How to Critique a Proposal

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slides courtesy of Janet Stocks with input from others

NIH, 2014
The benefits of peer critique of your proposal

- **Who**
  - Someone who knows your discipline (a specialist)
  - Someone who doesn’t (a generalist)

- **Why**
  - A fresh/objective perspective
  - Discussion of/clarification of ideas
  - Additional literature suggestions

- We are often better at evaluating other people’s work than our own
Benefits to you of critiquing others’ proposals

- Learn something you didn’t already know
- Obtain perspective on the structure of a proposal
- Get tips about how to present arguments
- Show that you are a good citizen
  - As a member of a community of scholars, you are the peers in peer-review
What to critique

- Content of Proposal
- Intended Audience
- Presentation
- Rhetoric
  - Exposition
  - Persuasion
  - Credentialing
What to critique (what panels look at)

- Content of proposal
  - Research question/ statement of the problem/ program objectives
  - Significance of research question
  - Existing state of the field and gaps (literature)
  - Methods
  - Expected products/ outcomes/ contribution
  - Assessment/ dissemination
What to critique (cont.)

- Intended audience
  - Is this the right funding agency for this proposal?
  - Does the proposal address the agency’s needs?
  - Has the researcher made appropriate contact with the agency?
What to critique (cont.)

- **Presentation**
  - Is the writing clear and concise?
  - Is the reader’s interest engaged throughout?
  - Are you persuaded that this is worth funding?
  - Are all the elements presented logically and consistently?
  - Are there appropriate transitions between concepts and sections?
  - Does the writer present appropriate credentials?
    - Does the writer have the background/training to be uniquely suited to this research?
How NIH panels work

- Proposals are reviewed by a primary reviewer and a secondary and tertiary
- As a reviewer, you will have 5-10 as primary, same amount as secondary and a few tertiary
- You will be expected to write critiques before the panel as a primary reviewer
- During the discussion, secondary reviewer will keep notes
The attitude of a peer critique

- Constructive criticism (be supportive, not brutal)
- Attempt to paraphrase main points (to see if they are clear)
- Dialogue / Ask questions for clarification
- Suggest additional literature if possible
- Probe for methodological details
- Point out gaps
How to deliver a critique

● Remember that this is not YOUR proposal (don’t expect that all your suggestions will be taken)

● Your opinion is valuable, but assume that the proposal author knows a lot too

● Therefore, tone is important—we are all in this game together!
How to receive a critique

• Be grateful that the person took the time to take your proposal seriously
• Take all feedback into consideration but make choices based on what YOU believe is best
• Come back to the feedback a day or two later and consider it again