Sharpening Your Focus: Tips on Grant Proposal Preparation

NIH Innovation Section: Cutting (but don’t breach the) Edge

By Chris Black, M.L.S., Assistant Director of Research Development Support, Office of Research

This is a series of tips published in UMMS Research News about writing proposals.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines state this section (and evaluation criterion) should:

1. Explain how the application challenges and seeks to shift current research or clinical practice paradigms; and

2. Describe proposed theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions that:

   (a) are novel and have advantage over status quo, or
   (b) will be refined, improved, or applied in (important) new ways.

Basically, how will you solve problems or gather/interpret data in new ways that matter to your field?
1. Suggestions for responding:

   - Limit section to approximately ½ to one page
   - Highlight one or a few innovations (not a laundry list of little items)
   - Start with explaining the norm/status quo in your field (judge how much your reviewers will know about this topic to determine degree of background needed); literature citations are useful here
   - Remember, emphasis here is on impact of the research concept or tool to the scientific field (as opposed to the impact of the study outcome to the NIH mission).

2. Is it innovative or just different? e.g., “This model has been tested in rabbits, mice, rats, drosophila, dogs, chickens, zebrafish, frogs and hamsters, but no one has looked at it in a cat yet.” Does this matter? Why?

3. Don’t strive for a totally revolutionary paradigm shift in an unsolicited R-type proposal – generally reviewers are a scientifically conservative group. They will be skeptical!

Acknowledging that reviewers are often risk-adverse, innovation often elicits skepticism.

Here is what the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) has to say:

“You can think of your research as a fish in the river of scientific knowledge. While you can swim anywhere, you have to stay in the water. Reviewers expect the same idea: your research can be somewhat innovative—at the water’s edge—but not so innovative that it’s out on the bank.”

For more advice from the NIAID on how to highlight significance and innovation in your next proposal, visit their website.