A common reviewer critique in NIH grant applications – especially for new investigators – is that the project is “too ambitious.”

According to William Gerin, Ph.D. (Pennsylvania State University, and author, Writing the NIH Grant Proposal: A Step-by-Step Guide, SAGE Books, 2006), “The ‘A’ word… is code for your inexperience is showing.”

There may be several reasons why a reviewer feels that the Principal Investigator (PI) has outreached his or her capabilities, or that the scope is unrealistic:

- Reviewers question the feasibility of the project within the time and resources (both human and physical) described in the application.
• The PI is not experienced enough in either the field or the methods.

• The problem is more complex than the PI realizes.

• The PI is naive about potential pitfalls/alternative approaches.

• The budget is unrealistic.

• There are too many investigators involved for the PI to manage and coordinate.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) suggests evaluating your “BEST”

• **Budget**: asking for too little is a sign that you do not understand the scope (be realistic!)

• **Effort**: an insufficient level shows you are unaware of how much work needs to be done

• **Specific Aims**: not having the appropriate number/conceptualization

• **Time**: requesting too few years indicates you think your work will take less time than adequate for the scope of the project

A good way to avoid the A word is to share a proposal draft with experienced colleagues before submitting.