Reading between the Lines of Your Summary Statement

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The summary statement, which is sent to each prospective principal investigator, indicates how the proposal fared in the review process. Read by an informed investigator, it is not only a description of a past event but also a clue to the future—such as whether your proposal, as written, is likely to be funded or whether a revised and resubmitted application may succeed. I am going to describe what is in the summary statement (sometimes called the "pink sheet," because it formerly was printed on pink paper), how to interpret what it means about the probable fate of your proposal, and how you can influence (to some extent) your success rate as a grant applicant.

Enhancing Your Chances by Using the System

To increase your chances of a favorable and fundable outcome to the review process, it is important to be well-informed about the system and about those who will be assessing your proposal. One way is to determine which IRG is likely to be reviewing your proposal—even before you write it. If you are responding to an RFA (Request for an Application) or an RFP (Request for a Proposal), there might be some hint in terms of which Institute is sponsoring that solicitation. Certain Institutes will have only one or two IRGs that will review such applications. By checking the roster of reviewers on those IRGs, you can run a computer search of the members’ publications and include in the literature review his or her work in your area.

As part of your advance intelligence, you can also obtain pink sheets (or modified pink sheets with certain personal information and priority scores deleted) from the IRG’s former reviews by submitting a formal Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Institute’s FOI officer. Those pink sheets will give

1 Editors’ note: While it is possible to obtain sanitized funded grant applications and summary statements, this is a lengthy process. It may be more efficient to solicit experience from colleagues and NIMH staff.
you some indication of how that IRG has reviewed a given set of proposals. You can also obtain the proposals through the Institute’s FOI officer. This information may help you improve or enrich your grant application by giving you a different perspective about what is expected of you. Another excellent way is to volunteer to become a reviewer, which will expose you to many research applications and to the review process.

**Interpreting the Pink Sheet**

When you receive your pink sheet, you will find that there is considerable information to be gleaned from it—especially between the lines. Of course, if you discover that your proposal was approved unanimously, received a priority score of 100, and is in the first percentile, you will never need to read between the lines; you will simply read the bottom line.2 If the budget you proposed is unchanged, there is little need to pore over the pink sheet. Simply celebrate!

But if the outcome was less than ideal, you may need to read the summary statement much more closely. The “recommendation” section has been partially discussed already in terms of approval, and whether or not it is unanimous. There is a tendency now to make votes unanimous whenever possible, because no reviewer wants to prepare a minority report unless a major scientific issue is at stake. If you have received unanimous approval, but a priority score in the 300s, for example, the complete pink sheet requires careful examination.

The “critique” is perhaps the most important portion of the summary statement in terms of what it may imply. You need to look at what has been written about what you have proposed and what has been deleted. For the most part the proposal’s strengths will be emphasized in this section. Sometimes these remarks will seem somewhat gratuitous and patronizing. If you detect that tone (“damning with faint praise”) in your pink sheet critique, it is cause for concern; other sections may reveal the reason.

If in discussing your experimental design, the summary contains phrases such as “overly ambitious,” that, too, is cause for concern. Reviewers use that term to imply that the applicant’s track record, amount of proposed effort, and institutional resources may indicate the proposed principal investigator is incapable of doing what has been proposed. The use of the words “overly ambitious” is telling you, in effect, that when you revise your grant application (as you will probably need to do), you should take a critical look at each section and scale it down.

For example, consider again the number and scope of the specific aims. There is a tendency to put too much in this section because you want to have your proposal appear to be comprehensive. As you reexamine your specific aims, make sure that each is focused and that each aim is not really two or three aims.

A key consideration is whether you have a hypothesis that can be tested. Proposals are severely damaged by not proposing a hypothesis. The first sentence of the grant application should begin, “The hypothesis I am going to test is . . .” It focuses your research application, and it focuses the reviewer.3

Another important consideration should be the number of years of funding you are requesting. You may have initially submitted a proposal for 5 years of funding, but if your proposal was unfunded and you revise it and resubmit, consider a study for a shorter period of time. You can acknowledge that it is difficult to justify 5 years of work and ask to modify the project’s duration to make it less ambitious and more feasible.

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2 Editors’ note: For an explanation of a priority score and percentile, see “The Review Process” by Stamper, this volume.

3 Editors’ note: See “How Do You Formulate a Testable Exciting Hypothesis?” by Dawes, this volume.