

Anatomy of an NIH Study Section

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What is a study section?

There are basically two types:

- Center for Scientific Review (CSR) review investigator initiated grants like RO1, but also other types
- Institute Based (e.g. NICHD) RO3, Career development (K-awards), Program Project (PO1), Training Grants(T32)



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What is the Study Section's Function?

- To evaluate the scientific quality of proposals, using established review criteria.
- This evaluation is then passed to the council of the different institutes where funding decisions are made
- The panel is explicitly not required to make decisions about funding



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Who establishes a study section?

- It is based on CSR recommendations to the NIH, and to the DHHS
- It requires congressional legislation for funding and regulation



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What Is Its Organizational Structure?

- Scientific Review Administrator (SRA)
- Administrative assistant
- Chair (who is also a voting panel member).
The chair serves one or two years
- 20-25 members
 - Permanent appointees serving a 4 year term
 - Ad hoc reviewers in person or by phone
 - Written reviews from outside consultants



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Who Are Its Members?

- Senior investigators, Associate Professor or above
- For permanent appointment, usually have a history of federal funding or equivalent grant success
- Ad hoc members are brought in for trial, or because of expertise in the area of several grants



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How are members selected?

- Recommendations to the SRA, who then uses CSR staff to evaluate and review nominations.
- There are also regional, racial and gender factors that are considered to optimize balance of the panel



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How does a review session work?

- Role of the SRA
- Role of the chair
- Order of business
 - Identify Upper 50th percentile/
streamlined and not discussed
- Review applications – may be 50-75
- Each reviewer will have 3-4 primary and 3-4 secondary or reader functions
- This represents a lot work for the reviewer (3-4 hours/grant at least)



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Review Process

- Primary, secondary, reader
- Usually begin with review of scores (1-3) (above 3 already excluded)
- Primary reviewer describes and presents detailed review
- Secondary adds qualifying comments
- Reader adds comments briefly if he or she dissents or wishes to amplify.



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Review Considerations

- Significance
- Approach
- Innovation
- Environment
- Personnel
- Review criteria are not really standardized, but better than using unspecified criteria
- There is no real training of study section members.



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Review Considerations

General discussion follows

- If Chair is doing a good job, will seek to establish consensus
- Panel members are free to deviate from the recommended score, but the chair should ask them to declare their intent, to explain their reasons briefly, and to provide written justification for their deviation.
- After referees complete their report, a final score range is recommended.
- Each review may take 15-30 minutes, often less.



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Grant Submission strategies

Which panel should you submit to: who are your peers? (Note that CSR Panel is independent of the NIH institutes)

Can you steer to review panel?

Yes, but need to provide rationale Send a cover letter to CSR with the grant submission

Can you steer to institute ?

Ask program officer to request assignment. Not normally applicants option

Can you communicate with panel ?

Yes but only via the SRA, never with members. It is fine to send materials to update your file, up to about one month prior to review



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Typical grant scenarios

1. You have been working hard on a grant, and the grant is not quite ready.

You argue that the panel will find fault with the grant, so it is a rational strategy to submit, get the reviews and then revise and resubmit for a later round.

Solution: Do not do this ever!!

If you are streamlined, or get a score near the 50th percentile, it is very hard to recover. Your initial score sets up subsequent expectations. There are exceptions, but the resubmission score is strongly governed by the first submission - you can improve 20-25 points, but if you begin at 50 or above, that improvement is still not a fundable score.



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Typical grant scenarios

2. You plan to submit a pilot grant and you see that the R21 pays more money than the R03 (about 125 K/year). So why not apply for the R21?

Solution: In most cases resist the temptation. The R21 is called high risk, and it is designed for novel high-risk initiatives, not simply to collect pilot data.

Furthermore, the need to recognize a high-risk highly novel approach adds another burden on the review panel (and therefore on the applicant), and the result is usually negative review.



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Typical grant scenarios

3. You are a junior investigator, and you think you are ready for an RO1 submission, but your pilot data is incomplete, and there are several aims that require techniques in which you have not demonstrated expertise.

Solution: Again, do not submit in this form.

Either collect the pilot data to show competence, or identify a collaborator, preferably more senior, who has recognized expertise in the area, as evidenced by publications and presentations.



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Typical grant scenarios

4. You would like to do a mentored K award, (KO1, KO8 etc), and you plan to name a senior faculty member in your department as the mentor.

This person has extensive experience as a clinician and has trained many people, but has no history of training research scientists, and a limited formal training record in NIH terms.

Often this may be your chair.

Solution: Find another mentor. This arrangement is unlikely to work



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Final Comments:

- It may look like the deck is stacked against the fledgling investigator, and this is partly true, by virtue of the need to demonstrate that you can do the things you promise to do, but most panels recognize this, and are more lenient with starting investigators.
- They are also more lenient with K awards than with research grants, because the panel wants to support the growth of our field. So there is some balance restored.

