Confessions of a Grumpy Reviewer

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PIs often approach writing grant proposals as they do writing journal articles. However, there is a key difference between the journal article reader and the proposal reviewer: your colleague who chooses to read your journal article is already interested in what you have to say and has made the choice to read your article; in contrast, the reviewer reading your grant proposal may have no special interest in the topic you're proposing and is obligated to read your proposal. In addition, reviewers are specifically tasked with the role of being critical and helping to winnow down numerous proposals to just the ones with the best ideas. As a result, proposal reviewers are a much more challenging audience. They may be tired; they often are reading your grant proposal as one in a large stack of proposals; and they may be grumpy. It's therefore very important to engage and excite your reviewer and make him or her your champion. Most critically, avoid irritating your reviewer.

There are many ways to irritate your reviewer. Below we list mistakes that PIs often make—some can significantly hamper the clarity of your proposal, while others are admittedly pedantic. However, like a small pebble in a shoe, even minor irritations can become significant for a reviewer who is reading your proposal at 2 am.

First, the big mistakes that can hamper clarity:

- **Illegible figures and graphs.** This can drive reviewers crazy and lead them to conclude that the PI really doesn't really care whether the reviewer understands the proposal or—even worse—that the PI has something to hide by making key graphs or charts impossible to read. Graphs may be illegible because the axis labels or units are missing or too small, or because there is no clear legend for multiple lines. Figures are often illegible because text in the figures is too small, or because the figure is too complex. Beware taking a PowerPoint slide and shrinking it down to figure size – this is almost always a bad idea. Simplify the figure and redraw it so that it is legible at the size it will be in the proposal. If it's too complex, consider breaking the figure into two figures or focusing only on the core concept and explaining the rest within the text. Also beware of blurry, low resolution figures. This adversely impacts the impression of competence that you want to convey to the reviewer.

- **Very lengthy figure captions.** The main point of including a figure is to provide a visual way for the reviewer to easily and quickly grasp key concepts. However, some PIs see it as a way to get around the font limitations by including a lengthy discussion of the figure in the caption in 9 point font. A grumpy reviewer will just skip the entire figure. If the figure merits a lengthy discussion, include that in your main text. In the caption, provide a concise description of the main points you're making with the figure.

- **Failure to clearly state your project goals and objectives early in the proposal.** Many reviewers tell me that if they have read two (some say just one) pages of a proposal and they still don't know what, *specifically,* the PI is actually proposing to do, they will put the proposal down and go on to the next one. Remember that you can always provide background later in the proposal; don't irritate your reviewer by making him read several

pages of background information he probably already knows in order to find out what you're proposing to do.

- **Typos and grammatical mistakes**. These kinds of mistakes, which reviewers see as sloppiness, signal to the reviewer that the PI didn't care enough about the proposal to ask someone to proof read it (or at least use spell check). Reviewers see this as sign the PI will do sloppy research, and they also see it as lack of respect for them as the reader.

- **Walls of text with no subheadings.** When a reviewer opens a proposal, and she sees large blocks of text with minimal headings and no subheadings, a deep feeling of dread settles on her. This proposal is likely to be difficult to follow, and it will be a challenge to find where in the text the review criteria are addressed. This makes the reviewer's job much more difficult and, consequently, makes her extremely grumpy and disinclined to give the PI the benefit of the doubt on any aspect of the proposed project.

- **The garden path proposal.** Usually, when a topic is introduced early in a proposal, it's a signal to the reader that the topic is central to the proposed project. However, some PIs introduce a topic and discuss it at some length, and then never return to it in the rest of the proposal. Instead of discussing an important point, that part of the proposal was just an interesting aside (perhaps motivated by the PI's perceived need to acknowledge work that is tangential to the proposal or that might be of interest to the review panel). In this case, the PI has led the reviewer down the proverbial "garden path," signaling to him that the proposal was going one way, and then suddenly taking a 90 degree turn in an unexpected direction. Reviewers often find this deeply confusing and, at 2 am, deeply irritating. If a topic is not really central to your proposal, don't discuss it at length early in the proposal. If you feel you must address it, put it later in your proposal and clearly explain why you are discussing the topic and how it relates to your proposed project.

- **The ghost team project.** Often, proposals for team projects fail to describe the team, their qualifications, and what the roles of team members are until the management plan, if there is one, at the end of the proposal. The project plan is often written in passive voice, e.g., "The specimens will be fabricated and tested …" As a result, the proposal reads as if key tasks will be done magically by no one in particular. Team projects are more expensive and complex than single-PI projects, so there needs to be a strong reason to fund a team. That reason usually stems from the skills and experience that each team member brings to the team. If you fail to describe your team and the qualifications of each member early in the proposal, you have left out one of the most important aspects of your project, and reviewers are unlikely to recommend funding.

- **The tentative or uncommitted proposal.** Some proposals read as if the PI is not really sure what he will do if he wins the grant. The research plan is peppered with words like "might," "could," "would," "it might be interesting to," "X can be done," etc. This kind of tentative wording weakens your proposal and makes it appear that you are not really committing to a clear course of action, which makes reviewers uncomfortable. Everyone knows that there are no guarantees in research, but as the PI, you need to have the courage of your convictions. If you appear to be unsure of what you will do or whether you're likely to be successful, why should your reviewer place her faith in you? Wording such as, " We will do x" is always more convincing than, "We plan to/might/could/would do x."

- **Using jargon or lab shorthand.** Some PIs are so accustomed to talking to their graduate students and close colleagues that they end up using language in their proposals that is inaccessible or unclear to reviewers who are not in their particular subfield. You may say to your grad student, "Go scan these specimens," or "Analyze the interface," and your student will know that you want a differential scanning calorimetry analysis done of the specimen to determine its glass transition temperature or that you want the interface examined using transmission electron microscopy to determine its structure. However, if you write in your proposal that you will "scan the specimens" without being specific, it will be unclear to the reviewer what you'll actually be doing. In addition, even if the reviewer can figure out what you mean, she is likely to see this kind of imprecise wording as sloppiness, which will irritate her.
- **Vague claims.** PIs will often say that their research will improve or reduce something without giving any numbers. If you make claims that your research will "improve the efficiency" or "reduce the cost" of a step, the reviewer will want to know if you anticipate a 200% improvement in efficiency or a 0.02% improvement. If you don't give at least some estimate of the magnitude of the impact along with rationale for that estimation, reviewers will often disregard the claim altogether.
- **Inconsistent descriptions of tasks.** In many proposals, the project schedule at the end of the proposal lists the specific tasks to be accomplished in satisfying detail, but the research plan/methodology section doesn't describe many of the tasks, or describes different tasks. Alternatively, tasks may be mentioned early in the proposal but not addressed in the research plan. Inconsistencies of this type makes it difficult for the reviewer to know what you actually plan to do and also make it appear you may not be sure what exactly you'll do if you get the grant.
- **Overuse of acronyms.** Nothing is more annoying to a reviewer than having to search for the definition of an acronym that was defined on page 2 and then used again on page 9. Terms that are used just a few times in a proposal shouldn't be converted into acronyms unless the acronyms are universally used in your discipline and the reviewers all share your discipline.

Below are some more pedantic complaints which, nonetheless, can be deeply irritating at 2 am:

- **Using "proposal" when you mean "project."** The proposal is the grant application document you are submitting; the project is what you will do if you are awarded the grant. Therefore, you should not say, "the goal of this proposal is to [research goal here]." That's the goal of your **proposed project**. The goal of your proposal is to convince the agency to fund you. However, you can say, "In this proposal we will first discuss x and then y…" because that refers to the document itself.
- **Use of overly colloquial wording.** This is most commonly an issue for non-native English speakers who may not realize that some words are too informal for use in a proposal. The most common of these is the use of "nowadays," which in the US has a distinct "grandpa in a rocking chair on the front porch" feel and might be followed by a discussion of what the "whippersnappers are up to." Better wording would be "currently" or "to date."
- **Use of "notice" when you mean "note."** This is also most common for non-native speakers. "Notice" connotes casually seeing something that may or may not be important, whereas

"note" generally connotes paying attention to something, which is usually the correct meaning in a proposal.

- **Use of quotation marks for emphasis.** Some PIs write things like "*This approach is "novel" because…*" There is already copious griping on the internet and in writing guides about the this kind of misuse of quotation marks, but we include it here because it's still a common mistake and is especially problematic in a proposal. Putting "novel" in quotation marks implies that you are quoting someone else, and it may not actually be novel—the opposite of what you want to communicate to the reviewer.

As you work on your proposal draft, remember that even though there is no review criterion called, "Did not annoy the reviewer," these kinds of annoyances can often impact your reviews in less explicit ways. Do your best to avoid the mistakes discussed above, and ask your friends and colleagues to read your proposal draft and give you feedback on how reader-friendly they found your proposal to be.