

Tips for Preparing for a High-Quality Review

The William T. Grant Foundation conducts a rigorous selection process for our Reducing Inequality and Improving the Use of Research Evidence major grant applications. To carry out our commitment to offer critical, constructive feedback to applicants, we rely on external reviewers to offer expert judgements to every grant reviewed. As a reviewer, your role is to evaluate a full proposal matched with your expertise to assist the Foundation’s program officers determine the strength of the proposal. To help the review process, the following tips should serve as guideposts that will help you to turn out consistent and constructive high-quality reviews grounded in what produces the best application and review experiences for all parties.¹

1. Provide constructive comments

The Foundation is most interested in high quality reviews that are concise and provide constructive feedback on the proposal. Critical, constructive reviews help staff make funding decisions, but they also help applicants improve their research, whether or not they receive funding from the Foundation.

What does that mean?

- Don’t summarize the proposal – you and the applicant already know what is in the proposal.
- Avoid brief assessment statements that do not offer constructive feedback such as, “This proposal was good” or “Yes, this research design makes sense.” Instead, explain your assessments, positive or negative, by elaborating your rationale.
- One way to provide effective supporting rationale for your assessments is to offer specific examples from the proposal.
- Consider separating comments into strengths and weaknesses by review question.
- Constructive feedback means it should be actionable – point out the specific issue and suggest potential ways to address it.
- In your bottom-line comment, summarize the major issues that shaped your overall assessment of the proposal.

1. Avoid bias

Bias is a normal process our brains use to help us make rapid judgements in life. However, bias can affect whether the proposal review is fair and transparent.

How can reviewers protect against bias?

- Ensure an early first impression or initial information does not shape your perspective of the full proposal.
- Be open to new ideas, theories, and methods. Guard against reading the proposal in a way that rigidly aligns with or affirms your existing beliefs or expectations. The

¹ Some content adapted from: <https://tipsforreviewers.nsf.gov>.

Foundation is open to a range of methodological approaches; what matters is that the design is rigorous and aligned with the questions asked.

- Think of alternative views: what would someone with a different perspective think about the proposal?
- Play devil's advocate: what are reasons to justify funding *or* not funding the proposal?
- Guard against unconscious social bias by carefully and systematically answering the review questions (use examples from the text to justify your assessment). Take some time to question yourself: often we can recognize our biases if take time to question our judgements and imagine how we would justify our decisions to others.

What are some tips for preparing constructive reviews that avoid bias?

- Give yourself time to read the proposal carefully. We are more likely to make decisions informed by unconscious bias when we are pressed for time.
- Take notes as you read the proposal and highlight relevant text to use as concrete examples that support your points.
- Think about the kind of feedback you would want to have if it was your proposal. Are you writing the kind of review you would want to receive?
- After answering each question, ask whether your comments are reasonable and clearly justified.
- If the proposal is unclear, it is important for the applicant to know this. Please be sure to let the applicant know exactly what was unclear and use page numbers to identify examples.
- Check your personal preferences. Is the proposal accomplishing what it set out to accomplish?