



Michelle Cardel, PhD, MS, RD

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Today, I finished my 4th @NIH study section (though first one via Zoom). I have learned so much through these experiences on what reviewers want, and more importantly, what they don't want to see in grant applications.

A thread to improve your grantsmanship 📌

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Justify, justify, justify. Provide rationale for why you choose the study design that you did. Even if the reviewers don't necessarily agree with the route you chose, they are less likely to ding you for it if you provide a scientific rationale for **why** you choose it.

Be upfront about the limitations of your study design. There is no such thing as the perfect study. Recognize the limitations of the design you selected, identify potential problems that may arise, and be proactive in a section specifically addressing them.

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identify potential solutions when issues inevitably arise.

Recruitment. In human studies, recruitment is one of the biggest issues we face. Ensure your pilot studies recruit the population and (when possible) use same study design you plan to use in the larger study. If your prelim data shows issues with recruitment, this is a red flag.

Study Team. Does the PI have experience with the proposed study population and study methods? If not, did they include team members with complementary expertise and experience? Ideally, team has published together and demonstrated successful collaboration of sorts in the past.

Feasibility. Does environment have all resources & support needed to carry out proposed projecct (including letters of support from proposed partners)? Are study team members (e.g., coordinators) already hired? If not, allow enough time in study timeline for hiring and training.

Study timeline. Ensure study timeline is reasonable and project milestones are clearly laid out. Be sure you can actually do what you say you are going to do.

Early Stage Investigators (ESI). Some applications do not clearly delineate who is ESI. Thus, be sure that if you are ESI & applying for a R-level grant, add ESI status to your biosketch & budget justification. This will remind reviewers to be more generous with the application.

Reviewers get annoyed when applications are hard to read. Typos, spelling errors, and figures that are too small to read are an easy way to annoy your reviewers. And trust me, you don't want them annoyed while they read and score your application.

Revisions. Sometimes you get the same reviewer & sometimes not, but all want you to be highly responsive to issues brought up by previous reviewers. Do it thoughtfully & carefully. Reviewers see when a PI addresses issues in a superficial way. And it does not make them happy.

Significance. You can write world's most beautiful grant but if your research and proposed study don't significantly advance the field, it's not going to do well. Ask people to review specific aims page early. If issues of significance arise a lot, go back to the drawing board.

Grantsmanship is an art. The grants that get scored the highest are the ones that are an absolute delight to read. They are clear, focused, direct, include all necessary components of the application, AND focus on addressing a significant gap in the literature. I wish you luck!


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