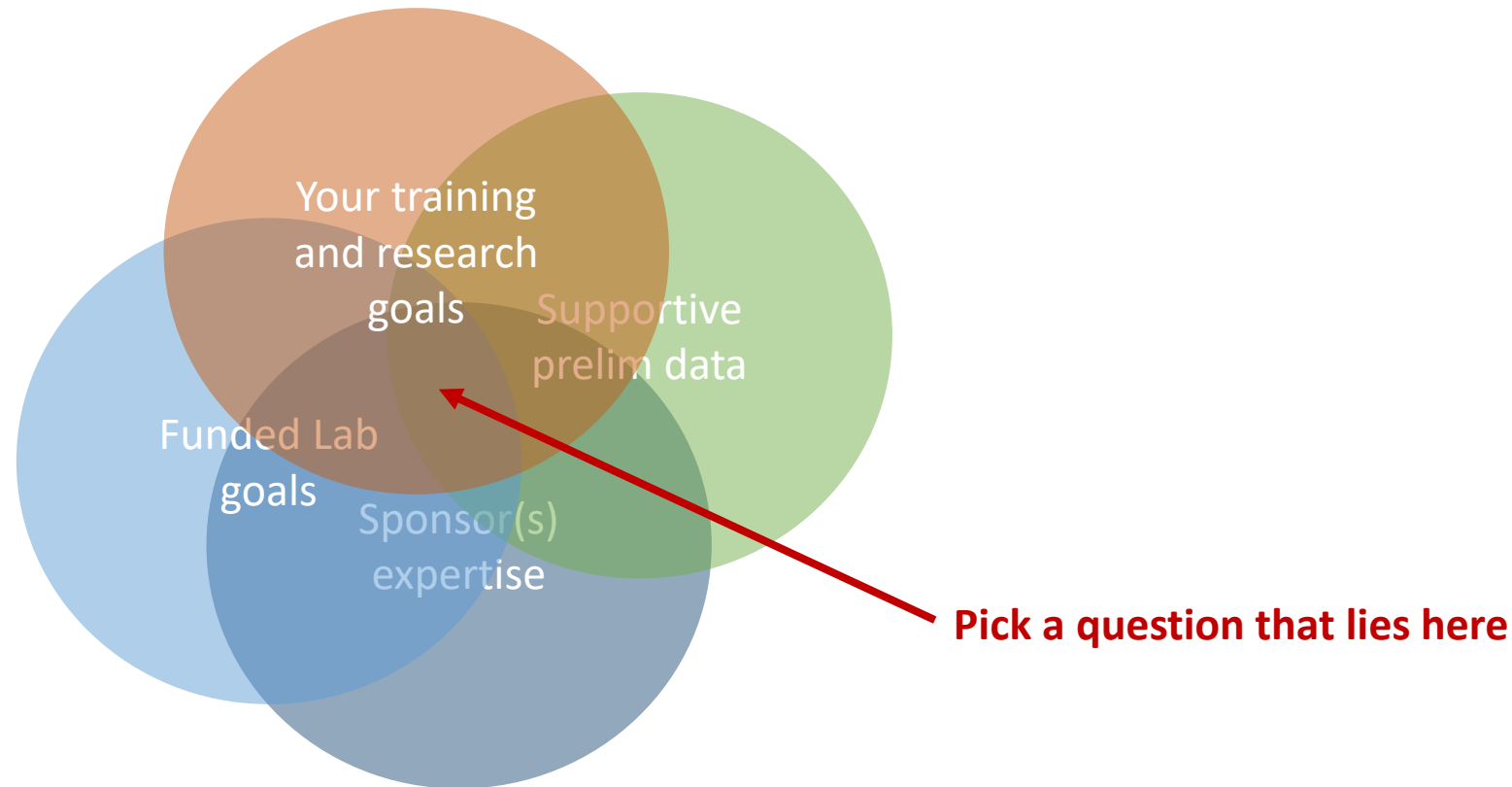
# The question, idea, and hypothesis

## Coming up with a feasible idea:

- Think about feasibility.
- Look at NIH reporter to see what the scope of work of successful NRSA's in your field/a your stage are
- Think about your time frame (how many years you are asking for funding)
- See also notes below on how to [avoid being overambitious](#)

# The question, idea, and hypothesis

Make a mental venn diagram of your training goals, questions of interest to you, funded research questions of the lab, technical expertise of your sponsor/available co-sponsors, and methods/concepts your prelim data support. In the middle will emerge some questions you can tackle... find the most significant one of these and do it.



# The question, idea, and hypothesis



M. S. AtKisson @iGrrrl · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Always remember the Heilmeir catechsim: [arpa.mil/work-with-us/h...](https://arpa.mil/work-with-us/h...)



3



## The Heilmeier Catechism

- What are you trying to do? Articulate your objectives using absolutely no jargon.
- How is it done today, and what are the limits of current practice?
- What is new in your approach and why do you think it will be successful?
- Who cares? If you are successful, what difference will it make?
- What are the risks?
- How much will it cost?
- How long will it take?
- What are the mid-term and final “exams” to check for success?



# The hypothesis

- Is related to your question (but is not your question)
- Is testable/falsifiable
- Is clear and simple
- Is specific
- Is important
- Is well rooted in the literature (but not incremental)
- Testing it will produce important information regardless of whether it's supported
- Will be tested by your aims
- Is feasible to test within the proposed timeframe

---

♥ C. Savio Chan and 4 others liked



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · 1h



PSA: Putting conditional language in a hypothesis (can, may, might, could) means that the sentence no longer contains a hypothesis. You cannot test a conditional. A hypothesis must be testable, ideally directional.



# The question, idea, and hypothesis

## Make it hypothesis driven

It is well worth jotting down what your hypotheses are, for your own sake. Most studies are vulnerable to the criticism that they are 'exploratory' and do not have specific hypotheses that are being tested. Even if your study is largely exploratory, make some explicit hypotheses about what you might be directly testing, based on proposal. It is absolutely essential that you write down clear hypotheses, unless the Call is specifically for an exploratory study, which is very rare. 'Fishing expeditions', no matter how good they might be, do not fare well with reviewers or grant panels. I often use direct questions incorporating the hypotheses I want to test as subheadings in an application. That way no one is in doubt about what the hypotheses are.

Masud Husain

# The hypothesis

A hypothesis & prediction are not the same thing

Hypothesis: a potential explanation of a biological event

- *Projections from the orbitofrontal cortex to the basolateral amygdala regulate the encoding of reward value.*
- *Hypoactivity in nucleus accumbens causes apathy symptoms in depression.*

Prediction: the specific expected result of an experiment based on the hypothesis

- *Inactivation of orbitofrontal cortex to the basolateral amygdala projections will prevent reward value encoding.*
- *Medial prefrontal cortex activity is attenuated in subjects diagnosed with major depressive disorder with symptoms of reduced apathy, relative to health controls.*

# Challenges in creating a strong question/hypothesis/plan

Don't try to fit a square peg into a round hole (Nancy Smith- UCLA)

- Try to avoid starting with the experiments you plan (or your PI told you) to do and make a question and hypothesis from this... start with the question and hypothesis and propose the experiments that best answer the question and test the hypothesis

**I've got a good question, now what?**

# The approach, experimental design

- Logical steps that include specific experiments to address your question and test your hypothesis
- Non-interdependent
- Ideally your experiments will not produce entirely descriptive information
  - Description of the phenotype of a KO mouse
    - Reviewer would say: lacks mechanistic insight
  - Recordings of activity in brain region in different behaviors
    - Reviewer would say: lacks information on causal function
  - RNA-seq of one or two brain regions in several different states
    - Reviewer would say: lacks causal analysis, mechanism of transcriptional regulation

# The approach, experimental design

- Experiments must be rigorous, well controlled and systematic
  - Read top well respected papers in your field. Notice the methods, controls, validations and use this info to craft your experimental design
- Converging evidence, use multiple methods to address the same question from different angles. This overcomes the imitations of any one single method
- Avoid artificial (or entirely artificial) manipulations
  - Think through the physiological relevance of your proposed projects
  - Using entirely optogenetic stimulation probably won't well test your hypothesis
- Include ALL the controls
  - Look to the literature for what is the most rigorous standard
  - ask for feedback from your PI and others in the field
- Include ALL the validations
  - Never propose a method that without showing and continuing to validate it does what its supposed to be doing

# The approach, experimental design

Think through the project

e.g., If you want to ask A, then you have to do X, Y, Z (based on your reading of the literature) can you show you can do X, Y, and Z, if not then get a collaborator who is expert in A, or don't do A

Make sure you experiments test your hypothesis

e.g., if I do A I might find X and on the basis of X I could interpret Z. Is Z a true/false for your hypothesis? If not, then you need to adjust your experiments to make sure you are testing your hypothesis (or adjust your hypothesis)

Don't propose a correlational analysis for a hypothesis that requires a causal analysis.

e.g., X mediates Y, so I will record X. recording X doesn't test mediation of Y.

Think through the statistical analyses

This may help you identify missing controls, incongruence, or an overambitious design



**Dr. Nicole Redmond** @DrNRedmond · 8m

Replying to @KateWassum

It's actually useful for helping folks think through their project themselves. Sometimes they want to measure all of the things, eg Already collecting X, can get Y and Z too. But Y and Z add complexity and don't fit in conceptual framework



1





# The approach, experimental design

- Must be feasible!!!
  - You have a sponsor/co-sponsor that is expert in the concept method
    - If your lab doesn't have demonstrated expertise in an area, get a co-sponsor who does)
  - Your sponsor's/co-sponsor's lab has demonstrated success in the method (published or preliminary data)
  - You can learn to do it (this is based on your personal statement)
  - You can do it within the time frame proposed
- You will likely design, then redesign your experiments; make sure you update your question/hypothesis to suite your final set of experiments i.e., make sure your experiments actually well test your hypothesis.

- Address potential pitfalls and propose alternative strategies.
- Propose experiments that fall within the timeline. Never 'over-propose'.
- Have somebody else review it before you submit.
- Include schematics/figures to explain concepts.
- Do not try to capture multiple thoughts in the same sentence.



**Raj R Rao**

Professor & Department Head,  
Biomedical Engineering  
University of Arkansas, USA

**I've got the idea, hypothesis, and approach,  
what do I actually write?**

**Specific aims page**

# Specific aims page

## Limited to 1 page

The Fellowship Applicant must describe concisely the Specific Aims, broad, long-term objectives and the goal of the proposed research to test a stated hypothesis.



**Abraham Palmer** @AbePalmer · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

If you haven't won them over by the end of the Specific Aims page, you've already lost. Make sure that page pops.



3



**Sharon Plon** @splon · 7h

Replying to @KateWassum

Two points (1) If reviewers don't like your grant after reading the specific aims page the battle is half lost. Work on it. (2) the closer to the deadline you ask someone to read the grant - the less useful the comments you receive. They know you don't have time to change much.



1



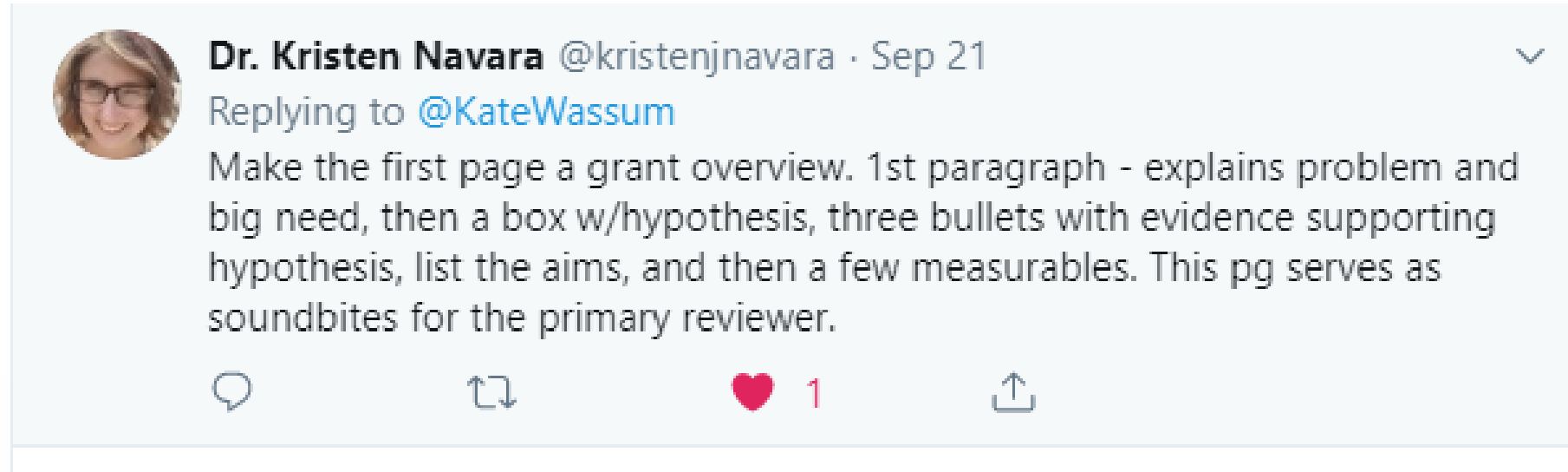
2



The specific aims are really important!!!!

Spend time on them. Do them early. Get feedback on them, revise accordingly, THEN write the research strategy.

# Specific aims page



- Your reviewer will look back over your aims when they introduce your grant, have all the key points/criterion there available for them (use **bold** underline *italics*)

Make sure italicized or underlined statements stand alone... ie one can get them without reading everything around them.

# Specific aims page



**Maire Doyle** @celticscientist · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

The hardest point I have found to get across to junior postdocs is to not have them write the first draft of their SA as an introduction to their entire field of study, almost always I have to a stroke through their first paragraph. Spend 80% of ypur time on the SA.



2



- Get to the point, provide only enough background for the reader to understand your broad goal, question/gap in knowledge, hypothesis, and aims.
- No need for citations in the aims, you make claims here that you will support in the main research strategy with citations (I think T. Kash said this)

# Specific aims page



**Dr Mike Nitabach**  
@mnitabach



Well-written grant specific aims should be fully understandable by a senior undergrad major in yr discipline w/o having to look anything up.

12:37 PM · Nov 18, 2019 · [Talon \(Plus\)](#)

37 Retweets 190 Likes



**Dr Mike Nitabach** @mnitabach · 21h  
Replying to [@mnitabach](#)



I'm pretty good at self-enforcing this now after years of practice, but in beginning I relied heavily on feedback from people outside my subfield.

2



12



**David L. Haggerty** @dlhagger · 20h  
Replying to [@mnitabach](#)



How is anyone supposed to fund anything remotely interdisciplinary using this rule of thumb?

1



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · 20h



IMO/E, this approach serves best for interdisciplinary work. Reviewers will come from many backgrounds, too. They all need to understand. Dump all the jargon: Why is this important? What will you do?

1



1



4





# Specific aims page

Should clearly communicate the

- scientific problem
- the gap in knowledge/need for investigation
- The importance of the proposed work
- the general and specific goals of the project (as an overview), including training goals

# Specific aims page

The specific aims are critical.

This is often where you will capture or lose your reviewer.

*Good specific aims will make a good grant easy to write.*

If a grant is not coming together, the problem is very likely within the aims.

# Specific aims page- Kate's suggested structure

## ¶1:

1. Something to introduce the broad topic of study.
2. Slightly more specific information.
3. The problem, with the connotation of why this is an important problem
4. Thus, the *broad objective* of this proposal is to XXX.

## ¶2:

1. Something to introduce the more specific topic of study.
2. Slightly more specific information.
3. Limitations of prior research.
4. The gap in knowledge.
5. *Thus my general working hypothesis is XXX.*
6. I will combine **xxx**, **xxx**, and **xxx** to test this hypothesis (**xxx** = ***techniques*** and ***methods***)  
if your hypotheses has more than one aspect, then repeat #1-4 prior to #5, potentially in a separate paragraph.

## Aims

1. **Clear, direct statement of the aim in a single sentence.**
2. Specific background information that leads to the specific hypothesis for this aim.
3. I will use XXX and XXX (techniques/methods) to address the specific hypothesis that XXX.

*Most training grants have 2-3 aims*

## Training Aim

With the proposed project I will acquire xxx skills, xxx conceptual understanding, and further develop my xxx skills and understanding, which will be crucial for launching me to the next phase of my career.

# Specific aims

- Clear cut steps to be used to test your hypothesis
- Related, but NOT interdependent
  - if Aim 1 does not work out, or the hypothesis is not supported, then you can't or wouldn't proceed with aim 2
  - The only case in which you \*might\* get away with interdependency is if the aim that others depend on has VERY strong preliminary data
- Each aim should have its own sub-hypothesis which leads to specific predictions for the outlined experiment(s)
- Need to have measurable endpoints
- Manageable scope of work (which requires a manageable, testable hypothesis)
- Avoid entirely descriptive aims, supplement with causal where possible
- It is usually a good idea to organize your experiments by objective

# Specific aims

- Use ACTIVE, DEFINITIVE words -Determine, Define, Ascertain, Reveal, Delineate, Expose
    - Delineate the XXX function of XXX in XXX process/behavior
    - Determine the role of XXX in XXX.
    - Determine the necessity of XXX for XXX
    - Reveal hyperactivity in XXX during XXX
    - Define the function of XXX in XXX
- Be specific in your hypothesis– e.g., hyperactivity is more specific than dysfunction or abnormal activity

# Specific aims

Adriana Galvan: “For each Specific Aim, list a Training Aim”

Include training aims on the specific aims page, either for each specific aim, or as one clear bullet point e.g. ↓

**Training Aims:** I will further develop my skills in XXX and acquire new skills, including XXX, XXX, and XXX. I will also receive extensive training XXX and XXX concepts/theory. I will receive non-technical training in data presentation and dissemination, oral communication, and XXX type of neuroscience.

# **Research strategy**

# Research Strategy

**Limited to 6 pages.**

Must include:

- **Significance** of the proposed studies, including the background leading to the present application
- **Approach** (including preliminary studies, if any) to provide experimental support of the proposed hypothesis.

The applicant must describe the background leading to the proposed research, the significance of the research, the research approach (design and methods) for achieving the Specific Aims, the rationale, and expected/alternative outcomes of the proposed studies. It is beneficial to include pertinent preliminary data obtained by the applicant in the current or prior laboratory.



# Research Strategy

- State the problem
- Why is it important?
- Describe the aspect of the problem you will solve
- Describe both generally and in some detail how you will solve it
- Describe why you will use this approach
- Demonstrate why you are the best person to solve this problem (and why you are in the best lab to solve this... i.e. prove it's feasible)
- Once successful, what will we know?
- And what will you learn

# Research Strategy- Main sections

- Significance
- Premise & Approach
  - General approach
    - Behavior/general approach
    - Subsections with specific background info for premise
  - Aim 1
    - Rationale
    - Procedures
    - Data and statistical analysis
    - Predictions and implications
    - Alternative strategies (both technical and conceptual)
  - Aim 2
    - Rationale
    - Procedures
    - Data and statistical analysis
    - Predictions and implications
    - Alternative strategies (both technical and conceptual)
- Other stuff
  - Estimation of group size (e.g., your power analysis)
  - Rigor & reproducibility
  - Sex as a biological variable (not required for training grants, but including it won't hurt and some reviewers look for this)

# **Research strategy: Significance**

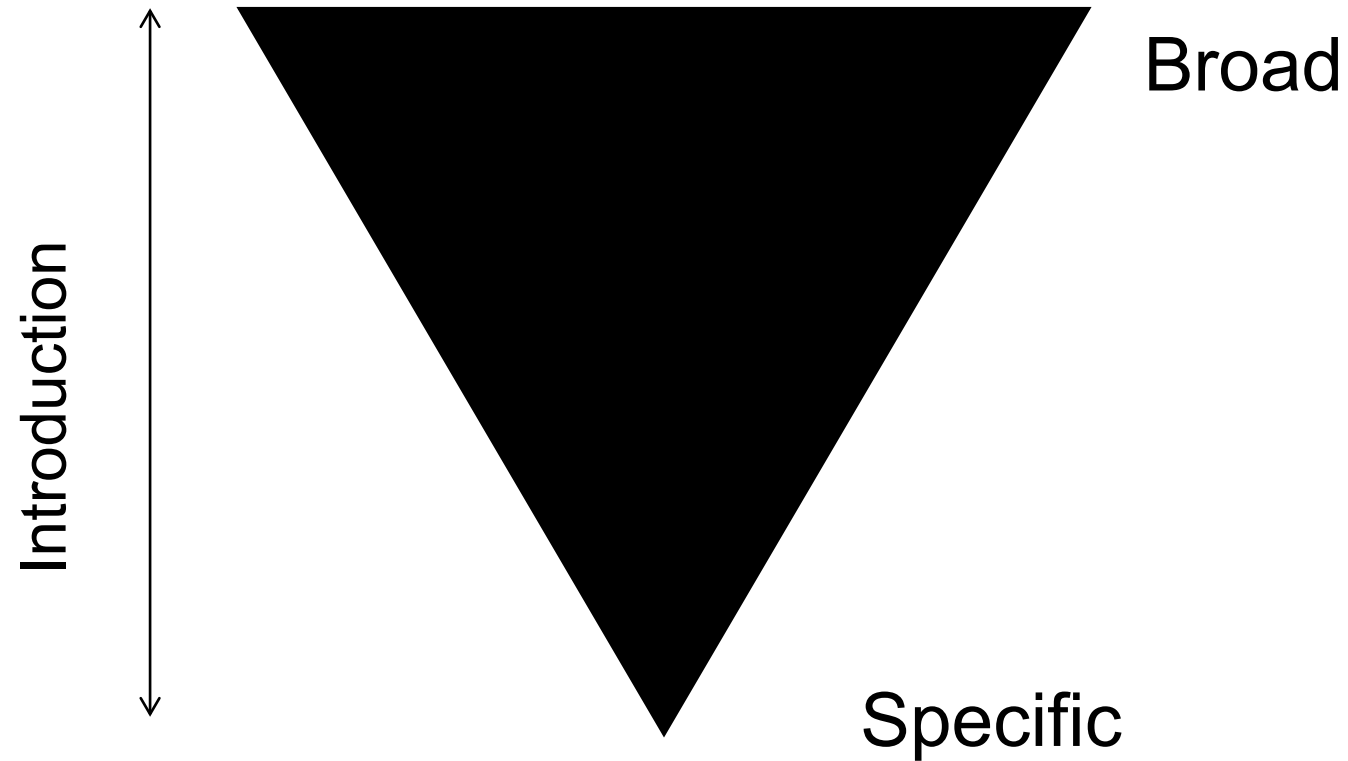
# Research Strategy- Significance

## Significance

- Broader context
- Explain what gap you will fill
- How will filling that gap enrich the field
- Describe impact on concepts/technologies that are central to the field

It is NOT a background section, there will be some broader context and background, but detailed rationale/background info should go in the general approach section

# Research Strategy- Significance



- Get to the main broad objective by the end of the first paragraph (usually I like the first paragraph to lead into this objective)
- Then get to your more specific objective(s) and hypothesis
- then it's ok to get slightly broad again... e.g., to use the inverted triangle to explain the significance of your proposed project, but then to broaden again when you describe the relevance for health/disease

# Research Strategy- Significance

- I suggest ~3/4 pg devoted to this, definitely no more than 1 page (though there is not explicit requirement)
- Include references, but don't describe specific studies or preliminary data in detail give the broad picture relevant for one to understand your question and the potential impact of answering this question
- Goal is to get the reader excited about your proposal, to show them the work will be impactful and important
- This is NOT an introduction/background section- that comes later
- For basic science NRSAs, include a section: "Implications for understanding and treating (insert institute goal here e.g., addiction, mental illness)"
  - But be honest if you're doing basic science, don't overclaim impact to disease. Be clear that you are not attempting to model or study a specific disease state, but then explain why the basic information you are collecting will be important for understanding that disease state and that ultimately understanding disease is your goal
    - E.g., this proposed research is not attempting to study the neural or psychological processes underlying addiction, though that is my future goal. The goal here is to provide a framework/biological architecture/groundwork for such studies by providing mechanistic insight into the XXX neural systems/substrates of XXX behavior known to be dysfunction in XXX disease.

# Research Strategy- Significance, Kate's suggested structure

## ¶1:

1. Something to introduce the broad topic of study.
2. Slightly more specific information.
3. The problem/gap in knowledge with the connotation of why this is an important problem
4. Thus, to achieve XXX knowledge/effect, the *broad objective* of this proposal is to XXX.

## ¶2:

1. Something to introduce the more specific topic of study.
2. Slightly more specific information.
3. Limitations of prior research. (could be #4)
4. The gap in knowledge. (could be #3)
5. Main objective of the proposal
6. Any more information info one needs to understand your hypothesis (not details)
7. *Thus my general working hypothesis is XXX.*
8. I will combine **xxx**, **xxx**, and **xxx** to test this hypothesis (***techniques*** and ***methods***)

## ¶3: Implications for understanding and treating institute goal (e.g., mental illness)

1. A statement about dysfunction of the behavior, process, system you are studying in one or more disease states, with citation
2. How what you are going to study will help understand and/or treat these disease states/what your hypothesis means for understanding the disease state.
3. Anything you are doing to increase translational relevance (e.g., using translationally relevant behaviors, studying circuitry known to be disrupted in specific disease states).
4. How your work may lead to new treatment options (but don't inflate)

# Research Strategy- Significance

Include a diagram on the first page that well encapsulates your hypothesis and, potentially also, your approach to test it.



**loops** @mad4sci · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

I find that explanatory schematics make a huge difference to get your point across. Reviewers have limited time and a lot of dense material to go through. Schematics cut thro the tedium of having to read thro dense material.



1





# **Research strategy: Premise & Approach**

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach

- Your goal here is to outline the *\*relevant\** background information and explain your approach to test your hypothesis, in both a general way and with more specific information on the experiments
- I suggest it include several subsections:
  - A general approach section, where you, in specific sub-headed sections,
    - outline the background information, gap in knowledge, limitations of prior work and rationalize your hypothesis
    - And describe the approach you will take to solve this problem, and why this is a good approach
    - If you're using the same behavioral task throughout each aim, I suggest explaining it here
  - A section for each Aim, with
    - Rationale for each specific hypothesis and approach
    - Procedures
    - Predictions
    - Alternative strategies

**Research strategy:**  
**Premise & Approach**  
**General approach section**

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, General approach section

- I suggest ~2-3 pg for this (depends on how much subsequent rationale/premise you put within each aim)
- **DO** use subheadings to divide this section into the most relevant background parts
- **DO** cite primary research articles (rather than reviews)
  - **Don't describe findings in great detail unless necessary- tell the punchline**
- **DO** put your work in the context of prior literature
- **DO** provide multiple citations for core concepts/methods
- **DO** describe the limitations of prior research and how your proposed work will improve on the existing body of knowledge
- **DO** end each subsection with the approach you will take to address the limitation/gap you have revealed
- **DO** include preliminary data from you and your lab that is supportive of your hypotheses and the technical feasibility of your proposed project (if prelim data is supporting technical feasibility only, or is a pilot, usually I would put this with in the aim itself, rather than the general approach section)
- **DO** cite your lab's prior work on the topic (it can be helpful to highly references from your sponsor(s) lab(s) in a different color
  - Although not exclusively
- **Do** use this section to describe and rationalize general strategy (i.e., behavioral task) that will be fundamental to each aim

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, General approach section

- **Do NOT** assume the reviewer will know the background information. They probably won't, and if they do, they want to know that you know
- **Do NOT** assume the reviewer will *not* know the background info. They will not like if you mischaracterize a study or have inaccuracies
- **Do NOT** write review article. If too long, the reviewer will get bored, lost, wonder what the point is and get frustrated.
- **Do NOT** discuss any topics that you will not pursue experimentally. If you do, it will prompt the reviewer to think you will pursue these ideas, and they will be wondering why you aren't pursuing them.
- **Do NOT** overfit the prior literature to your hypothesis
  - This could result in mischaracterization of the prior work
  - This could cause your hypothesis to seem already known, obvious, and thus less impactful
- **Do NOT** inflate the lack of knowledge or significance of the topic this can cause a negative impression
- but **Do NOT** undersell the importance of your proposed research
  - How do you strike the balance? Basically be accurate and honest about the state of the literature and the gap in knowledge and the impact your study will have. Ask for feedback and specifically ask people if you are under or overselling

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Preliminary data

- Prelim data is CRITICAL
- Should be placed throughout your general approach section where most appropriate (I'm generally not a fan of a separate preliminary data section)
- Data from your sponsor(s) lab(s) AND that you collected
  - You will use the respective contributions section to make clear which figures you did and which were your lab's data, and can make clear in the legend
- One way you demonstrate your capability to perform the proposed experiments
- The further along you are in your position, the more prelim data will be expected of you. Eg a 4<sup>th</sup> year grad student will be expected to have more prelim data than an early 2<sup>nd</sup> year.

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Preliminary data

- Include prelim data that supports your hypothesis
- Include prelim data that supports the feasibility of EVERY method in your lab
- When things are published, you can cite this, though consider making a figure of published data if it is fundamental to the hypothesis
- Make sure the images are clear and readable
  - Do not make them too small
  - Should look like figures you see in strong publications
  - Ideally report the N (and show individual data points) on a graph and statistics (unless your N is too small for this)
- Prelim data should show evidence of strong rigorous science
- Prelim data should be related to the proposed project
  - If you are including prelim data that is unrelated to the proposed project, but is needed to support technical feasibility, make this VERY clear

**Research strategy:**  
**Premise & Approach**  
**Aims subsections**



# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims

- The goal here is to explain your specific hypotheses for each aim and what you will do to test it, with details on your controls and procedures
- To explain why you selected this approach
  - And maybe why you didn't select other approaches
- And to detail what you think will happen and what you think this will mean
- And further to explain your alternative strategies
  - Possible findings other than those predicted, what this would mean, and what you would do to address it
  - Possible technical challenges and how you will address these



**Laurens Witter** @gigaseal · Sep 20

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

In the midst of writing two now.structure: 1. Why is it important 2. What will you solve 3. How will you solve it. Then each aim: 1. Rationale, 2. Methods/approach 3. Expected outcome 4. Alternatives if 2 fails. Everything needs a backup plan. Make it 100% failsafe.



1



# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims

- Break up your rationale & approach by aim
- Include your statistical analyses
- Include any methods validations
- Anticipated difficulties and workarounds
- Include diagrams/flowcharts



**Dr. Nicole Redmond** @DrNRedmond · 2h



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

A simple figure with your conceptual framework can help illustrate how your measures and outcomes fit together to address your aims.



# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims Kate's suggested structure

- Rationale
  - Any additional needed premise (that isn't in the general approach)
  - Specific Hypothesis for each aim (a sub part of your overall hypothesis)
  - How will test this hypothesis we will use xxx because xxx to test xxx. We selected xxx bc xx
  - Include preliminary data referencing feasibility
  - Prediction
- Experiment procedures
  - Details of what you are going to do
  - Why you are doing each thing and what the controls are should be clear.
  - Include the N calculation e.g., [N=12/group (6 male, 6 female) x 2 viruses (hM4Di v. mCherry) x CNO points (training v. test) = 48 rats]  
controls should be super clear
- Validations
- Data analysis, including specific statistical analyses you will use. Be detailed.
- Predictions and interpretation.
  - given our hypothesis we expect xxx and will interpret as xxx. This will be further bolstered by evidence of xxx.
- Alternative strategies
  - Possible findings other than those you predict, what they would mean, what you will do
  - Technical pitfalls, why you think they won't happen, and what you will do if they do
  - Possible limitations of the methods that might cause issues and what you will do to address them

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims



Kate Wassum  
@KateWassum

THIS is good grant writing advice.  
You need to explain what you're going to do, but too many methods details will derail your message.

**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

An Approach (NIH) or Experimental Plan (NSF and others) is not a Methods section. I'm pretty sure you don't need to give the relative humidity and temperature of your cell culture incubator unless it differs from standard (it does not). 1/6

[Show this thread](#)



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

The rubrics disappear when you use them to provide context and appropriate detail. The goal is to show your thought processes so clearly that the reviewer can follow them. First hurdle in grant writing? The reviewer understanding what you want to do and why. Why first, though 5/6

1 11



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

And the caveat: NO rubric, framework, outline provides the magic beans of grant funding. They're simply tools to help you convey an interesting idea with a very feasible and exciting plan. 6/6

1 13



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

Replying to @iGrrrl

If you dive into the methods without context, the reader can't know why they should care. Most often I see, "[Detailed methods.] This will allow us to learn X." Order of information is backwards. 2/6

1 6



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

Start with why. My usual rubric is, "Because we need to know X, we plan to do Y, using approach Z. We expect to see A, which we think would mean B." Start with why. 3/6

1 6 30



**M. S. AtKisson** @iGrrrl · Sep 18

(My approach to discussing preliminary data is almost identical: Because we wanted to know X/had question X/ to test hypothesis X, we did Y. Exactly, we used approach Z. We found A, as shown in Figure 1, which we think means B (supports hypothesis/experiment is feasible).) 4/6

1 9

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims

When describing your procedures, put citations for your or your sponsor's lab- make clear that your lab has done this before. Where your procedures are also demonstrated in your preliminary data reference that too

e.g.,

I will do xxx and yyy as in my labs prior work (CITATIONS) and in my preliminary data (Fig. X).

Consider putting your sponsors' citations in a different color so it is clear to the reviewers what work is coming from your sponsor's lab- this can increase feasibility and make clear your sponsors can provide all necessary training.

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims

Explain the methodology- not just what will do, why will do

Explain why you selected your approach over other alternatives

Use diagrams!

Write **confidently** about approaches that work,

Do not use phrases such as 'In the event X does not work...'.  
Show your confidence by strengthening the likelihood argument, Many researchers including myself/lab have already shown that...).

Although based on our labs experience/preliminary data we have confidence in XXX, if we find XXX problem we will XXX.

Explain the alternative outcomes to show that you have thought through the experiments, and make sure the expected and alternative outcomes produce a win-win situation.

# Research Strategy- Premise & Approach, Aims

If you have identified a potential problems, weaknesses, alternative possibilities... address it it. If you see a weakness, reviewers likely will too and it's better to have addressed it and to say you have a plan than to not address it

**Research strategy:**  
**Other stuff you need to include**



# Research Strategy Sex as a biological variable

- You're not obligated to address this in a training grant, but some reviewers will want to see it, so use both sexes and make that clear.
- State what you will do if you find sex differences add power, report them both, look for heterogeneity of variability
- If you're proposing to study something with known sex differences, explain what these are and what findings you might have
- If you're absolutely only going to use one sex, explain why
- If sex is part of your question you are obviously obligated to well address this

# Research Strategy- Power analysis

- You need to rationalize how you selected your N
- So run a power analysis, explain what data that was run on (e.g., prelim data, existing lab data with similar methods) and get the N you need for sufficient power and propose to use that N
- Also explain if you are including extra N bc you are using both sexes or expect attrition
- Free tool: <http://www.gpower.hhu.de>

# Research Strategy- Rigor and reproducibility

- Explain the measures you are going to take to reduce the potential for bias in your data and ensure the reproducibility of the work
  - E.g., blinding, automated scoring, multiple raters for hand scoring, running in multiple cohorts, counterbalancing all factors, reporting and keeping factors consist (e.g., time of day), building in internal replication, validating all your tools
- Look at your PIs R01s for common text for this
- Not a place to detail everything you're doing, but rather to trigger the reviewers to see the rigor in what you've already written in the research strategy- for them to know that all the controls, validations, etc. are what contribute to rigor.
- In total- sex, group size estimation, and rigor & reproducibility should take up ~1/2 page

# Research Strategy: Timeline

- Detail a plan for executing your experiments, troubleshooting, analyzing data and publishing your work
- Think about how long things will take you (in the course of a day and over months)
- Be realistic, even perhaps slightly pessimistic
- Should likely include an actual diagram timeline, with interim and final endpoints
- Leave grace periods
- Be details and thoughtful about this. It is a crucial factor in feasibility (both the reviewers assessment of feasibility and your ability to know what's actually feasible)



**RIOH** @RIOH\_Mb · Sep 21

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Include a timeline / gannt chart to show how multiple projects will go and when there is overlap. Include time consuming steps like getting ethics approval, data sharing or access agreements.

If you don't have prelims data, include pitfalls and alternate approaches.



1



**How long is all this going to take?**

# Timeline for preparing the grant

Internal deadline is 1 week before submission date (varies by institution)

(for our department, our business office needs it 2-3 days before this internal deadline)

They need a complete draft at this point, with every required document

So your deadline is actually earlier than the NIH deadline

Also— leave time for unexpected events— the PDF doesn't compile well, you get sick, your PI is out of town, etc.

# Timeline for preparing the grant

Start talking about your research and training goals ASAP when you start in grad school

Regularly talk with your PI about plans for the NRSA and preliminary data you'll need

Begin writing 3-6 months before the deadline

# Timeline for preparing the grant

Task	Deadlir
1. Prepare Specific Aims, Significance, Innovation.	
2. Send material from point 1 to colleagues/program officer. Request Biosketches from members on grant.	
3. Prepare cover page component, Project/performance site component, key personnel.	
4. Prepare Facilities & other resources and Equipment.	
5. Modify ideas according to input received.	
6. Prepare Research Strategy-Approach Aim 1 (minus Justification & Feasibility).	
7. Prepare Research Strategy-Approach Aim 2 (minus Justification and Feasibility). Ensure all is correct in colleagues' Biosketch(es).	
8. Prepare Research Strategy-Approach Aim 3 (minus Justification and Feasibility). Prepare your Biosketch.	
9. Develop Justification & Feasibility sub-sections (Review of Relevant Literature) for all Aims.	
10. Develop Human/Vertebrate animals section (ask your advisor for templates).	
11. Develop the Budget component. Develop the Bibliography/References Cited section.	
12. Prepare Project Summary/Abstract, Project Narrative, Title, Cover letter. Obtain letters of Support.	
13. Prepare Appendix. Prepare checklist	
14. Assemble complete draft. Proof, correct.	
15. Submit complete draft to colleagues (pre-review committee) and Internal school routing system.	
16. Revise grant based on comments received.	
17. Submit grant	



# Reach out to your program officer after specific aims

Before you begin preparation of any proposal to any institute, reach out to a program officer!  
They will tell you:

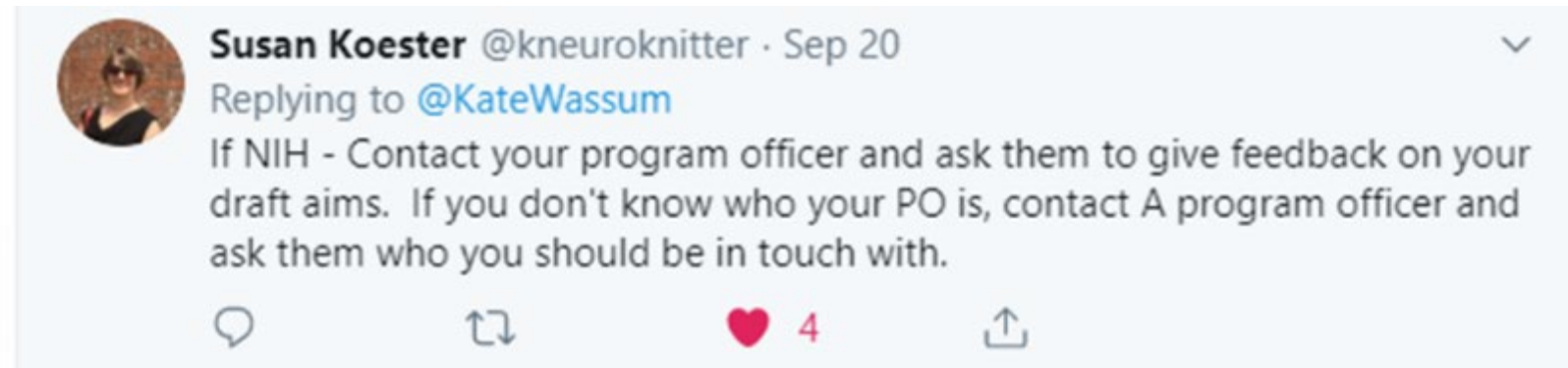
- whether your idea is appropriate for a particular funding mechanism
- whether the science falls in line with the program priorities of the institute
- will also give you feedback on drafts of aims

You can ask them questions, e.g., about how to deal with your PI not having an R01, or whether your aims are overambitious

Send them a well POLISHED specific aims page at least 1 month before the deadline... ideally 2+  
They might not respond right away, followup in a week

You'll likely schedule a call with them to discuss

Listen to your PO



# Timeline for writing the grant

Try to arrange your schedule so that you have large (3+ hrs) blocks for writing

... But also learn to write productively when you've got shorter blocks of time (bc lets be real, its hard to find big chunks of time when you're taking classes, teaching, doing expts, having a life etc.)

Recognize what time of day you write/think best, and protect those times for writing

Things you can do if you have <1hr and/or are writing while doing something else (e.g., waiting for your immuno)

- Make a figure
- Add citations to a section
- Write 1-2 paragraphs that you have previously outlined
- Draft a letter of support
- Add in methods details
- Hunt down a specific references

*The point is, do easy/quick things when you have short amounts of time, maximize your time to hasten the process*

# Timeline for writing the grant: Strategies for writing efficiently

- Use an outline
- Write first, edit later. Get your thoughts out, it doesn't have to be perfect, you can fix it later use comments, or highlighting to mark passages you intend to revisit
- Cite as you go, but don't spend lots of time hunting down a citation, adding it to your citation manager etc. that will slow you down, put in a brief reminder of the paper (link, PMID, Author etc) and make time to fill out the citations later
- If you're stuck, use a place holder (e.g., xxx) to mark details to fill in later
- When writing methods sections, get it down first, then go back to fill in details

# Timeline for writing the grant: Strategies for writing efficiently

- Before completing a writing session, take 5 min to jot down bullet points of where you were going next so you can more easily pick up the next time
- Set a timer (e.g., for 15 min) and write continuously until it goes off
- If you feel yourself going off on a tangent (e.g., looking up a paper) set a timer for a short amount of time (e.g., 5 min) and when it goes off decide if you need to continue down the tangent... this will avoid you going down the rabbit hole

**Grantsmithing, Grantspersonship, grant  
writing skillz**

# Grantsmithing, Grantspersonship, your grant writing skillz

The writing a successful grant, independent of the science. A proposal with poor grantsmithing is unlikely to be funded, no matter how good the science is.

Gets brought up a lot when discussing training grants written by novice grant writers

## How to be good at grant writing

- Start ahead
- Think through
- Have a strong, vetted outline
- Get feedback
- \*Listen\* to feedback (both what they are saying and not saying)
- Don't make excuses
- Revise your grant accordingly
- Leave time after drafting for it to sit so you can come back to it fresh
- Use strong grammar, style, and formatting
- Make sure your aims and significance pages are strong
- Avoid common pitfalls

# **Common Pitfalls**

# Common Pitfalls

## *Proposal lacks significance*

- Address an important question
  - More than just an incremental, descriptive, or procedural advance
  - Interesting to those beyond your niche
  - Provide mechanistic insight
- Highlight a clear AND important gap in knowledge
- Have a compelling rationale
- Don't assume the reviewer will understand the significance
- Just because it hasn't been done, doesn't mean it should be
- Workshop your idea before writing it up... do others think it's significant
- Write a strong specific aims and significance page
- Sell your idea
- Make relevance to disease clear
- Don't overfit prior work to justify your hypothesis
- Get feedback on the writing of your significance/specific aims
- (But for training grants, don't sacrifice feasibility for significance)



# Common Pitfalls

## *Proposal lacks significance*



**David** @Foreman1David · Sep 22

Replying to @KateWassum and @leafs\_s

You're writing a sales pitch, so think about your idea as a product. Who is it for? Will they like it? Why? (aka what's the value it adds). Most importantly: will their representatives be reviewing it? & can I make sure they are? Often v tricky in translational research.



1



**Dr. Alyssa Arentoft** @AlyssaArentoft · Sep 21

Replying to @KateWassum

Commenting mostly to follow, but I do have a simple tip: be your own PR. Take a late version of your grant and imagine you're handing it off to a PR professional. Sit down with it. How can you best sell your story?



# Common Pitfalls

*Approach doesn't include a testable hypothesis*

- Make sure your hypothesis is testable... and that you also actually test it with your proposed experiments
- Think it through... well ahead of time

# Common Pitfalls

## *Weak or absent preliminary data*

- You need strong prelim data, there is no way around it
- Don't submit a grant without strong prelim data... which may mean waiting a cycle
- Make sure the prelim data fits the proposed research
- Consider what prelim data you and your lab want when thinking of your question, hypothesis, and approach

# Common Pitfalls

## *Overambitious aims*

- Think about all the experiments you'll do, including all controls, validations, follow-ups, coursework, writing etc.
- Make a timeline early and use this to know what's feasible
- Anticipate what you can do, then cut it by 1/3
- Keep the N manageable
- Ask your PI and others in your area what's feasible
- Keep your hypothesis feasible to test
- Have your sponsor and LOR writers comment on your ability to tackle ambitious projects
- Have backup plans for everything
- Test one hypothesis, don't propose to do everything



**Louk Vanderschuren** @lvanderschuren · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Prioritize. Don't write up *\*all\** your exciting ideas in one proposal.



7



# Common Pitfalls

## *Overambitious aims*

- Address potential pitfalls and propose alternative strategies.
- Propose experiments that fall within the timeline. Never 'over-propose'.
- Have somebody else review it before you submit.
- Include schematics/figures to explain concepts.
- Do not try to capture multiple thoughts in the same sentence.



**Raj R Rao**

Professor & Department Head,  
Biomedical Engineering  
University of Arkansas, USA

3 x 7.50 in

# Common Pitfalls

## *Aims that hinge on the success of previous aims, i.e. dependency*

- Have aims that are related, but do not depend on one another
- If it seems like they might depend on one other, explain why they do not
- Have supportive preliminary data if there is any potential dependency



**Louk Vanderschuren** @lvanderschuren · Sep 20

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

- Make sure your ideas are testable.
- Don't stack hypotheses, so that your whole proposal does not fall apart if the first aim gives disappointing results.
- Think of a plan B- and include it in your proposal.



7



# Common Pitfalls

## *Untested or overly complex methodology*

- Use feasible methods
- Make sure that EVERY single method you propose has a sponsor who is expert in the method
  - These don't have to be at your institution
  - But make sure every sponsor is well integrated and if they aren't at your institution, that you have a plan for training with them
- Do not propose untested or presently unavailable methods. No matter how tempting, don't do it.
  - Keep in mind that you are not 100% beholden to what you write— if a new, better method comes up after you propose your project, you can use it.
- If you're proposing complicated methods have your sponsors and LOR writers give examples of how you've tackled similarly complex things in the past
- Have preliminary data for each method, ideally some that you collected
- Have a strong training plan with details of how you'll receive training in difficult methods

# Common Pitfalls

## *Absent statistical justification for N*

- Include a power analysis in the research strategy



# Common Pitfalls

## *Investigator/or mentor lacks experience or collaboration*

- Make sure you have a mentor/sponsor for every single method you propose. All the needed expertise should be covered
- If your mentor has not yet placed someone in a faculty position, get a senior PI that has as a co-sponsor
- If your mentor is pre-tenure, regardless of the above, get a senior PI as a co-sponsor
  - I'm not saying that junior people don't mentor well, this is definitely not true, but some reviewers will say this... so just prevent this by having senior PIs
- Highlight how great your mentors are in your selection of sponsor part
- Have all your cosponsors well integrated in the training plan, e.g., regular meetings, how you will spend time in their lab etc.

# Common Pitfalls

## *Mentor doesn't have funding*

- Make sure your sponsor has funding that is 1. for the general question you research is on and 2. for the ENTIRE training period
- This should ideally be an R01
- If it isn't for the whole proposed training period, then need to describe plans of how they will fill the gap and highlight their track record of funding
- If they don't have funding, considering getting a co-mentor with such funding
- If they don't, talk to your PO about whether it would be advisable to put in an NRSA

# Common Pitfalls

## *Didn't follow the guidelines*

- Look up the guidelines
- Follow the guidelines
- Make sure you have the most up to date guidelines
- Double check that you have followed the guidelines
- Use a recent, successful example



**Dr. John Hernandez** @Dentategyro1 · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Make sure to read the mission statements or any recent official statements of the funding agency. They can help you form your aims and structure your research plan 😊



4



**Lynda Coughlan** 🧐 @Virusnerdette · 7h

Replying to @kaymtye @KateWassum and @NicolaGrissom

1/2 Yes!!! 🙌 The first thing I do before I start writing is look up the guidelines for reviewers and make sure that my grant then ticks each box and addresses all the points they have to consider and comment on....



1



1



# Common Pitfalls

## *Weak candidate*

- Make sure you and everyone else highlights how awesome you are, don't undersell yourself
- Take ownership of your prior research. Say "I did ...". Own it, love it, show it.
- Show your intellectual ownership of your prior work
- Do NOT undersell yourself (it has to be said again)
- If you've been in the lab for more than a year or so, preliminary data is a must
- Have good grades. Good grad school grades go a long way to mitigate some crappy undergrad grades as do letters should say you're smart, so don't be discouraged if you once got a C in undergrad (I did!)

# Common Pitfalls

## *Weak candidate*

- Have prior publications, abstracts, and presentations (yes even if you are a early grad student)
- If you don't have these ↑ have your LORs explain why
  - E.g., the candidate doesn't have any pubs because publication rate is slow in their research area, a publication is expected later this year
  - The candidate doesn't have abstracts because their PI was not able to financially support their meeting travel, but I can attest to their strong intellectual involvement in their prior work by xxx examples
  - Have your letter writers put you in the context of your environment
- Use BioRxiv to post works that are about to be submitted, so you can put them on your biosketch
- But this is just easy metrics for reviewers, so don't be discouraged from applying if you don't have a pub yet.
- Strong prelim data can mitigate concerns about lack of prior publications

# Common Pitfalls

***Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves***

- Have an individualized training plan, that includes details on
  - Technical training (listed and detailed for every technical component)
  - Intellectual training
  - Career development
    - Networking
    - Data dissemination
    - Opportunities for feedback
    - IDP and discussion of career opportunities, postdoc placement
  - Professional development
    - Mentoring of mentoring
    - Teaching mentoring (but don't teach too much)
    - Conferences
    - Data dissemination
    - Writing training
    - Training in grant writing, plans for subsequent grants (postdocs esp.)
    - For postdocs sponsor might mention what you can take with you
    - Training in peer review

# Common Pitfalls

***Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves***

- Include formal coursework, workshops, training in stuff you don't have experience in
- Sponsor statement should include a timetable of training milestones
- Your training plan should go 'above and beyond' the typical pre or post doc training

# Common Pitfalls

***Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves***

- Do not overschedule the training plan--reviewers look for feasibility and a realistic schedule
- Work collaboratively with your mentor on the training plan--reviewers take this piece very seriously
- Incorporate time for histology, data analysis, troubleshooting, writing etc.



# Common Pitfalls

*Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves*

- Make sure that you are learning new methods, skills, tools, concepts, techniques
- Have a training aim in your specific aims
- Describe what new you are learning and how this will get you to the next stage (make it easy for the reviewer to see this)
- Learn the latest techniques
- Explain how the methods you are learning might be flexible allowing you to apply to new things in the future
- If you're expanding on existing expertise, explain what is new

# Common Pitfalls

***Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves***

- If you're experiments aren't significant or well designed, this can give the impression of poor training. Avoid this
- Have a strong mentoring plan that includes all cosponsors
- Be sure you have meetings proposed with your co sponsor at least monthly
- The lab size should seem 'just right'.
  - If it's a big lab, sponsor should note that more senior/independent trainees will work with you (in addition to PI).
  - If it's small they can highlight how they have one on one time to train and work with you individually.
- There needs to be a lot of face:to:face with the sponsor. Like a lot. 1x/week is not enough. And also need to describe what happens in these meetings.

# Common Pitfalls

***Training will not get the candidate to the next stage– training potential, training plan, and the experiments themselves***

- You have to propose to learn new stuff (while at the same time showing you're capable of doing said things)
- This new stuff has to get you where you want to be in the future (and that should be a research position)
- Describe how what you are learning will allow you to ask more questions in the future. It can help to show that a technique you are learning will be 'flexible'... eg you're going to use opto to ask this one question about dopamine neurons, but in the future you could use this to ask questions about all sorts of stuff
- Describe why you're learning these things and what you plan to do with them beyond your current position.
- Describe how what you're learning will compliment what you already know
- Don't assume the reader will get it. You need to walk them through it.
- If you already have experience with the method, describe what new stuff you will learn, new analysis, new circuit, new viral approach, new behavior, application in a new way etc.
- Training potential requires an on-point sponsor statement
- Less rigor and feasibility in the research plan will diminish training potential

# Common Pitfalls

## *Ill-defined question/hypothesis*

- See above and below strategies for achieving [clarity](#) in your question and hypothesis.
- Keep the aims feasible and focused, each with a clear specific hypothesis and prediction, related to the overarching hypothesis
- Make the future directions clear, if we learn this, what will be next
- Explain how you will interpret your data and design experiments that will produce data that with clear interpretations (avoiding confounds, and alternative possibilities)

# Common Pitfalls

*Proposal is unclear (due to jargon, style etc)*

- See below tips on [clarity](#) and [style](#)
- Don't use uncommon acronyms
- Avoid jargon and have someone outside your field read and say back to you what they understood and what they didn't so you can find areas to improve language

# Common Pitfalls

*Proposal is unclear (due to jargon, style etc)*

- See below tips on [clarity](#) and [style](#)
- Don't use uncommon acronyms
- Avoid jargon and have someone outside your field read and say back to you what they understood and what they didn't so you can find areas to improve language
- Self-edit, take time away, read in a different color/font, and/or aloud to help find areas that are unclear
- Use spell check and grammar checkers
- Keep one concept/sentence
- Have grammar checker in word highlight runon sentences

# Common Pitfalls

## *Experiments do not address hypothesis*

- Make sure your experiments address your hypothesis
- Don't make your hypothesis have a causal implication then use a correlational analysis
  - Correlations can't tell you about mediation, function, necessity, sufficiency, regulation
- Think through your hypothesis, if you had all the expertise and methods in the world, how would you test it, how close are your experiments to this
- Think through your predicts from your experiments, what can you really say about these, does this address your hypothesis?

# Common Pitfalls

## *Methods are unclear*

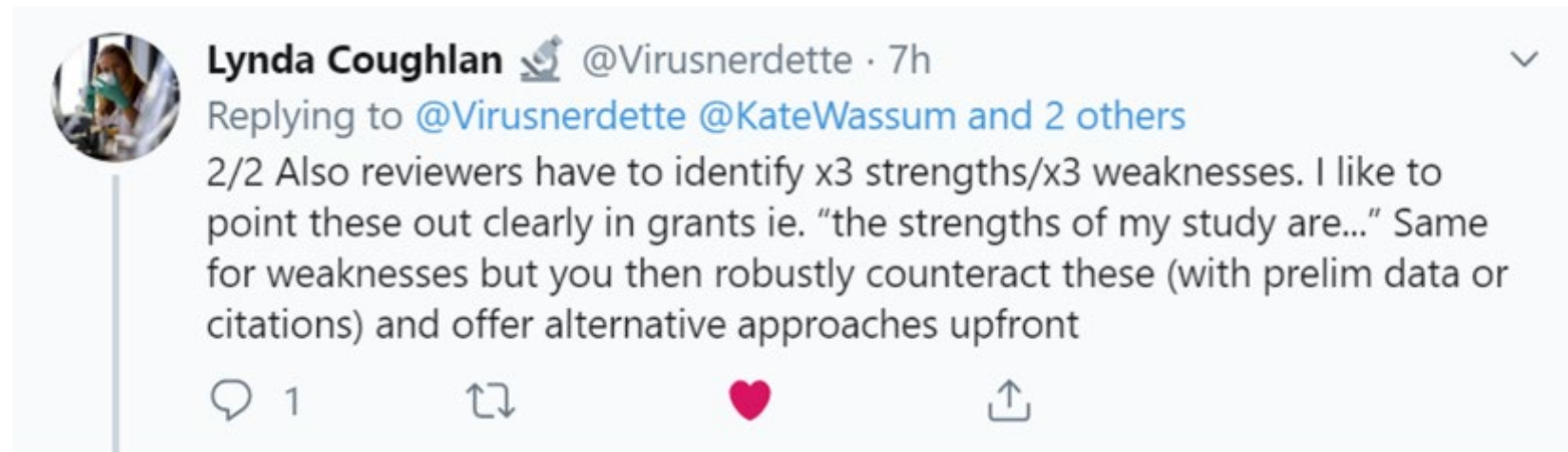
- Receive feedback early and often
- Don't assume the reader is familiar with your proposed methods
- Explain why you are doing a specific method
- And why you selected this, perhaps why over other common approaches
- Use diagrams and flowcharts to explain your techniques and approach!!!
- Include data and statistical analysis



# Common Pitfalls

## *Making the reviewer work for it*

- Look at the review criterion, make it easy for the reviewer to lift their comments from your text
- Don't assume the reviewer will be in your subfield, or will get why your proposal is interesting, or why you need to learn these new things. Assume nothing
- Don't make the reviewer work for it. This means taking the time to ensure your through process is clear, logical, and flows.
- Your reviewer should be able to get your hypothesis and approach and see the strengths of your proposal from reading it for 10 min.



# Common Pitfalls

*Making the reviewer work for it*



**Mattia** @Ciavenasc · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Describe the topic and the unmet need. Define the overarching question. Define the question that you aim to answer with each experiment/analysis. Be respectful of your colleagues that are going to read it: you won't away with poorly written or hastily put together proposals



1



# Common Pitfalls

## *Problems with experimental approach*

- Inappropriate level of experimental detail
- Feasibility of each aim not shown
- Lack of appropriate controls
- Not directly testing hypothesis
- Correlative or descriptive data
- Experiments not directed towards mechanisms
- No discussion of alternative models or hypotheses
- No discussion of potential pitfalls
- No discussion of interpretation of data

# Common Pitfalls

The submission is unclear, written in haste or just poorly put together

No hypotheses or poorly articulated ones

Inadequate track record or expertise in this area

- Of the candidate: poor grades, lack of evidence for productivity (e.g., prior publications)
  - Write a strong statement about your experience
  - Have prelim data that you generated
  - Have your letter writers address any weaknesses (grades, lack of pubs)
- Of the sponsors
  - Get a co-sponsor for every single method and concept in your proposal
  - And make sure they are well integrated into the training plan
  - And that they read your grant (bc if you have errors in their area of expertise, it will be clear they aren't actually involved)
- Far too ambitious
  - Develop a realistic timeline, have a hypothesis that is realistic to test, cut experiments that aren't critical to test your hypothesis, talk with your mentor about what is feasible, keep the N in check (look at successful examples in your area)
  - Demonstrate you can handle difficult techniques with prelim data
  - Have your mentor comment on feasibility
  - Consider your time to graduate (eg don't propose a 4 year project in year 3)

# Common Pitfalls

Great ideas but no preliminary data

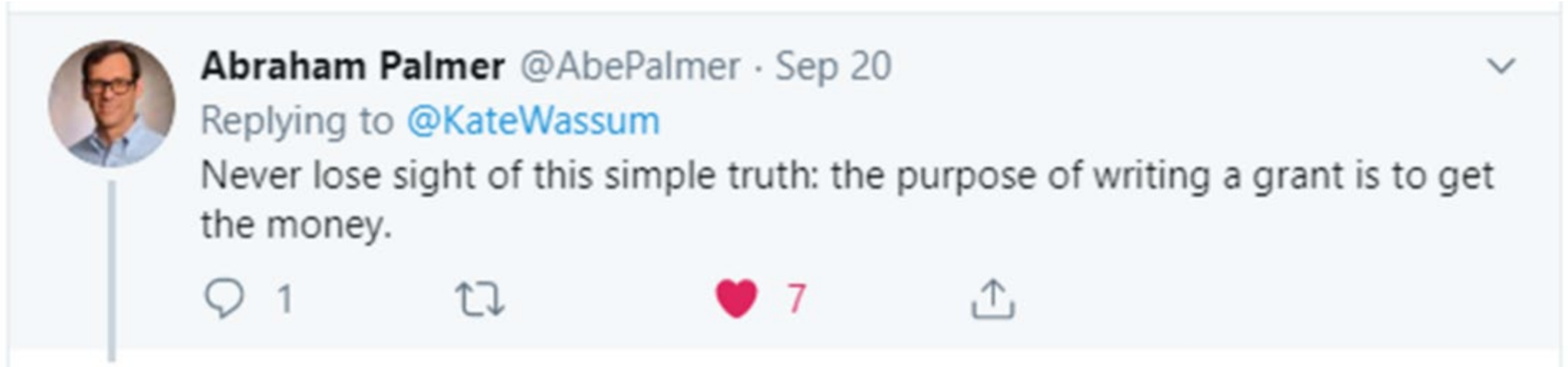
you have to convince reviewers that your proposal will work. Feasibility is MAJOR topic of conversation for training grants.

-You need prelim data for everything

Incremental research, not a step change

-this is less of a thing for training grants, incremental can be ok, but it still needs to be significant and advance the field, otherwise it might be deemed as not good training, or just leave the reviewers feeling blah about it. Tell others your idea— esp outside your field, and get their hot take. This doesn't have to be PIs, it can be your colleagues in grad school

# Common Pitfalls



I read this as write a grant that will get funded, don't write an esoteric grant, one that is overambitious, or too complicated, one without sufficient preliminary data. Write the grant that avoids all the common pitfalls, is clear, and has the best chances of being funded.

# Hot tips

# How to handle all the tips & advice

Ask lots of people/read lots of blogs etc (see [resources](#) below).. Look for consistency in advice, think about what will work for you, triage things you don't agree with

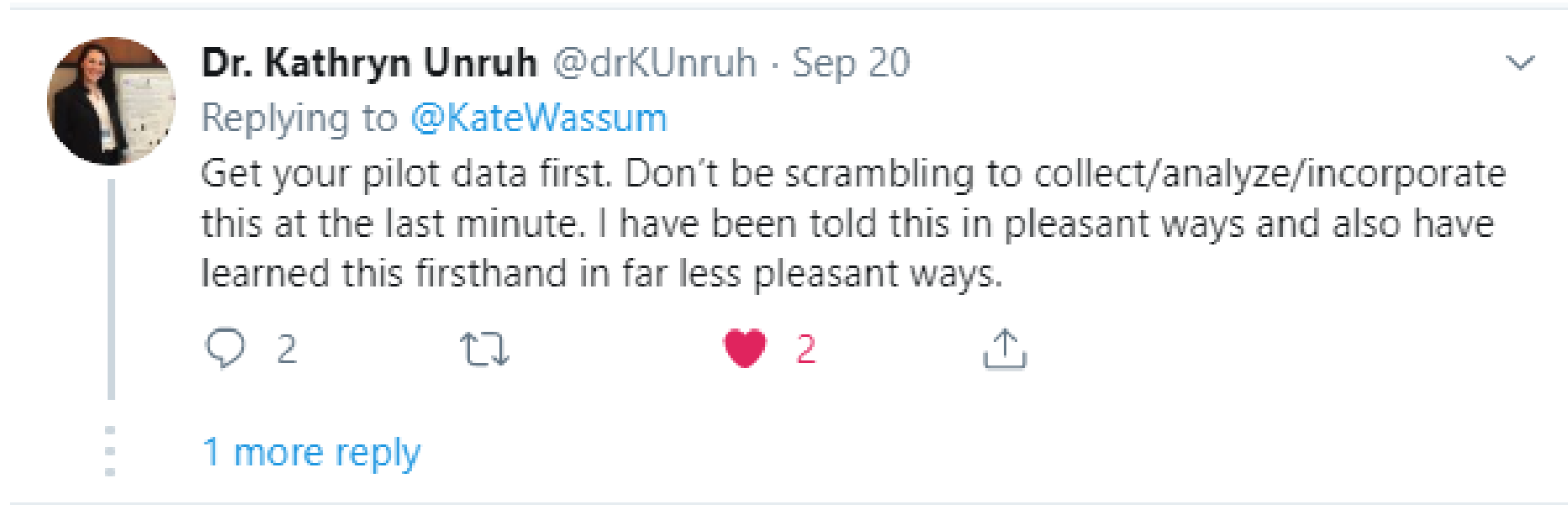
Know that there is no one way to write a strong grant  
And that no one person has all the answers



# **Hot tips**

## **Timeline**

# Time your prelim data



But don't wait too long until it's perfect.. Talk to your sponsor about when it's go time

Plan your prelim data so you have backup projects, things that are likely to produce so you'll have some prelim data to support a proposal but the time you need to submit

# Start early

- Start EARLY
- Formulate hypothesis/aims
- Assess preliminary data
- Collect budgetary quotations
- Request letters of support / reference
- Identify people who can read/help
- Look up administrative requirements

# Start early

I start at least 9 months before the deadline and try to identify the specific question, and place it in context of what we know and current theory.

Over the next several months, in fits and bursts, I flesh out the specifics, and try to have 3 broad objectives, and several sub objectives. And then I spend a lot of time of figures, both illustrative and preliminary data.



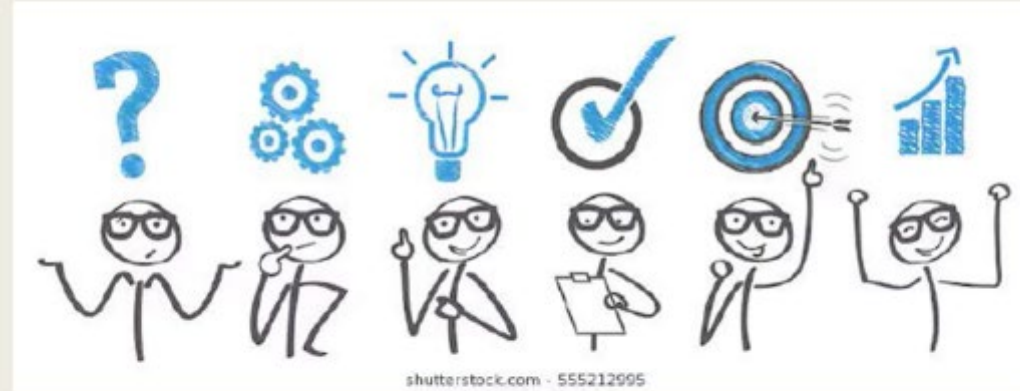
**Judith Mank**

Professor & Chair in Evolutionary Genomics

Department of Zoology, University of British Columbia

# Start early

## How to get started?



- Brainstorming
- Literature review
- Read a paper, ask what next?
- Q&A at Seminars
- Ideas whiteboard/list
- Develop logic and flow
- Seek inputs from colleagues
- Read the guidelines **thoroughly**
- Contact a program official
- Determine the possible review committee

# **Hot tips**

# **Outlining**

# Write an outline for your grant



**Dr. Stephanie Guertin** @punkrockscience · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Plot out your grant before you start writing. What do you want? Why should readers want you to do it? Why you? What do you need to do it?

You should be able to make your case in five paragraphs as well as you can in five hundred - the core is the argument, the rest is details.



1



# Write an outline for your grant

- What we know
- What we don't know (critical gap in knowledge)
- Question
- Hypothesis
- Significance
  - What we know
  - What we don't know
  - Why we need to know this
  - The major question and hypothesis
- Preliminary data
  - From lab
  - From you
- Aim 1: title
  - What we know (brief, you will flesh out later)
  - Hypothesis
  - Preliminary data (what you have, and what you still need to support your hypothesis and feasibility)
  - Expt 1.1: goal
    - Prediction
    - What you will do, with N, and controls
    - Validation
    - Potential alternative strategies
  - Expt 1.2 (ditto)
- Aim 2: ditto the above



**Don't cheat the space limitations**

**Hot tips**  
**Figures**

# Make beautiful, clear, publication-quality figures

- Preliminary data is a vital aspect to a successful grant
- It needs to be made into clear, straightforward figures
- The figures should be publication quality
  - Look at figures in the top journals in your field and emulate these styles
- Where possible, include the individual data points and statistics
  - Unless it's a pilot with very low N
- Include all the relevant data... don't say "data not shown" unless it's not relevant, in which case why are you writing about it?
- Write a BRIEF clear legend (in a smaller font- arial 9pt)
  - Do not cram methods details in the figure legend
- Prepare the figure as if the reviewer won't read the legend
- Describe the figure in the text, as if they reviewer won't read the legend, or look at the figure

Hot tips: clarity in figures



**Sachin Patel** @SachinPatelLab · Sep 20

Always use color figures!  
Show individual  
Data points on graphs when possible!  
Use diagrams to convey main hypotheses!  
An impactful clear story is more important than a laundry list of super  
technical experiments that could obscure the big picture ...

2   16



**yo yehudi** 🇮🇱🇪🇺 @yoyehudi · Sep 20

But if you use colour figures, make sure that the meaning is still clear if  
printed in monochrome - you can't know if your reviewer will print your  
application so they can annotate it easily, and also it prevents colourblind  
reviewers from struggling with your app...

1   7



**Dr. Susan Sangha** @sanghalab · 15m

another followup tip: also make sure the  
graphs are readable when printed out and/  
or don't get blurry when you have to zoom  
in at 300% to read them. Also, don't make  
super tiny graphs



**Dr. Susan Sangha** @sanghalab · 3h

protip: make sure all the graphs, etc  
print out properly in your grant. Once  
in a while I go old school and need to  
print stuff out so I can scribble my  
notes all over it.

2   2



**David Moorman** @DavidEMoorman · 3m

Along these lines, sometimes figures look  
great in a Word doc and get blurry when  
they get converted to PDF - always check  
the PDF closely before you submit!

# Make beautiful, clear, publication-quality figures

- Make the figures big enough to see (image a 85 year old reviewing your figure)
  - Be careful with the space in the figures (i.e., don't have a huge bar in a bar graph)
  - But don't pack the data too densely
  - Make sure the writing on the figures is big enough to read (again... 85 year old)
- 
- Spend time on the figures... it's often a good break from writing that will allow you some space from your text (see editing below)

**Hot tips**  
**Clarity**

# What not to do

## DON'T

- Use vague statements or generalizations
- Over-promise
- Be sloppy
- Ignore what's already known
- Make the reviewer struggle to understand

# Do not write as if your reader is in your field

Write your grant for reviewers who are unlikely to be in your immediate fields.

...for me to give a high score to the proposal, the first thing they need to do is to make the proposal understandable.

**Chih-Horng Kuo**

Principal Investigator

Institute of Plant and Microbial Biology

Academia Sinica, Taiwan



**Dr Liz Tunbridge** @LizTunbridge · Sep 22

Replying to @KateWassum and @leafs\_s

Make it as clear as possible. Don't assume the reviewers will be experts in either the technical details or the background. Different reviewers contribute different things. Sometimes less is more, especially if the authors have a track record in the area...



1



**Dr. Jayne Morriss** @jmorris\_UORPSY · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Know your audience (reviewers). Write in a style in which most people can understand the jist of what you are proposing. Operationalise your terms at the beginning of the proposal. Depending on the size of the grant - have a few safe aims and few risky ones!



4



# Do not write as if your reader is in your field

The reviewer is unlikely to attribute lack of clarity understanding to themselves, rather this will reflect poorly on you. So make things clear for them.

Feedback from others is the best way to learn what is clear and what is not.



**Michele A. Basso** @MicheleABasso1 · 45m

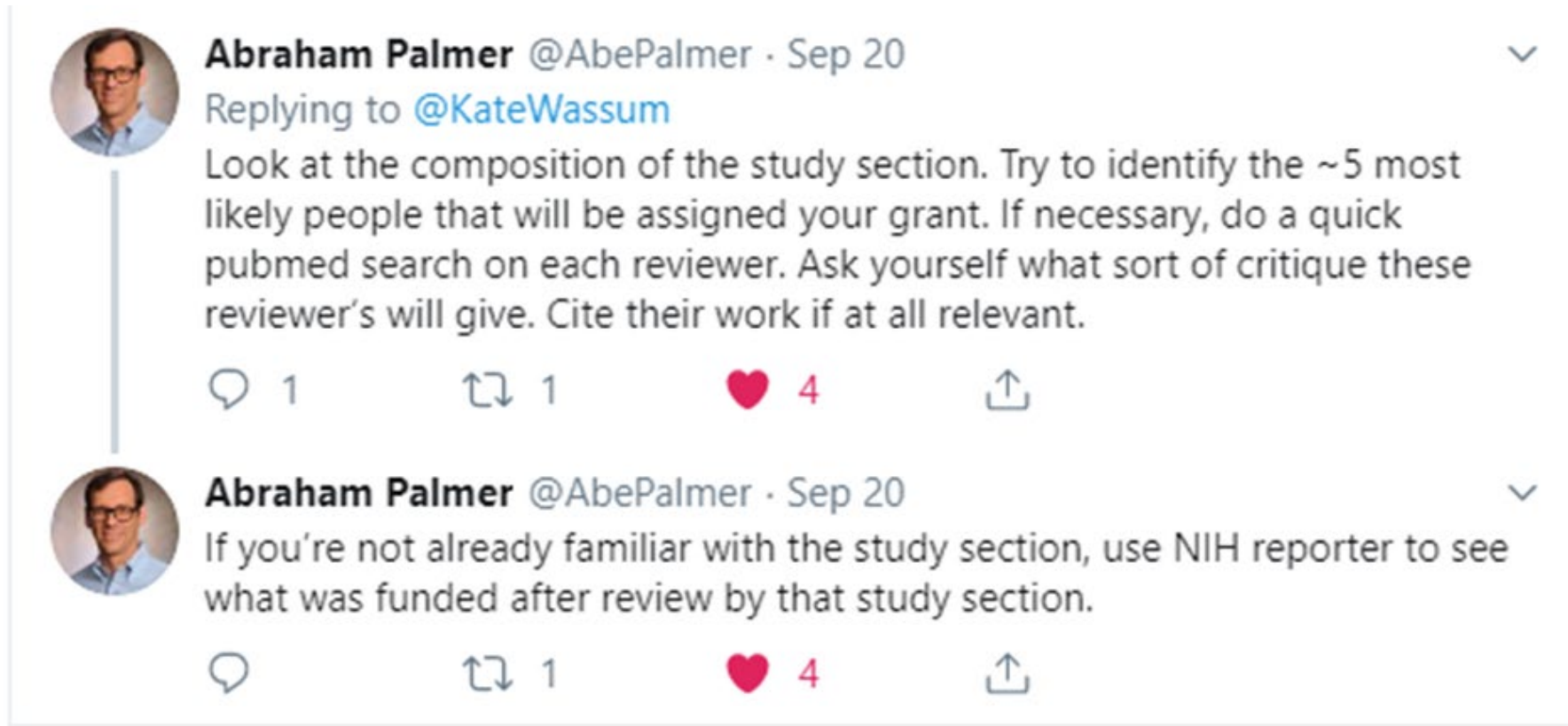
Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Ok I'll try this again - such a Luddite . Use active voice , avoid new acronyms.  
Never make your reader feel dumb, they should be reading and predicting accurately what you are going to say next or what experiment you are going to do next.





# Know your reviewers



*\*But keep in mind there is no guarantee that your proposal will go to these people, so ensure that it could be understood by anyone on the panel  
It is often the case that the 3 people on the panel you think are most well suited to review your grant did not review it*

# Make the WHAT & WHY clear



**Jim Johnson, Ph.D.** @JimJohnsonSci · Sep 21

Replying to @KateWassum

Make sure it's clear WHY the research is needed, rather than focusing too much on HOW it will be done. Keep language simple and clear. Avoid acronyms. Pay attention to aesthetics of the pages and make it easy to read. Make supporting data clear (doesn't have to be unpublished)



3



Introduce main concepts right away, then back them up both on the paragraph level and on the whole grant level

# Make the WHAT & WHY clear



**Jim Johnson, Ph.D.** @JimJohnsonSci · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Make sure it's clear WHY the research is needed, rather than focusing too much on HOW it will be done. Keep language simple and clear. Avoid acronyms. Pay attention to aesthetics of the pages and make it easy to read. Make supporting data clear (doesn't have to be unpublished)



3



# Make the WHAT & WHY clear

Especially in the specific aims

E.g., "Mice will receive an intracranial injection of vehicle or bicuculline in the subiculum, and we will measure time to reach the hidden platform in a Morris water maze test".

This tells us HOW you will do it, but not what you are doing or why you are doing it. It focuses on the process, not the product.

Instead:

We will test if activating the subiculum (with intra-subiculum injection of bicuculline) increases spatial memory in a Morris water maze task.

or: we will test the role of the subiculum on spatial memory. To this end, we will increase activity of the subiculum (with intra-subiculum bicuculline) and test ....

Micky Marinelli

*You will need to describe your methods, but in the aims, procedures section, after you've already convinced the reviewer it's a good idea and approach*

# Make the WHAT & WHY clear

*State the product before the process (WHY, WHAT, how)*

Less clear: We tested the effects muscimol on latency to find the hidden platform in the Morris Water Maze

More clear: We tested if activating GABAA receptors (with muscimol) improves working memory

Micky Marinelli

*You can follow this logic when describing your methods*

# Make the WHAT & WHY clear



**catie profaci** @cprofaci · Sep 20



Replying to [@KateWassum](#) and [@JaredWYoung](#)

Remember the logic behind your experimental strategy might be clear to you but not to the reader!! Each time you introduce the details of a method, explain in the first half of the sentence what you're testing - "To understand/test [research ques], I will [method]"



# Don't omit sets of reasoning, connect concepts

Nicotinic receptors were upregulated, so we hypothesized greater cell excitability  
*There is a stop missing here, how does nAChR upregulation relate to cell excitability? Your reader might not know*

Cakes contain eggs. Eggs elevate cholesterol. Elevated cholesterol clogs arteries. Clogged arteries increase the risk of heart attack.

# Provide information only if it is useful

- Information should help understand the point
- Information should not lead down the wrong path (no red herrings)
- Don't let the reviewer think you're going to do something else– they will get disappointed
- Everything should be targeted at your question, hypothesis, and approach, nothing else



**Jared W Young**   @JaredWYoung · Sep 20

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

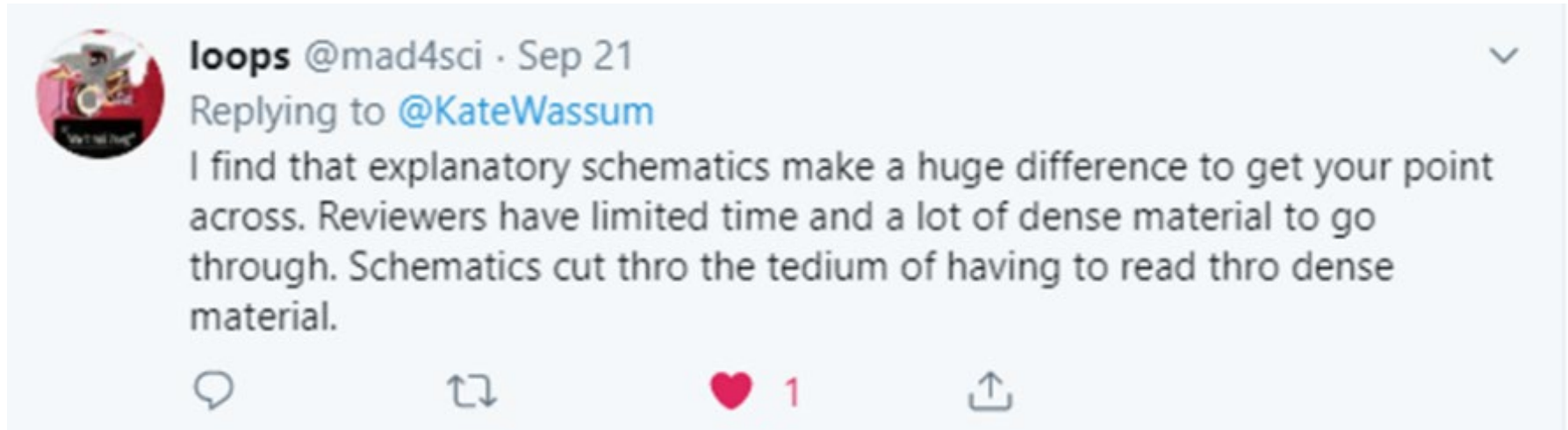
Best tip I ever got was from Dr. Sue Andersen whom showed me how to write it so that the grant was easy to follow. Sometimes less detail is clearer, have spaces between paragraphs, try to put a figure on each page to break up the density of text for reviewers sake!





# Use diagrams

- To explain your hypothesis
- Your approach
- A method



# Be concise

## Omit unnecessary words

- Less clear: High pH values have been observed to occur in areas that have been determined to have few pine trees
- More clear: High pH values occur in areas with few pine trees

This is best achieved through the editing process... “if I had more time, I would have written you a shorter letter”- some famous writer



**Rick Bevins** @RBevins · Sep 25

Replying to [@drugmonkeyblog](#)

In my experience, I have rarely met a grant that could not benefit from an economy of words



# Provide a clear, concise story

Tell a great story! the scientific research enterprise can get quite nuanced and myopic. Putting the story you are trying to tell in a narrative context, embedded back into the greater picture to which the proposed work is trying to make a contribution will go a long way to delivering to the readers needs. (Aaron Blaisdell)



**Dr. Dennis Eckmeier** @DennisEckmeier · Sep 22

Replying to @KateWassum

Be concise, clear, and convincing.



1



# Avoid abbreviations and jargon

Only use VERY common accepted acronyms

Don't introduce new acronyms

Avoid abbreviations and technical terms (jargon)

Unclear: HI rats showed similar FR responding and elevated PR responding across SA training. However they did not exhibit incubation at late WDs.



**Michele A. Basso** @MicheleABasso1 · 45m

Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Ok I'll try this again - such a Luddite . Use active voice , avoid new acronyms. Never make your reader feel dumb, they should be reading and predicting accurately what you are going to say next or what experiment you are going to do next.



1



1



3



# Avoid abbreviations and jargon



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25



Replying to [@drugmonkeyblog](#)

Acronym Abuse: At a minimum, make sure you redefine them once per section, perhaps even once per page.



# Use consistent, defined terms

Define your terms (in **bold**) and use them consistently throughout

Don't use synonyms for your key terms

If you do use common acronyms define them on first use, in bold, so they are easy for the reader to find



**Dr. Jayne Morriss** @jmorris\_UORPSY · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Know your audience (reviewers). Write in a style in which most people can understand the jist of what you are proposing. Operationalise your terms at the beginning of the proposal. Depending on the size of the grant - have a few safe aims and few risky ones!



4



# Use key phrases that clue the reviewer in to important points

The overall objective of this study is...

My broad goal is

It is well known that...

But what is unknown...

The current gap in knowledge is

The limitations of this prior research are

These outcomes are expected to have important positive impact because...

Thus my hypothesis is

I will provide mechanistic insight by

My general approach

We examined... We show that... X is an important addition to...

These are signals to the reader

# Some examples of lack of clarity

GR and MR were measured in the DG. No differences were found across groups. NACP was measured in the DG and SVZ. AD mice showed higher NACP than Con mice.

- Too many acronyms

The proposed state-of-the-art technique is expected to advance the field significantly.

- Too value, telling not showing, what is start of the art, what will the advance be

Cocaine can increase cellular pH. Neuronal pH is decreased by morphine.

- Concepts not connected.

Cocaine alters cellular pH.

- How? Increase, decrease, pattern altered?

XYZ proteins were clustered in distal dendrites, suggesting that they could play an important role in synaptic integration. We also measured learning, using a T-maze. Suppression of ABC facilitated learning.

- Concepts not connected

Metirapone treatment suppressed locomotor sensitization to cocaine. This suggests that stress could play an important role in cocaine addiction.

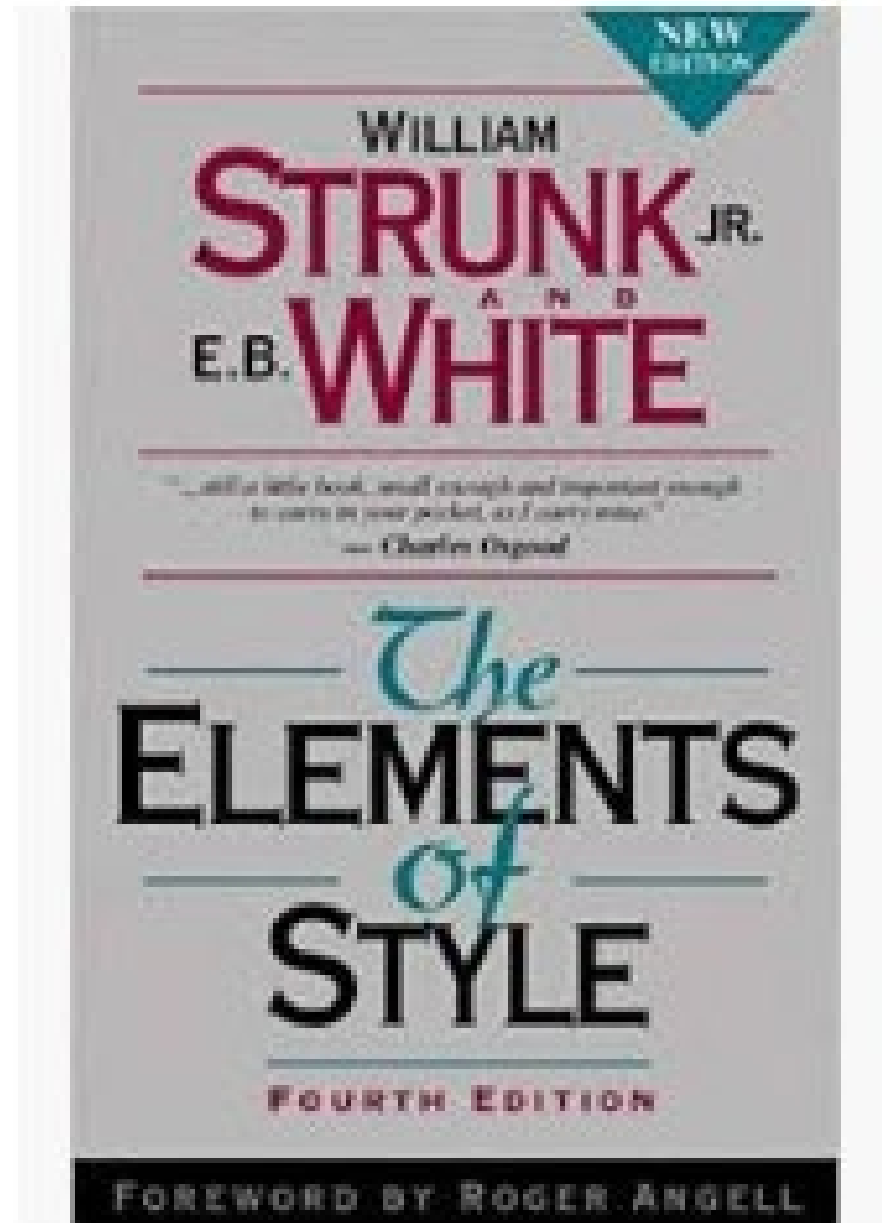
- Concepts not connected, missing a logic step.



# **Hot tips**

## **Style**

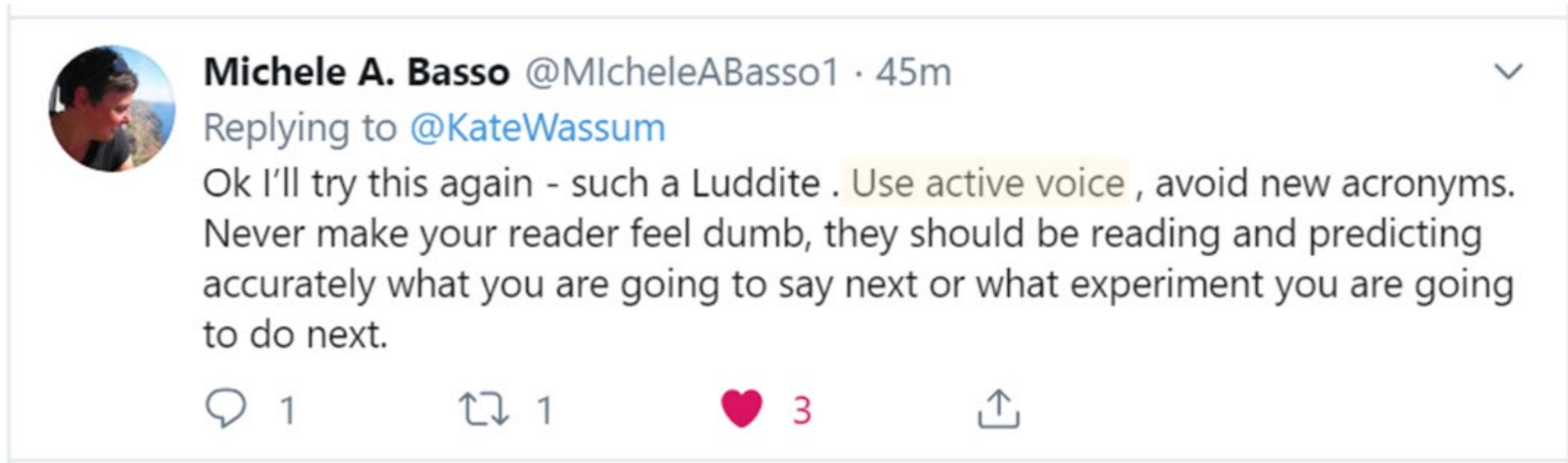
Achieving strong style... read Strunk & White, now, and ongoing



# General tips

1. Avoid all jargon. Do not use any abbreviations unless strictly necessary
2. Avoid all unnecessary term(s) (to make text shorter and clearer)
3. Use short sentences and avoid clauses
4. Use consistent terminology
5. Use a consistent order of words
6. Use the active voice (declarative sentences)
7. Make sure that all descriptive words have a direction (avoid: modify, change, etc...)
8. Follow hierarchies/consistent hierarchical structure
9. State the “what” before the “how”
10. Only use ONE concept per paragraph
11. Do not skip steps of reasoning
12. Avoid red herrings
13. Avoid the use of nouns as verbs and avoid clustering terms  
(e.g. “lower respiratory tract iron burden”)
14. Avoid “weak” qualifying words (might, may, believe)
15. Avoid “whether” – use “the extent to which” instead
16. Avoid “will” in pitfalls – use “would” instead
17. Make certain you use the correct word when there are two that are similar
18. “Label” sentences (to help understand the purpose of that sentence)

# Use Active voice



When using first person, say I, not we for a training grant

# Use Active voice

## Active vs Passive voice

### ■ Active voice:

- I will collaborate with Prof. xyz, an experienced biostatistician.
- We will measure blood glucose levels

### ■ Passive voice

- Collaborations with an experienced biostatistician will be established
- Blood glucose levels will be measured

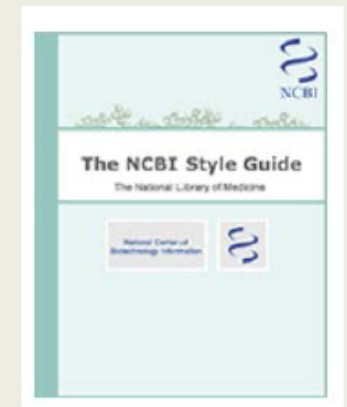
Active voice: Emphasizes the doer

Passive voice: Emphasizes the action

Strike a balance- both are useful

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK988/>

<https://lagunita.stanford.edu/courses/Medicine/Sci-Write/Fall2014/about>



# Sentence construction

- Use bold declarative sentences
- One concept/sentence
- Don't use long or runon sentences – use grammar checker for this
- Break up passages with longer sentences with shorter ones
- Use precise & meaningful words (hyperactive v. dysfunctional)
- Use active verbs (analyze v. analysis)
- Avoid negatives (similar v. not different)
  
- Avoid clustering nouns and adjectives; avoid using nouns as adjectives
  - Less Clear: Red-absorbing pigment spectral curves prevent rat brain cell formation
  - More Clear: Spectral curves for red-absorbing pigment prevent the formation of brain cells in rats

# Paragraph construction

ONE concept per paragraph

1-3 backup statements for each concept

*Use short, simple sentences (~20 words, if writing))--- there is a feature in word to identify these for this*

Use the same tense in the same sentence and for the same type of information

# **Hot tips**

## **Formatting**



# Formatting won't get you a grant, but it is important

A clean well formatted grant is important

It won't increase the chances that a poorly designed or written grant will get funded

But it will lessen the chances of an otherwise very strong grant by creating a negative impression

# Use hierarchies & labeled subsections

- As in the structures defined above, have sections, with subsections, and subsub sections so reviewers can find all the info they need easily

# Put spaces between sections and paragraphs

This advice is universal, everyone agrees. Do not write a wall of text. Include white space to break up the page



**Jared W Young** 🇸🇪 🇬🇪 @JaredWYoung · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Best tip I ever got was from Dr. Sue Andersen whom showed me how to write it so that the grant was easy to follow. Sometimes less detail is clearer, have spaces between paragraphs, try to put a figure on each page to break up the density of text for reviewers sake!



1



20



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25

Headers and white space. Use them liberally. Even a 6pt line is better than no space.



2



1



20



# Use bold, italics, underline

- **Bold** for defining terms and acronyms, anything the reader will need to come back to often.
- *Italics for important points that you want to emphasize*
- *Labels:* or as a label for sub-sub-sections
- Underline, used sparingly, for crucial things like hypotheses



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25

Bold or italic font is not a substitute for white space. These serve other functions.



**Abraham Palmer** @AbePalmer · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum

Formatting tips to help dyslexic reviewers: 1) never use full justify, much harder to read, 2) mix in bold, italic, and underline 3) indent new paragraphs.

(helpful for everyone): use bold when defining an abbreviation, if reader forgets definition, they can find it more easily.



# Don't cheat the space limitations



**Drug Monkey**  
@drugmonkeyblog

NIH Grant writers: If you are adopting a style variant to save space so that you can jam more words into the page limits you are almost certainly decreasing your application's chances.

8:44 AM · Sep 25, 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

**43** Retweets **144** Likes



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25

Figure Legend Abuse: You can use smaller font and get away with it. But then you has better not try to smuggle in methods results narrative and discussion. Keep it simple. Or use the proper font size

3

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14



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25

There is no such thing as a "footnote" in NIH grant applications. This is not another way to sneak in a bunch of tiny font text.

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2



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25

Do not use the Vertebrate Animals section to describe all of your methods in place of a description in the research plan.

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# Don't cheat the space limitations



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25



These are the basics. They keep being said in various ways by lots of people. Yes. And yet applicants still make bad choices all the time. Don't make bad choices in pursuit of wedging in more text.



3



13



**Drug Monkey** @drugmonkeyblog · Sep 25



The fact that you have one or more colleagues, or yourself, that got grants funded with these mistakes is irrelevant. That happened *\*despite\** these errors. Always think of it that way.



1



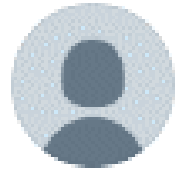
1



16



# Font



**Paul Gray** @PaulAGrayPhD · 3h



Replying to [@drugmonkeyblog](#)

Arial 11. Just go with it. Had a colleague who's grant was voided after positive study section because font didn't fit standards. This actually happened.



1



**Hot tips**  
**Get Feedback**



# It's your mentor's job to help you



**Janna Moen** @jannamoen · Sep 20



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

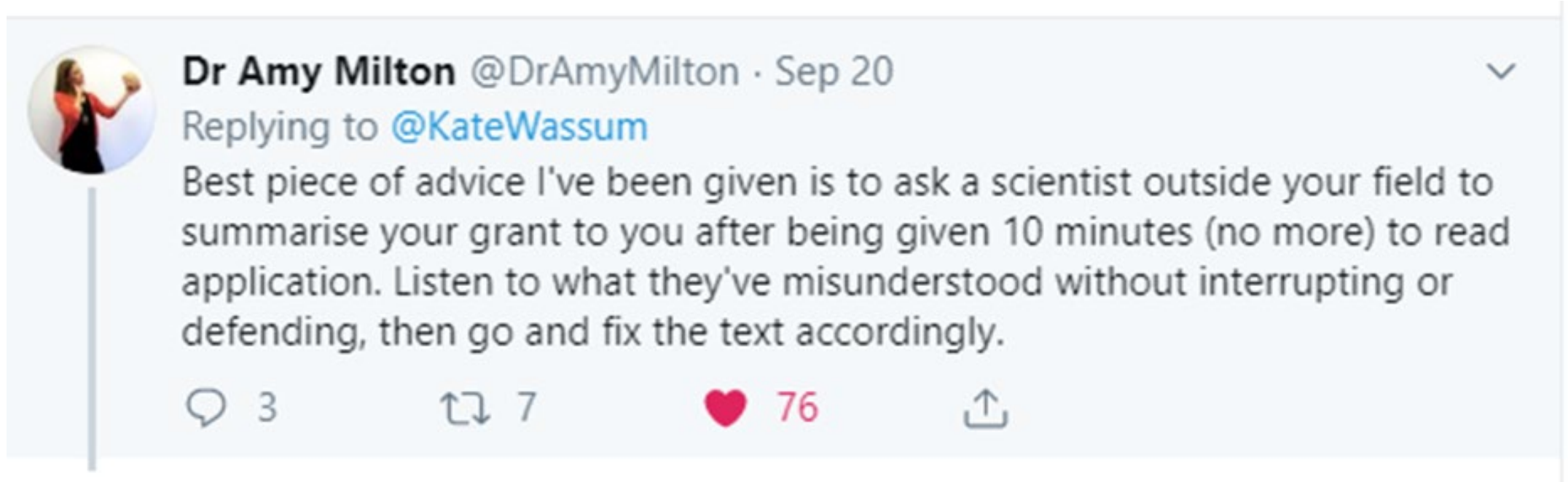
Work with your mentor(s) as much as possible! Aim to have a polished draft a month before deadline, send it out to your committee & other collaborators for feedback (esp outside your field). They can help identify things that are confusing, unclear, etc.



# Get feedback from people within your field and with experience

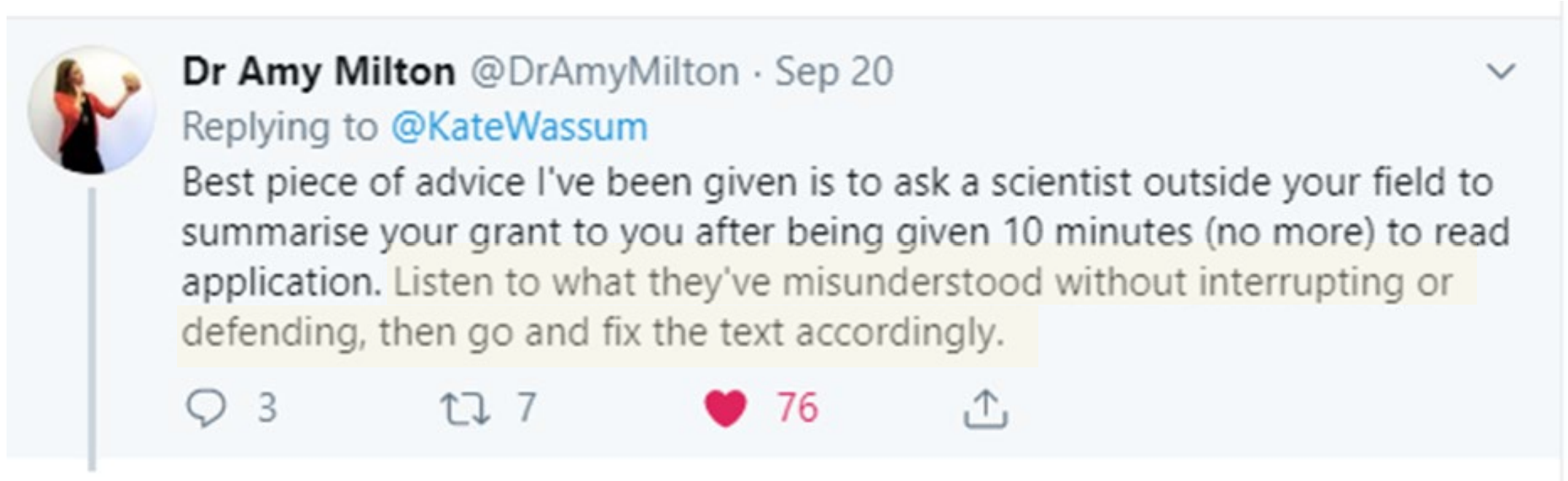
- Feedback is critical to finding flaws, ensuring clarity, and catching errors in logic or design.
- Share the proposal with colleagues, students, and other folk who can give you good, honest feedback.
- The more you vet the proposal prior to submission, the higher the quality of the submission that the reviewers will see.
- Get feedback from other PIs who have experience with training grants.
- Encourage your readers to be honest with you... tell them, 'don't worry about hurting my feelings... I appreciate all your thoughts, please don't hesitate to be critical'
- On the first pass, I find it helpful not to bias your feedback by asking specific questions. Just let them read the proposals/aims/outline and give you feedback, then followup with your specific questions (e.g., did you find this clear?, what did you think about this logic?)

# Get feedback with a timeline from someone outside your field



*Because your reviewer will likely make a judgment in 10 min*

# Listen and be receptive to the feedback



No Excuses! If someone didn't understand something, that's on you, not them.

# Get feedback outside your subfield



**Katie Karlsgodt** @KatieKarlsgodt · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Find a buddy, or group of buddies slightly outside your area that you can rotate around getting and giving feedback from/to. Then imagine it is the 5th grant someone is reading at 2am and think of what would make it easier for them to follow (consistent structure, headings, etc)



**Kate Wassum** 🧠 🧑🏫 🏆 @KateWassum · Sep 21



YAS!!! Great tips.

I always tell students to imagine the reviewer is reading the grant at midnight, hungry, jet lagged after returning from a long trip, and with two kids screaming in the next room.



# Get feedback outside your subfield



**Jennifer Silvers** @JASilvers · Sep 20



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

2 things that sound obvious but took me awhile to figure out: 1) Keep it simple with 1-3 impactful but feasible aims, more than that starts to feel scattered. 2) Ask your colleagues for feedback! My best comments have come from folks in adjacent but not overlapping fields



7



**David Barker** @DavidBarker\_PhD · Sep 21



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Force them to have someone in science but outside their field flag the \*Jargon\* for replacing or re writing



3



# Leave plenty of time for feedback



**Sharon Plon** @splon · 7h



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Two points (1) If reviewers don't like your grant after reading the specific aims page the battle is half lost. Work on it.(2) the closer to the deadline you ask someone to read the grant - the less useful the comments you receive. They know you don't have time to change much.



# **Hot tips**

## **Editing**



**Best way to be critical of your own proposal, is to find the flaws in someone else's**



**Kay Tye** @kaymtye · Sep 20

Replying to @KateWassum and @NicolaGrissom

\*Mock Study Section\*, with time pressure to read, review, discuss and score grants.

Once you put yourself into a reviewer's shoes, you write with a different perspective that HELPS the reviewer do their job (which will improve scores).



# Leave LOTS of time for editing



**NeuroVixen** @NeuroVixen · Sep 20



Replying to [@KateWassum](#)

Be sure to budget enough time to give yourself a week without looking at it so you can come back with "fresh eyes" and catch mistakes/things that aren't clear/can be improved.



4



# Writing is rewriting

Trying to edit online will disrupt your thought process, just get your initial thoughts the screen as quickly as possible to capture what's in your head, including the excitement you feel for the proposed work.

Then edit later

The majority of work in writing a grant is in the editing process.

# Writing is rewriting

Edit in multiple stages

- Content
  - Are you selling it?
  - Is it logical?
  - Are your references correct, is everything accurate
- Clarity
  - Does it make sense?
- Style & Grammar
  - Is it written well
  - Can I make it more concise
- Content again
  - After you make it more concise, is it still accurate and clear

# Writing is rewriting

Read the grant out loud to yourself and you'll catch awkward prose and missing words, or you might find re-wording is in order to reduce redundancies, flow, etc.

- Word can do this for you

# Writing is rewriting

Compile feedback from many, then address each point through your editing

**Hot tips**

**Responding to feedback in a resubmission**

# Responding to feedback in a resub



Sherry Pagoto  
@DrSherryPagoto

It's grant season again! Isn't THIS scenario the WORST:

You submitted a grant, it got a score. You respond to the reviews only for the resubmission score to stay the same or get worse. AGH!! What happened? Here are some common reasons. A thread! 1/14



12:02 PM · Oct 14, 2018 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

153 Retweets 350 Likes



Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

Replying to @DrSherryPagoto

The No Cigar: The changes you made did not adequately solve the problems that reviewers were concerned about. 2/14

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Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The One Step Forward, One Step Back: A change you made solved one problem but then introduced a new problem. 3/14

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7



Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The Debate Debacle: You debated the reviewers concerns and consequently made minimal changes. You lost the debate. 4/14

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Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The "He/she Is Just Not That Into You": The reviewers didn't feel the project had enough significance in the first place. Fixing a few methodological flaws didn't change that feeling. 5/14

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8



Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The "You Just Can't Leave Well Enough Alone": You added a completely new element to the project (unrelated to the reviews) that opened a can of worms. 6/14

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5



Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The Eagle Eye: You got a new reviewer who caught serious problems the first reviewers missed. While this might seem unfair, from a scientific perspective, is it ethical for a scientist to ignore a methodological flaw simply because another scientist overlooked it? 7/14

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2

10



Sherry Pagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The "Sorry, This Cancer Can't Be Treated": You got a new reviewer who rated certain flaws as more lethal than the first set of reviewers did. 8/14

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9





# Responding to feedback in a resub



It's grant season again! Isn't THIS scenario the WORST:

You submitted a grant, it got a score. You respond to the reviews only for the resubmission score to stay the same or get worse. AGH!! What happened? Here are some common reasons. A thread! 1/14



12:02 PM · Oct 14, 2018 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

153 Retweets 350 Likes



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

The bottom line is that your grant was reviewed twice, possibly by the same, possibly by different reviewers, and it did not produce the level of enthusiasm needed to get a fundable score. (CRAP!) 11/14

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6



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

If you had new reviewers this is even worse news, because not one but two sets of your peers weren't wowed. (DAMN YOU ALL!) 10/14

1



7



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

Lessons learned (from someone who has been on receiving end of all of these highly pleasant scenarios): be very careful in making the decision to put the time into a resubmission. Just because it got scored doesn't mean it has a chance. Things to consider... 11/14

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11



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

How close was the score? Specifically, what were the scores for Significance? This is a HARD one to move. If the overall score isn't in spitting distance look for enthusiasm expressed in the reviewers comments, such as... 12/14

1



16



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

"Flaws are minimal and easily fixable," "the work is highly significant," "work is likely to have high impact." Is there language that makes you feel invited back? If not, you probably weren't. 13/14

1



25



**Sherry Pagoto** ✓ @DrSherryPagoto · Oct 14, 2018

Finally, consider how fixable the problems are AND whether fixes will introduce more problems, possibly requiring more data--which may mean the whole thing just isn't ready for prime time.

I'm very curious how others have made the tough decision to resubmit or move on! 14/14

8



43



# Responding to feedback in a resub



**Anne Carpenter** @DrAnneCarpenter · Nov 5

I think the point he's trying to make is that the SS is not a checklist: fixing the specifics may not fix the bigger picture issues. Getting a fundable score means at least one reviewer was \*excited\* about the proposal. If you fix the details but not the "meh", it will fail again



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5



24



**Anne Carpenter**  
@DrAnneCarpenter

Replying to @pratt\_ed @boehninglab and 2 others

I think it is SUPER useful to have someone senior read reviews and "read between the lines" to tell you what issues are really 'score-driving'. It's hard to make a tutorial for this kind of thing! I devoured internet resources when I was getting started to try to make sense of it

8:41 AM · Nov 5, 2019 · [Twitter Web App](#)

# Responding to feedback in a resub



**Dr Mike Nitabach** @mnitabach · 21h

Additionally, reviewerz rarely state "Specific Aims way too complicated & jargon-laden to easily follow" even when it drove score.



2



1



9



**Dr Mike Nitabach** @mnitabach · 21h

Instead they'll say stuff like "Specific Aims are diffuse/dense/unfocused/insufficiently mechanistic", but really mean "too hard to read".



1



21



**Dr Mike Nitabach** @mnitabach · 21h

And this is (legitimately) absolutely infuriating to junior faculty who think it's their exptl plan that is problem & not the writing.



1



13



# **Super brief primer on the other components of the NRSA**

# Introduction

Required for a resubmission or revision application, but otherwise do not include  
**Limited to 1 page.**

Goal is to provide your response to the criticisms of the A0

- Highlight the prior reviewer's positive comments (using "*quotes*")
- Compile and condense the negative ones and include your concise response

# **Doctoral dissertation and research experience**

All graduate students should include any applicable research experience.

Advanced graduate students must include a narrative of their doctoral dissertation (may be preliminary) and any other prior research experience.

Please note that while the instructions direct Predoctoral Fellows to omit this section, the information is required of advanced graduate students who have successfully completed their comprehensive examinations or the equivalent by the time of award and will be performing dissertation research.

All graduate students should include any research experience, if applicable.

**Limited to 2 pages.**

# Doctoral dissertation and research experience

The goal to show them what you have done, to demonstrate your potential to execute the proposed projects and your high potential to become a successful independent researcher

Also a chance to show them stuff you have done that isn't published and to let them know that you were highly intellectually involved in your undergrad research

When writing about your research experience OWN IT!!!!!! You are awesome, show them (don't tell them)

Use strong, declarative, active language...

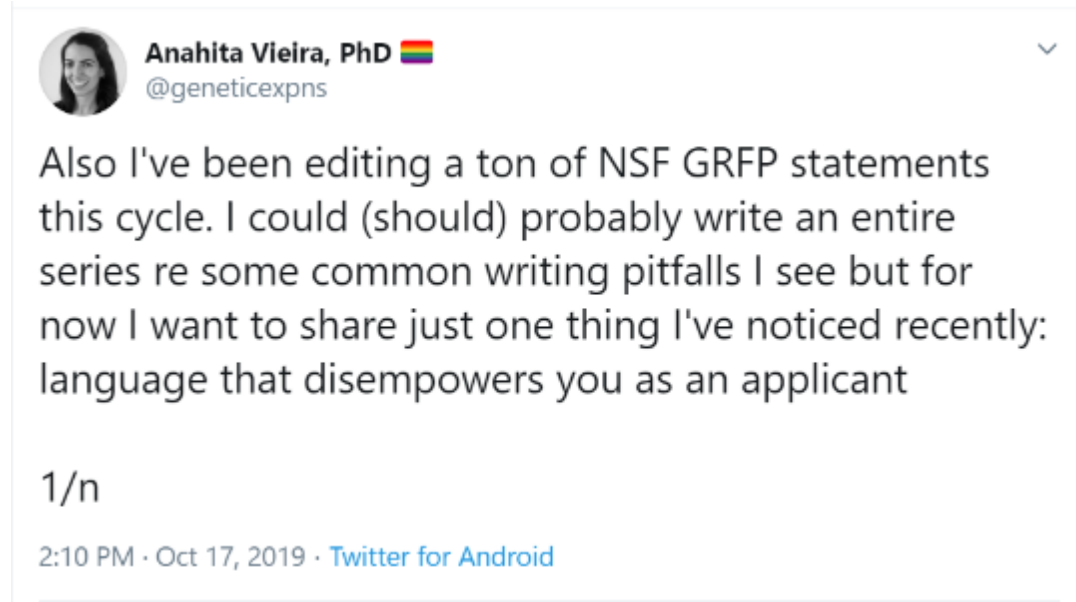
I was interested in X, so I joined X lab, to ask X question. I knew that X, so I formulated X hypothesis. To test this I did X because X. I found X. I interpreted this as X, so I then did X.

Use the end of this section to lead into what you are now doing.

Resist the temptation to just copy and paste your personal statement for grad school.

# Doctoral dissertation and research experience

Own it, love it, show it.





# Goals for Fellowship Training and Career

Provide details of your overall career goals

And the goals for your current training

Explain how the proposed research and training will enable the attainment of your ultimate career goal

**Limited to 1 page.**

This is where you tell them what your career goals are and how this will get you there. This is CRUCIAL for the Training potential component of the scoring

probably these goals should include ultimately becoming an independent researcher...  
with the steps you need in your field to get there

Think hard on what you want to do in the future and what tools/skills/intellectual training you need now to get you there. Design your project and training around these goals.

Can divide into technical (research skills) and non-technical (conceptual, career, writing, mentoring, etc.) training

# Activities planned under this award

A detailed description of all planned activities under the proposed research training plan, such as

- Coursework
- Seminars
- scientific conferences
- opportunities for interaction with other groups and scientists
- special or unique training opportunities for the applicant that are available in the training environment.

Give a year-by-year accounting including an estimate the percentage of time to be devoted to each activity (in a table)

**Limited to 1 page.**

You can also include your detailed timeline both in text and diagram here if you don't have space for it in the research strategy

# Activities planned under this award

Fellowship Applicants must describe a tailored research training plan well-suited to the stage of his/her career development to date.

Describe the skills and techniques that the candidate will learn during the award period, and discuss the relationship of the proposed research training to the applicant's career goals.

The applicant's plan should be coordinated with the sponsor's plan, and should include substantive detail that adds to the information about time allocations requested.

# Research Enhancement Objectives and Plan

# Respective contributions

Written with your sponsor

Describe how you and your sponsor(s) have collaborated to develop the current research and training proposal.

Describe anyone else you worked with in developing this (e.g., colleagues, program officer, grant writing course)

Describe which of the preliminary data you collected and which was from your lab.

Limited to **1 page**.

Overall goal is to be honest about how the grant was prepared, but also to show that you did it mostly yourself

# Sponsor & Co-sponsor statement

- Research Support Available
  - The sponsor(s) who will directly supervise the applicant's research, must currently be funded to conduct independent research in the area of the proposed research training (e.g., Principal Investigator on an R01 or equivalent)
- Sponsor's/Co-Sponsor's Previous Fellows/Trainees
  - The sponsor(s) must describe past experience in the guidance of other research trainees and fellows.

# Sponsor & Co-sponsor statement

- Training Plan, Environment, Research Facilities
  - The sponsor(s) must describe in detail
    - their commitment to and proposed role in guiding the individual applicant during the research training experience.
    - the research training plan for the applicant (coordinated with the applicant's own research training plan).
    - include items such as classes, seminars, and opportunities for interaction with other groups and scientists.
    - Training in career skills, e.g. grant-writing and presentation skills are strongly encouraged.
    - elaborate on the research environment and available research facilities and equipment, and discuss the relationship of the proposed research training to the applicant's career.
    - describe the quality and appropriateness of the training environment for the applicant's development including the strength of the institutional commitment to fostering the fellows' training.
    - the quality and availability of facilities and resources (e.g. equipment, laboratory space, computer time, subject populations) for the proposed training. Additionally, the quality of the facilities and related resources (e.g., equipment, laboratory space, computer time, available research support, etc.) must be described.

d. Number of Fellows/Trainees to be Supervised During the Fellowship: The sponsor(s) should provide information on other trainees they will be supervising during the period of this fellowship award.

e. Applicant's Qualifications and Potential for a Research Career: The sponsor(s) are also expected to provide an assessment of the applicant's qualifications and potential for a research career. The application must include statements that address the planned value of the proposed fellowship experience and research training program, and how these relate to the applicant's

# Sponsor & Co-sponsor statement

- Number of Fellows/Trainees to be Supervised During the Fellowship
  - The sponsor(s) should provide information on other trainees they will be supervising during the period of this fellowship award.
- Applicant's Qualifications and Potential for a Research Career
  - an assessment of the applicant's qualifications and potential for a research career.
  - address the planned value of the proposed fellowship experience and research training program, and how these relate to the applicant's needs in preparation for an independent research career.
  - Applicants should provide evidence of their potential for a productive and successful research career based upon the quality of their previous research training and academic record.



# Sponsor & Co-sponsor statement

- This is **VERY** important component of the research training criterion
- Written BY YOUR SUPERVISOR, NOT BY YOU
- Srsly, do not let them tell you hey are too busy and can you draft it, it is their job to do this.
- If they don't know what to write... then suggest senior PIs they can ask for advice, or ask those PIs to reach out to your mentor
- It must be consistent with the training goals written by the applicant so you can and should review this with your sponsor to ensure absolute consistency
- It should be written from the perspective of all the sponsors (including co-sponsors), so
  - 1. everyone's info is included
  - 2. it is clear that all cosponsors are well integrated into and contributing to the training plan
  - It's useless to have a cosponsor, but not discussion of how they will give you training
- must include some comment on how they will engage with you for training in the responsible conduct of research

# Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research

- plan to obtain instruction in the responsible conduct of research.
- should document prior instruction in responsible conduct of research during the applicants current career stage (including the date of last occurrence)
- and propose plans to receive instruction in responsible conduct of research.
- Such plans must address
  - Format
  - subject matter
  - faculty participation
  - duration of instruction
  - frequency of instruction
  - see [NOT-OD-10-019](#).
- May include career stage-appropriate, individualized instruction and/or independent scholarly activities that will enhance the applicants understanding of ethical issues related to their specific research activities and the societal impact of that research.
- The role of the sponsor/mentor in responsible conduct of research instruction must be described.
- Applications lacking a plan for instruction in responsible conduct of research will be considered incomplete and may be delayed in the review process.
- **limited to 1 page.**

# Resource sharing plan

## Resource Sharing Plan:

NIH considers the sharing of unique research resources developed through NIH-sponsored research an important means to enhance the value and further the advancement of the research. When resources have been developed with NIH funds and the associated research findings published or provided to NIH, it is important that they be made readily available for research purposes to qualified individuals within the scientific community. If the final data/resources are not amenable to sharing, this must be explained in the Resource Sharing section of the application (see [http://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/data\\_sharing/data\\_sharing\\_faqs.htm](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/data_sharing/data_sharing_faqs.htm)).

(a) *Data Sharing Plan*: Not Applicable.

(b) *Sharing Model Organisms*: Regardless of the amount requested, all applications where the development of model organisms is anticipated are expected to include a description of a specific plan for sharing and distributing unique model organisms and related resources, or state appropriate reasons why such sharing is restricted or not possible. See [Sharing Model Organisms Policy](#), and [NIH Guide NOT-OD-04-042](#).

(c) *Genome-Wide Association Studies (GWAS)*: Regardless of the amount requested, applicants seeking funding for a genome-wide association study are expected to provide a plan for submission of GWAS data to the NIH-designated GWAS data repository, or provide an appropriate explanation why submission to the repository is not possible. A genome-wide association study is defined as any study of genetic variation across the entire genome that is designed to identify genetic associations with observable traits (e.g., blood pressure or weight) or the presence or absence of a disease or condition. For further information see Policy for Sharing of Data Obtained in NIH Supported or Conducted Genome-Wide Association Studies (go to [NOT-OD-07-088](#), and <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/gwas/>.)

# Project Summary

- 30 lines
- Succinct description of the project
- Background, gap in knowledge, hypothesis, approach
- Stand alone document
- Written somewhat general, for a lay science audience
- Some reviewers use this to make quick decisions about which grants to review in what order
  - It's not a scoreable item, but might give chance the impression of the scorable items

# Project Narrative

- 2-3 sentences
- For public release
- General goals of the project

# Biosketch- You, the PI

- **5 pages max**
- <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/funding/424/applicant-fellowbiosketch.doc>
- Include some text in the personal statement part that indicates why you are well suited to do these projects (with specific reference to your prior work) and how they will help launch your career
- Well describe your prior work, its impact
- Use this page to sell yourself
- If you don't yet have any publications, see if you can post any that are almost ready to submit on BioRxiv before the NRSA submission deadline... this shows progress and is encouraged for Biosketches

[https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/faq\\_biosketches.htm#](https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/faq_biosketches.htm#)

<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/how-to-apply-application-guide.html#format#>

# Biosketch- Sponsors

- **5 pages max**
- In their personal statement part, your sponsors should include information on their mentoring philosophy and (briefly) experience to highlight their commitment to mentoring
- If a co-sponsor, their personal statement should detail the specific expertise they will contribute

# Selection of sponsor and institution

- Discuss how you arrived at selecting the sponsor(s) and the institution.
- Describe why this institution is a good place for you given your research career goals
- Describe why you selected your sponsor's lab and how this will facilitate your career and research goals
- Ditto for the co-sponsors
- **Limited to 1 page.**



# Description of institutional environment and commitment to training

- This is where you describe how great your institution is for helping you to achieve your training, research, intellectual and career goals
- Describe all the intellectual, physical, and person resources available
- Describe for both institution broadly and for your specific department/area
- There is likely a pre-written version of this from your department you can tailor
- **Limited to 1 page.**

## **Additional educational information**

This includes mission, demographics, number of students who graduated with Bachelors, Masters or Ph.D. in the sciences, total R01 NIH funds received by the institution)

Usually written by the grad student administrator

# Facilities

Get from your sponsors, describes all the facilities of your lab and co-sponsors labs  
Including shared facilities (like cores)

Make sure its clear that all the appropriate facilities you need to do your work is  
available

And that you have facilities for biohazards, if applicable

# Equipment

Get from your sponsors, describes all the equipment in your lab and co-sponsors labs  
Including shared resources

Make sure its clear that all the equipment you need to do your work is available

# References

Use the correct NIH format:

# Letters of support

- These are written from your collaborators addressed to you
  - You will likely draft this for them
  - It will detail that the collaborator is excited to work with you on the project, how you have interacted in the past and how they will contribute to your training in the future
  - Should be consistent with all the training plan information
  - Every co sponsor or any PI listed as contributing to training needs to provide a letter
- 
- You will likely write a draft of this for your letter writers. It's not a LOR. It's a document detailing how they will support your proposed research.



**Jacquie Godbe** @Trientist · 1h



Bother, bother, bother and ANNOY your letter writers to submit their letters on time. I had an application sunk because a collaborator put it off until the last minute, got the flu, put it off again and then reneged on their offer AFTER I had submitted. [#gradschool](#)

# Letters of reference

- Will be submitted separately
- At least 3, no more than 5
- Must be strong and describe your potential for an independent career in research
- Should be from relevant prior research mentors (ideally PIs)
- Send your letter writers reminders and suggestions of topics to include in their letter.
  - You may ask specific LOR writers to comment non any weaknesses you feel you have in your application (e.g., low GPA, papers that aren't published yet, lack of pubs owing to negative data, gaps in training)
- Send them your biosketch and specific aims so they can tailor your letter
- If you can't get one from a key prior mentor (like the main person you worked with as an undergrad), have another letter writer explain why (if possible)
- Send them reminders!!!

# Letters of recommendation

- You might be asked to draft your own LOR.
- Usually, if someone asks this, they just want to make sure that they cover all the basis and give you the strongest letter possible.
- But don't assume that they will edit it.



Anahita Vieira, PhD   
@geneticexpns

Ever been asked to draft your own recommendation letter? Have no idea where to start? Here's a template to help get you started. 🙄🙄 #acwri

XX FANCY LETTERHEAD HERE XX

[Date Here]

Dear XYZ Selection Committee,

It is a pleasure to recommend Spongebob Squarepants for XX fellowship/program. I've known Spongebob for X years as his thesis advisor and in xyz capacity. Overall, I consider Spongebob to be a mature, thoughtful, detail-oriented individual.

Spongebob received his undergraduate degree from The Pants of Square College where he studied about pineapples that live under the sea. During his time there, he innovated new ways of pitching his pineapple house in the harsh ocean conditions which undoubtedly will serve other creatures who wear square pants under the sea. His work was published in "Pineapples are great materials for houses" Squarepants, S., Cheeks, S., Krabs, M., Star, P. Under the Sea, 44, 123-129 (2015).

Spongebob's interest in innovating new houses didn't stop at his pineapple project. Over time, his ambitions grew beyond the doors of his pineapple house and now he is most motivated to obtain a license to drive a boatmobile. To this end, he is earning his living working at Mr. Krab's Krusty Krab Patty burgers. And he is taking driving lessons from Mrs. Puff. By all accounts, he is her most diligent student. This same spirit of hard-work and ingenuity is something that I saw in Spongebob when he rotated in my lab as a graduate student.

As his advisor, I see that Spongebob will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. Once he joined my lab, he took lead on a project looking at the effects of human activity on his homeland of Bikini Bottom. While others discouraged him from pursuing this line of inquiry, Spongebob demonstrated clear rationale and pursued his intuitions anyway. He now has a significant amount of pilot data demonstrating that humans have, in fact, destroyed the ocean. This work is currently under review at *Under the Sea* journal.

Based on my extensive interactions with Spongebob thus far, I consider his potential to lead his own research group one day to be quite high. Spongebob is more than a scientist. He thinks outside of his square pants and collaborates with others well so that he can achieve his goals. Based on his personal qualities and technical talents, I consider Spongebob to be highly deserving of an xyz fellowship and I recommend him without hesitation.

Sincerely yours,  
Dr. Lady Boss



# Letters of recommendation

- You might be asked to draft your own LOR.
- Usually, if someone asks this, they just want to make sure that they cover all the basis and give you the strongest letter possible.
- But don't assume that they will edit it.



**Anahita Vieira, PhD** 🏳️‍🌈  
@geneticexpns

Ever been asked to draft your own recommendation letter? Have no idea where to start? Here's a template to help get you started. 🙄🙄 #acwri



**Anahita Vieira, PhD** 🏳️‍🌈 @geneticexpns · Oct 3

So much of academia is about advocating for yourself, anyway. Learning how to write positively about yourself early on will help you with personal statements, cover letters, nominations and so on. It's a skill that takes practice. Punch that imposter syndrome in the face.

💬 1    ↻ 4    ❤️ 5    ↗



**Anahita Vieira, PhD** 🏳️‍🌈 @geneticexpns · Oct 3

Finally, please don't use this as a literal template and simply swap out Spongebob for your name lolso. You should obviously include YOUR details, YOUR story, YOUR motivations, YOUR skills, YOUR goals. Own your narrative.

💬 1    ↻    ❤️ 4    ↗



**Anahita Vieira, PhD** 🏳️‍🌈 @geneticexpns · Oct 3

The overall structure in these docs is similar:

- State who you are/what you are applying for
- State your thesis/passion/mission statement
- Share the \*relevant\* parts of YOUR story!
- Along the way, point out what your experiences taught you & how they shaped you

💬 1    ↻    ❤️ 6    ↗



**Anahita Vieira, PhD** 🏳️‍🌈 @geneticexpns · Oct 3

- In your conclusion/summary paragraph make sure to state your current goals and ambitions
- Explain how a fellowship/xyz program fits into this (i.e. how you would use it to fulfill your goals AND how these goals align with that of the program/org etc)

💬 1    ↻    ❤️ 4    ↗

# Vertebrate animals

- Must include the total N of subjects
- You can largely rip the rest of it off from your PIs successful R01s, tailoring to your specific projects
- Address:
  - 1) proposed use of the animals, and species, strains, ages, sex, and numbers to be used;
  - 2) justifications for the use of animals and for the appropriateness of the species and numbers proposed;
  - 3) adequacy of veterinary care;
  - 4) procedures for limiting discomfort, distress, pain and injury to that which is unavoidable in the conduct of scientifically sound research including the use of analgesic, anesthetic, and tranquilizing drugs and/or comfortable restraining devices; and
  - 5) methods of euthanasia and reason for selection if not consistent with the AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia. For additional information, see <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/olaw/VASchecklist.pdf>.

# **Protections for human subjects & inclusion of Women, Minorities, and Children**

- You can largely rip the rest of it off from your PIs successful R01s, tailoring to your specific projects
- For research that involves human subjects but does not involve one of the six categories of research that are exempt under 45 CFR Part 46, the committee will evaluate the justification for involvement of human subjects and the proposed protections from research risk relating to their participation according to the following five review criteria: 1) risk to subjects, 2) adequacy of protection against risks, 3) potential benefits to the subjects and others, 4) importance of the knowledge to be gained, and 5) data and safety monitoring for clinical trials.
- When the proposed project involves clinical research, the committee will evaluate the proposed plans for inclusion of minorities and members of both genders, as well as the inclusion of children.

## Resources:

*This list is non-exhaustive, a google search will bring up many resources.*

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/book/9780124201873/a-practical-guide-to-writing-a-ruth-l-kirschstein-nrsa-grant>

<https://www.cc.nih.gov/training/students/appadvice.pdf>

<https://www.americanscientist.org/blog/the-long-view/the-science-of-scientific-writing>

<https://www.thepsf.org/documents/Research/Grants/Top-Ten-Grant-Writing-Mistakes.pdf>

<https://www.alexhunterlang.com/nsf-fellowship>

<https://elifesciences.org/inside-elifeb6bf37cb/webinar-report-how-to-plan-research-grants-that-further-your-career>

<https://alexisshotwell.com/writing-workshops-academic-activist/>

<https://kbroman.org/blog/2011/10/21/grant-writing/>

<http://www.grantcentral.com/workbooks/>

[https://www.pitt.edu/~gsiegle/Siegle-f31hints-BehaviorTherapist10\\_fordistrib.pdf](https://www.pitt.edu/~gsiegle/Siegle-f31hints-BehaviorTherapist10_fordistrib.pdf)

<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/grants-contracts/calix-sample-f31-application-and-summary-statement>

<https://jef.works/blog/2017/10/19/NIH-F-series-grant-tips-and-example/>

<https://www.chemtoolman.com/nih-f31-fellowship-dos-donts/>

<https://postdocs.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tkssra2836/f/wysiwyg/NIH-Predoc-slides-5.24.18.pdf>

<https://www.biosciencewriters.com/Tips-for-Writing-an-Outstanding-NIH-Fellowship-Application.aspx>

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/dda0/57dd2705b19ac8722c6bfd270feae4564540.pdf>

[http://grantscourse.columbia.edu/RubinJaime\\_Funding\\_for\\_Graduate\\_Students.pdf](http://grantscourse.columbia.edu/RubinJaime_Funding_for_Graduate_Students.pdf)

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0193945913485162>

<http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/the-science-of-scientific-writing/1>

<https://pn.bmj.com/content/15/6/474>

**You got this.**