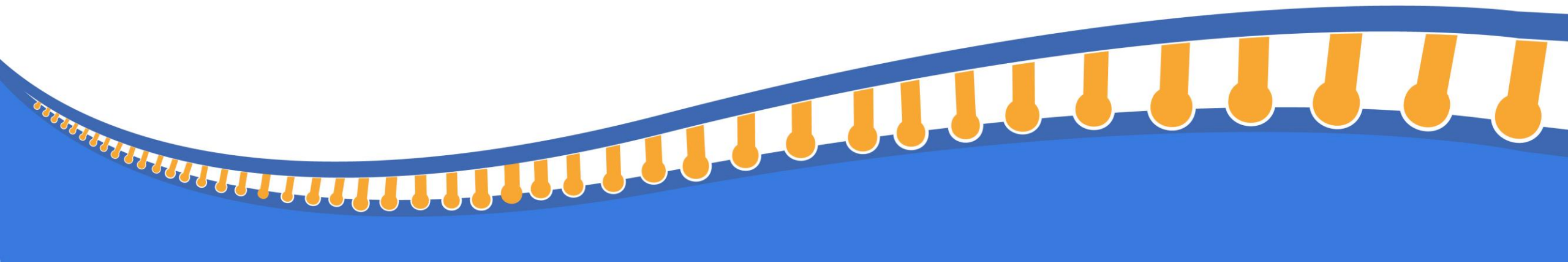# Module: Writing to the Score

How NIH Reviewers Evaluate Phase I

SBIR/STTR Applications

Learning Objectives

- Understand NIH scoring

- Translate criteria into writing

- Draft reviewer-focused text

- Avoid common pitfalls

How NIH Reviewers Score

- Scores 1–9

- Each criterion scored separately

- Phase I = feasibility

- Reviewer commentary: 'Strengths do not outweigh weaknesses.'

NIH Scoring Criteria

- Significance
- Investigator(s)
- Innovation
- Approach
- Environment

Significance

"why should the NIH spend taxpayer dollars on this problem"

- Is the health problem clear and important?

- Is there strong unmet need?

- Is there a meaningful impact on patients or the field

- Common Reviewer Critiques:
  - Clinical significance unclear
  - Focused on market size instead of health impact
  - Vague clinical relevance
  - No patient centered outcome

Significance Exercise

- If successful, this project will address ___ by ___ resulting in ___.

Investigator(s)

"is this the right team for this exact work?"

- Can the team execute the work in the proposal?

- Do skills match aims?

- Gaps are acknowledged and covered

- Common Reviewer Critiques :
  - Expertise lacking (regulatory, wetlab, patient care)
  - Overclaiming expertise
  - Undefined roles

Investigator Exercise

- Our team is uniquely qualified because ____.

Innovation

"What can this do that existing solutions cannot"

- Clear technical or scientific novelty

- Is it meaningfully different from existing approaches?

- Why hasn't it already been done?

- Common Reviewer Critique :
  - Incremental advance
  - No comparison to current approaches

Innovation Exercise

- Existing technologies do ___.
- Our technology does ___.
- The key technology differences are ___.

Approach

- Feasible aims –in 6-12 months?

- Clear measurable milestones?

- Key risks identified and mitigation plans for each of the risks

- Common Reviewer Critique :
  – Approach lacks detail
  – Obvious risks not identified or addressed
  – Lacking or insufficient go/no go criteria

Approach Exercise

- Draft one aim, one metric, one risk + mitigation.
- Write one major task (or aim) you will be working in
- List two ways you will measure success on the task
- Name one or two risks that may prevent you from completing the task and how can mitigate those risks

Environment

"Do they have what they need right now"

- Access to the resources needed?

- Facilities appropriate to the work?

- Real (documented) partnerships in place instead of plans to establish

- Common Reviewer Critique :
  - Missing key facilities tied to aims
  - Insufficient equipment to perform the work
  - Environment is not supportive of the work proposed

Environment Exercise

- The environment supports Phase I by providing ___.

Key Takeaways

- Write to criteria

- Clarity wins

- Phase I = feasibility + de-risking, not commercialization

- Reviewers are asking: "Is this worth Phase II?"

- One weak criterion (especially Approach) can sink the whole application