

# Demystifying NIH Peer Review



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Scientific Review Officers  
Scientific Review Program  
Division of Extramural Activities, NIAID/NIH



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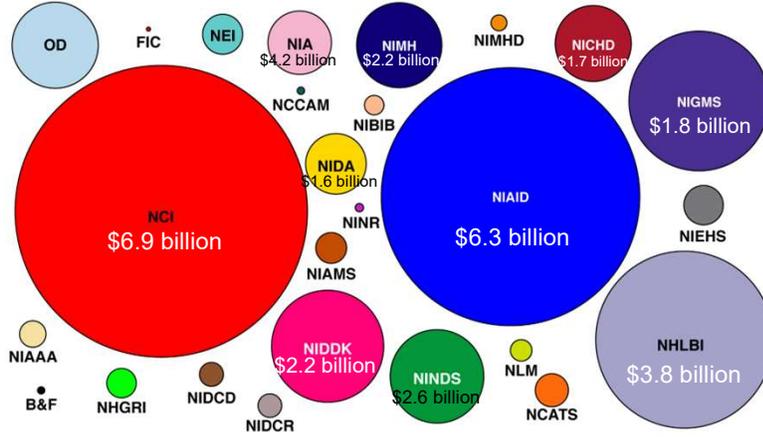
# The National Institutes of Health



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# National Institutes of Health

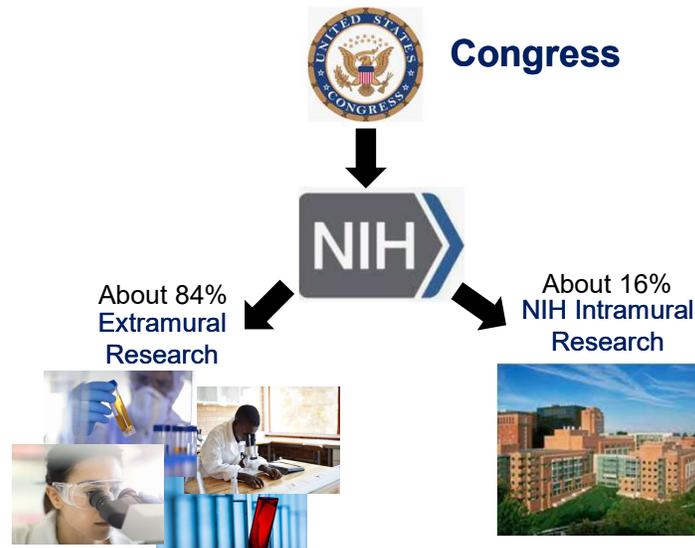


- 27 Institutes and Centers
- FY2022 enacted budget \$46.2 billion

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# Appropriations Distribution



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# Tools to Support Extramural Research

## GRANTS

- Usually Initiated by the Investigator
- Program Announcements (PAs) that encourage applications for a new or ongoing extramural activity/program
- Can also be solicited through Requests for Applications (RFAs) - indicate set-aside funds and anticipated number of awards
- For example, R mechanisms

## COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS

- Similar to a grant
- Substantial NIH Staff involvement
- Solicited; U mechanisms

## CONTRACTS

- Procurement
- Solicited through Request for Proposals (RFP), Broad Agency Announcements (BAA), other



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# Funding by the NIH



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## Timeframe: Submission to Award

Three overlapping funding cycles per year

Be aware of  
different receipt  
dates

**NIH** National Institute of  
Allergy and  
Infectious Diseases



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## How to Apply: Finding Opportunities



### Register in eRA Commons

Find Opportunity

Identify a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) that fits your career stage and your research interests

- grants.gov
- NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts (grants.nih.gov)
- NIAID Funding News
- NIAID on Twitter @NIAIDNews and @NIAIDFunding

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Allergy and  
Infectious Diseases

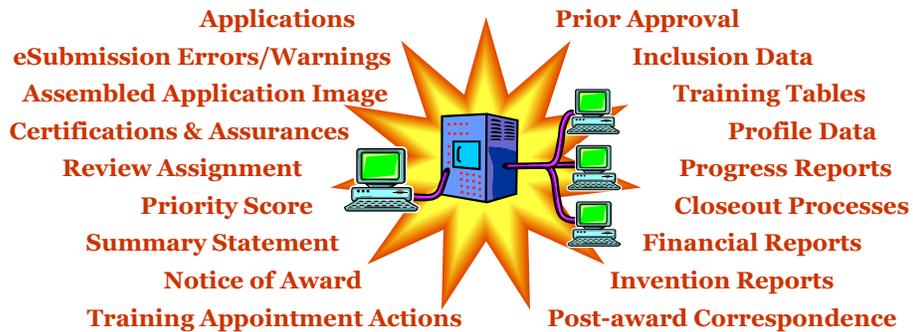
<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/how-to-apply-application-guide.html>

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## eRA Commons

Online interface to share administrative information about grant applications and awarded research grants



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## How to Apply: Preparing Application

Prepare Application

Verify eligibility with NIH Program

Follow Application Instructions:  
SF424  
NOFO

Seek input from NIH-funded colleagues and mentors

**Read the NOFO carefully**



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## How to Apply: Submitting, Tracking, and Viewing Application



Submit, Track & View Application

Submit **via your organizational representative on-time** (before 5 PM local time)

NIH recommends to submit early (days, not minutes!) - no corrections after due date

Use eRA Commons to track application

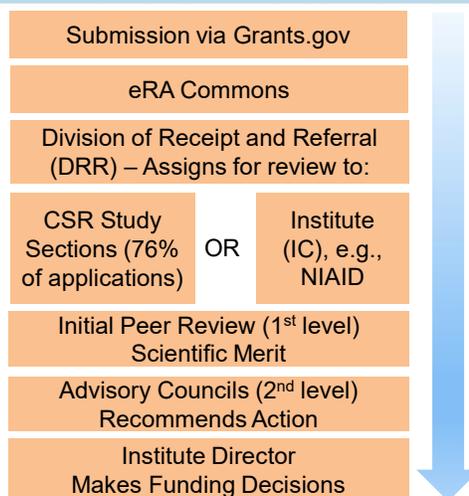


<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/how-to-apply-application-guide.html>

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## What Happens After Submission?



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## FY2022 Data

- All R mechanisms
  - 54,571 applications received
  - 11,311 awards
  - Success rate ca. 20.7%
- [NIH Data Book](#) has all statistics



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## Grant Applications



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## Common R Mechanisms

- R01 “Research Project Grant Program”
  - Most well known
  - ≤\$500k/year DC (higher with prior approval); 3-5 years
- R03 “Small Grant Program”
  - Small, well-defined project
  - ≤\$50k/year DC; 2-year cap
- R21 “Exploratory/Developmental Research Grant Award”
  - Projects in early and conceptual stages
  - ≤\$275k total DC; 2-year cap
- R41/R42 “Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR)”
  - Academic/industry collaborative
  - Phase I ≤\$296k total DC; 0.5-2 years
- R15 “Academic Research Enhancement Award (AREA) for Undergraduate-Focused Institutions” ([PAR-21-155](#))
  - PUIs
  - ≤\$300k total DC; 3-year cap



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## R15 AREA Grants

- All R15 clustered for review
- Goals
  - Support small scale research projects
  - Expose students in eligible environment to hands-on research
  - Strengthen the research environment of educational institutions that have not been major recipients of NIH research grant funds
- Scope
  - Undergraduate (preferably) &/or graduate institutions
  - R15 goals & review criteria **do not apply to**
    - High school students
    - Post-baccalaureate participants
    - Postdoc/residents/clinical fellows



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## Expected Student Involvement in AREA Grants



- Perform & troubleshoot experiments
- Present at (lab) meetings & (campus) conferences
- (Help) design experiments
- Collect & analyze data
- Draft articles
- Collaborative interactions



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## Some Elements of R15 Application Evaluation

- Science, approach, hypothesis (Significance, Innovation, Approach)
- Personnel (including students)
  - Performance without grad students/postdocs?
  - Collaborations to support research plan?
  - PI commitment to student-based research
- Environment (including resources, equipment)
  - Vintage but sufficient?
  - Likely belongs in Facilities or Equipment
  - May include collaborators' resources if easily available



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## Common F and K Mechanisms



- F programs “Individual Fellowships”  
(<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/fellowships>)
  - Some are “Kirschstein” fellowships
  - Individual undergraduates, doctoral students, and postdocs
  - **F31 “Predoctoral Fellowship to Promote Diversity”**
  - **F33 career transition awards (e.g., sabbatical fellowship)**
- K programs “Research Career Development Awards”  
(<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/career-development>)
  - Individual & institutional undergraduates, doctoral students, and postdocs
  - Typically mentored awards
  - K99/R00 “Pathway to Independence” post-doc to PI



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## Common T Mechanisms

- T programs “Institutional Training Grants”  
(<https://researchtraining.nih.gov/programs/training-grants>)
  - Individual undergraduates, graduate students, and postdocs
  - Typically institutional training programs (e.g., Bridges to the Doctorate)
  - Some are “Kirschstein” awards
  - **T32 “Kirschstein Institutional NRSA”**
  - **T34 “Kirschstein Undergraduate NRSA Institutional Research Training Award”**
  - **T35 “Kirschstein NRSA Short-Term NRSA Institutional Research Training Award”**



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## After Submission: Receipt/Referral and Review

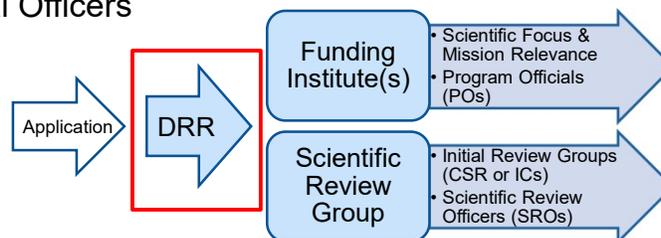


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## Division of Receipt and Referral

- Key decisions
  - Policy compliance (format, timeliness, etc.)
  - Assignment to Institute(s) for funding consideration
  - Assignment to study section or Special Emphasis Panel for initial peer review
- Managed by Referral Officers



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## Administrative Review by SRO

- Scientific content consistency with the NOFO (e.g., for RFAs, responsiveness)
- NIH policies
  - Font size/overstuffing
  - Page limitations
  - Appendix policies
  - Hyperlinks
- Contents
  - Expertise
  - Key personnel/key institutions
  - Human subjects/vertebrate animals/biohazards/etc.



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## Initial Peer Review (1<sup>st</sup> level)

- Evaluation by scientific experts (“peers”) free from inappropriate influences
- Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA)
- Primarily non-federal scientists with expertise in the relevant areas
- Appointed (serving up to six-years) or ad-hoc
- Recruited by Scientific Review Officers



Source: znet.com

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## Conflict-of-Interest (COI)

- Bona Fide Conflict of Interest (COI)
  - Professional                      - Financial
  - Employment                      - Study Section membership
  - Personal                            - Other interests
- Appearance of COI
- When COI
  - may be excluded from entire Review Panel, or
  - may be recused from discussion and scoring of application(s) with conflict



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## Maintaining Integrity in Peer Review

### Confidentiality

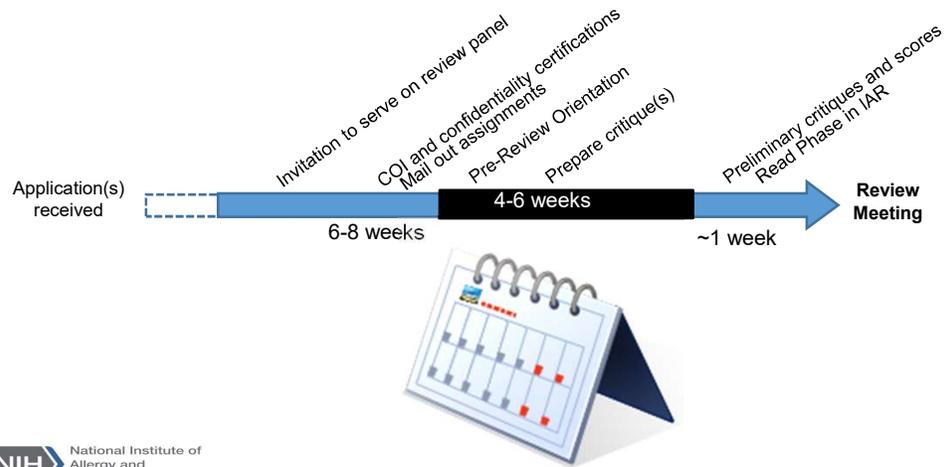
- Peer review meetings are closed to the general public
- Reviewers are required to maintain confidentiality about the review of applications
- Applicants may contact the SRO if they have any questions before the review of their application
  - **Applicants must not contact reviewers**
- **Notice: NOT-OD-22-044 Maintaining Security and Confidentiality in NIH Peer Review**



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## What Reviewers Do Before the Meeting



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## Scored Review Criteria

- Significance
- Investigator(s)
- Innovation
- Approach
- Environment
- **NOFO may state specific additional submission and review criteria**

Scientific rigor of prior research  
Scientific rigor of the work proposed



*Overall Impact: Likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field(s) involved*

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## Additional Review Criteria



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- Can influence the Overall Impact Score, as applicable for the project proposed
- Four items
  - Protections for Human Subjects
  - Inclusion of Women, Minorities, and Individuals across the Lifespan
  - Vertebrate Animals
  - Biohazards
  - Resubmitted, Renewed, or Revised Applications

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## Additional Review Considerations

- Do not affect Overall Impact Score
- Five items
  - Foreign Organizations as applicants
  - Select Agent Research
  - Authentication of Key Biological and/or Chemical Resources
  - Sharing Plan for Model Organisms
  - Budget and Period of Support
  - (Data and Genomic Data Sharing Plans included in Application, but not assessed during review)



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## Applications Receive a Preliminary Overall Impact Score

- R-type applications: *Likelihood for the project to exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field(s) involved* (see [“Review Criteria at a Glance”](#))
- Preliminary Overall Impact scores (1-9)
  - Supplied before review date
  - Available during Read Phase
  - Used before review meeting to determine discussed vs. streamlined

Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor
High	1	Exceptional
	2	Outstanding
	3	Excellent
Medium	4	Very Good
	5	Good
	6	Satisfactory
Low	7	Fair
	8	Marginal
	9	Poor



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## Peer Review Meeting Procedures

- Introductions
- SRO reminds reviewers of confidentiality policies
- Streamlining
  - Any non-conflicted reviewer can ‘rescue’ an application by simply stating “I want to discuss”
- Review of applications
  - Conflicted reviewers leave the (virtual) room
  - Chair runs meeting
  - Reviewer by reviewer scores and critiques; panel discussion
  - Additional Review Criteria are discussed
  - Final Overall Impact Scores submitted (all reviewers)
  - Additional Review Considerations discussed
  - Conflicted reviewers return



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# Final Scoring

Reviewers give numerical scores using a scale from 1-9

- Individual criterion scores (only assigned reviewers)
- Overall Impact Score (all non-conflicted reviewers)

Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor
High	1	Exceptional
	2	Outstanding
	3	Excellent
Medium	4	Very Good
	5	Good
	6	Satisfactory
Low	7	Fair
	8	Marginal
	9	Poor

- Final Overall Impact Score = average of all reviewers' votes multiplied by 10 (range of 10 – 90)
- Percentiled for some mechanisms



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# After Peer Review



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## After the Review

- Check eRA Commons (<http://era.nih.gov/commons/index.cfm>)



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## Check Application Status in eRA Commons

General Grant Information		Other Relevant Documents	
Status:	Application awarded.	<a href="#">Summary Statement</a> <a href="#">Latest FSR</a> <a href="#">Abstract (Awarded Grant)</a> <a href="#">Additions for Review (0 documents)</a>	
Institution Name:	my institution		
School Name:	School of Medicine		
School Category:	OVERALL MEDICAL		
Division Name:	NONE		
Department Name:	Internal Medicine		
PI Name:	Sigmund Freud		
Application ID:	1R01HD000000-01		
Proposal Title:	Dream Therapy for Cardiac Patients		
Proposal Receipt Date:	07/17/2005		
Last Status Update Date:	01/16/2006		
Current Award Notice Date:	01/16/2006		
Application Source:	Paper		
Project Period Begin Date:	01/16/2006		
Project Period End Date:	01/16/2007		
eApplication Status:			
FOA:			
NIH Appl. ID:			

Status History		Institute or Center Assignment	
Effective Date	Status Message	Institute or Center	Assignment Date
01/16/2006	Application awarded.	NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE (Primary)	08/17/2005
01/16/2006	Application awarded.		

Application Information		Study Section		Advisory Council(AC) Information	
Award Document Number:	R1MH	Scientific Review Group:	ZRG1 AAAA-		
FSR Accepted Code:	Y		3		
Snap Indicator Code:	Y	Council Meeting Date	2005/10		
Priority Score:	19	(YYYYMM):			
Percentile:	6				



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## After the Review

- Check eRA Commons (<http://era.nih.gov/commons/index.cfm>)
- Final Impact Score within 3 days of review meeting



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## Find Overall Impact Score in eRA Commons

General Grant Information		Other Relevant Documents	
Status:	Application awarded.	<a href="#">Summary Statement</a> <a href="#">Latest FSR</a> <a href="#">Abstract (Awarded Grant)</a> <a href="#">Additions for Review (0 documents)</a>	
Institution Name:	Application awarded. my institution		
School Name:	School of Medicine		
School Category:	OVERALL MEDICAL		
Division Name:	NONE		
Department Name:	Internal Medicine		
PI Name:	Sigmond Freud		
Application ID:	1R01HD000000-01		
Proposal Title:	Dream Therapy for Cardiac Patients		
Proposal Receipt Date:	07/17/2005		
Last Status Update Date:	01/16/2006		
Current Award Notice Date:	01/16/2006		
Application Source:	Paper		
Project Period Begin Date:	01/16/2006		
Project Period End Date:	01/16/2007		
eApplication Status:			
FOA:			
NIH Appl. ID:			
Status History		Institute or Center Assignment	
Effective Date	Status Message	Institute or Center	Assignment Date
01/16/2006	Application awarded.	NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE (Primary)	08/17/2005
01/16/2006	Application awarded.		
Application Information		Study Section	Advisory Council(AC) Information
Award Document Number:	R1MH	Scientific Review Group:	ZRG1 AAAA-
FSR Accepted Code:	Y		3
Sign Indicator Code:	Y	Council Meeting Date (YYYYMM):	2005/10
Priority Score:	10		
Percentile:	6		



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## After the Review

- Check eRA Commons (<http://era.nih.gov/commons/index.cfm>)
- Final Impact Score within 3 days of review meeting
- Summary statement
  - All written reviewers' critiques
  - Summary of discussion for non-streamlined applications
  - Available to Applicant, Institutional Signing Official, NIH officials, NIH Advisory Council, NIH Program Officer
  - PO, not SRO, is point of contact



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## Find Summary Statement in eRA Commons

General Grant Information		Other Relevant Documents	
Status:	Application awarded.	Summary Statement	
Institution Name:	my institution	Latest FSR	
School Name:	School of Medicine	Abstract (Awarded Grant)	
School Category:	OVERALL MEDICAL	Additions for Review (0 documents)	
Division Name:	NONE		
Department Name:	Internal Medicine		
PI Name:	Sigmund Freud		
Application ID:	1R01HD000000-01		
Proposal Title:	Dream Therapy for Cardiac Patients		
Proposal Receipt Date:	07/17/2005		
Last Status Update Date:	01/16/2006		
Current Award Notice Date:	01/16/2006		
Application Source:	Paper		
Project Period Begin Date:	01/16/2006		
Project Period End Date:	01/16/2007		
eApplication Status:			
FOA:			
NIH Appl. ID:			
Status History		Institute or Center Assignment	
Effective Date	Status Message	Institute or Center	Assignment Date
01/16/2006	Application awarded.	NATIONAL HEART, LUNG, AND BLOOD INSTITUTE (Primary)	08/17/2005
01/16/2006	Application awarded.		
Application Information		Study Section	Advisory Council(AC) Information
Award Document Number:	R1MH	Scientific Review Group:	ZR01 AAAA-
FSR Accepted Code:	Y		3
Snap Indicator Code:	Y	Council Meeting Date	2005/10
Priority Score:	19	(YYYYMM):	
Percentile:	6		



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## Summary Statement: Cover Page

<b>PROGRAM CONTACT:</b> [REDACTED] 240-[REDACTED] [REDACTED]@niaid.nih.gov		<b>SUMMARY STATEMENT</b> ( Privileged Communication )	<b>Release Date:</b> [REDACTED] 2016 <b>Revised Date:</b>
<b>Principal Investigator:</b> [REDACTED]		<b>Application Number:</b> 1 K08 [REDACTED]	
<b>Applicant Organization:</b> [REDACTED]			
<b>Review Group:</b> [REDACTED]			
<b>Meeting Date:</b> [REDACTED] 2016	<b>RFA/PA:</b> PA16-[REDACTED]		
<b>Council:</b> [REDACTED] 2017	<b>PCC:</b> [REDACTED]		
<b>Requested Start:</b> [REDACTED] 2017	<b>Dual IC(s):</b> HL		
<b>Project Title:</b> [REDACTED]			
<b>SRG Action:</b>	<b>Impact Score:</b> 17		
<b>Next Steps:</b>	Visit <a href="http://grants.nih.gov/grants/next_steps.htm">http://grants.nih.gov/grants/next_steps.htm</a>		
<b>Human Subjects:</b>	30-Human subjects involved - Certified, no SRG concerns		
<b>Animal Subjects:</b>	10-No live vertebrate animals involved for competing appl.		
<b>Gender:</b>	1A-Both genders, scientifically acceptable		
<b>Minority:</b>	1A-Minorities and non-minorities, scientifically acceptable		
<b>Children:</b>	3A-No children included, scientifically acceptable		
	Clinical Research - not NIH-defined Phase III Trial		

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## Summary Statements: Additional Pages

### Subsequent Pages

- Resumé and Summary of Discussion (discussed applications only)
- Description (provided by applicant)
- Reviewer critiques
- Special Issues
- Administrative notes made by SRO
- Meeting roster (aggregated rosters occasionally)



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## Program Officer v. SRO

**Program Officers**

**POINT(S) OF CONTACT**

**Scientific/Research Contact(s)**

**Jane Doe** Ph.D.  
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)  
Telephone: 240- 555-5555  
Email: [jane.doe@nih.gov](mailto:jane.doe@nih.gov) (mailto:jane.doe@nih.gov)

**John Doe, Ph.D.**  
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)  
Telephone: 240- 555-1234  
Email: [john.doe@nih.gov](mailto:john.doe@nih.gov) (mailto:john.doe@nih.gov)

**SRO**

**NOT POC**

**Peer Review Contact(s)**

**Harry Potter, Ph.D.**  
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)  
Telephone: 301- 555-9876  
Email: [harry.potter@nih.gov](mailto:harry.potter@nih.gov) (mailto:harry.potter@nih.gov)



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## Council Funding Approval (2<sup>nd</sup> Level)

- National Advisory Councils
- Basic scientists, clinicians, lay members
- Nominated by Institutes; approved by HHS (or the President in a few cases)
- Council meets 3 times/year
- Council procedures vary across ICs
- Final approval by IC Director





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## After the Review

- **If the application is to be funded, congratulations!**

- Need to submit Just-in-time information
- May need to resolve codes or other administrative issues



- **If the application is not funded, do not give up**

Contact your Program Officer to discuss options

- Submit a new application
- Revise and resubmit your application
- Appeal the review outcome
  - Acceptable reasons ([NOT-OD-11-064](#))
  - Differences of scientific opinion cannot be appealed

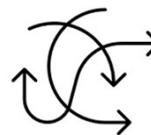


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## Common Problems Affecting Scores

- Absence of an acceptable scientific rationale
- Lack of experience in essential methodology
- Unclear reasoning in experimental approach
- Diffuse, superficial, or unfocused research plan
- Overly ambitious research plan
- Lack of sufficient experimental detail
- Figures and tables not legible



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## Some Basics on Preparing an Application



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## Tips for Application Preparation I

1. Get input from NIH-funded colleagues: NIH Reporter  
<https://report.nih.gov/>



2. Clear rationale for the proposed research
3. Well-organized and clear application
4. Well-designed and legible tables and figures
5. Relevant literature



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## Tips for Application Preparation II

6. Explicit organization and headers
7. Visually appealing and readable
8. Cross-reference, label, and number everything
9. Have NIH-funded colleagues read the application

NIH Grant Writing Tips:

[http://grants.nih.gov/grants/grant\\_tips.htm](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/grant_tips.htm)

10. Letters of support
11. All the instructions in the NOFO & SF424 application guide
12. Address all review criteria
13. Relevant Special Issues sections
14. Specific Aims: Most important part of the application
15. Write Abstract last! Include objective, hypothesis, general approach, and Aims



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## Cover Letters



- Only required for
  - Approvals to submit (e.g., exceeding \$500k in direct costs in any year)
  - Plans include large-scale genomic data
  - Application has an associated video
  - Corrected applications (missed validation)
  - Late applications
- Be sure to include
  - Application title
  - NOFO # and title
  - Explanations/documentation of above situations



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## PHS Assignment Request Form

- Awarding component assignment requests
- Study section assignment requests
- Individuals who should not review your application and why
- Expertise (**not individuals**) needed to review the application
- *Optional* form in all NIH application form packages



**PHS Assignment Request Form** OMB No. 0501-0001  
Revision Date: 01/01/2019

Use a blue pen to complete this form.

**Forming Opportunity Number:**

**Forming Opportunity Title:**

**Awarding Component Assignment Request (optional)**

If you have a preference for an Awarding Component (e.g., NIH Institute/Center) to award your application, please use the table below to identify the most appropriate awarding component for your application. (e.g., NCI for National Cancer Institute) or "None" for "Do Not Assign To Awarding Component" systems below. Your first choice should be in column 1. All requests will be considered. Boxes of boxes in parentheses for some applications and assignment requests are not always to be filled.

Information about Awarding Components can be found here: <https://www.nih.gov/od/office-of-extramural-activities/awarding-components>

1	2	3
Range in Awarding Component	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Do Not Assign to Awarding Component	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

**Study Section Assignment Request (optional)**

If you have a preference for a study section assignment, please use the table below to identify the most appropriate study section for your application. For that study section in parentheses and assign the number 1 or 2 to the study section. Boxes of boxes in parentheses for some applications and assignment requests are not always to be filled.

For example, you would enter "C0001" if you wish to request assignment to the Cancer Molecular Pathology study section at NCI (C0001) if you wish to request assignment to the Health Care Delivery and Management (H0001) study section at NIAID. (e.g., H0001) if you wish to request assignment to the Health Care Delivery and Management (H0001) study section at NIAID.

Information about Study Sections can be found here: <https://www.nih.gov/od/office-of-extramural-activities/study-sections>

1	2	3
Range in Study Section	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Do Not Assign to Study Section	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

**List Individuals who should not review your application and why (optional)** Only NIAID reviewers allowed

**Identify Specific areas of expertise needed to review your application (optional)** Only NIAID reviewers allowed

**Skills/Tools an applicant needs to conduct**

1	2	3	4	5
Location	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

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## Notes on BioSketches

- Part of Committee's evaluation
- Five-page limit
- Not quite a CV
- Prescribed format
  - Name, eRA Commons Name
  - Position Title
  - Education/Training
  - Personal Statement
  - Positions, Scientific Appointments, and Honors
  - Contributions to Science
- May be generated through [SciENCv at NCBI](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sciencv/) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sciencv/>)



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## Contacts, More Info, Questions



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## NIH Contacts and Times



### Look in the **Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)**

- Scientific Contact
- Grants Mgmt Contact
- eRA Helpdesk

Before submission

#### Scientific/Research Contact(s)

Jane Doe, Ph.D.  
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)  
Telephone: 240- 555-5555  
Email: [jane.doe@nih.gov](mailto:jane.doe@nih.gov) (<mailto:jane.doe@nih.gov>)

John Doe, Ph.D.  
National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)  
Telephone: 240- 555-1234  
Email: [john.doe@nih.gov](mailto:john.doe@nih.gov) (<mailto:john.doe@nih.gov>)

#### Peer Review Contact(s)

Harry Potter, Ph.D.  
National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)  
Telephone: 301- 555-9876  
Email: [harry.potter@nih.gov](mailto:harry.potter@nih.gov) (<mailto:harry.potter@nih.gov>)

Scientific Contact  
(PO)

After SS release

- Frequently Asked Question site:  
<https://grants.nih.gov/faqs#/>
- Emails with specific questions are usually preferred



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## Additional Information

Office of Extramural Research Peer Review Process  
[http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer\\_review\\_process.htm](http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer_review_process.htm)

Peer Review Policies & Practices  
<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/peer.htm>

Center for Scientific Review  
<http://public.csr.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx>

NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts  
<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/index.html>



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## Thank You!



## Questions?



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