



HOW TO BOUNCE BACK FROM REJECTION: REVIEWS & RESUBMISSIONS

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Workshop 4 of 4

TODAY'S PRESENTER



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- Part of Hanover team since 2017.
- >15 years in academia serving as project manager/leader, grant developer and project designer in clinical and health services research, STEM education and biotech.
- Continue to harness my skills in competitive intelligence, project management and communication to support our academic clients in their efforts to secure new funding from a mix of federal and private sponsors.

LOGISTICS

- Presentation slated to last about 50-60 minutes
- Followed by time for Q&A
- A PDF of slides will be made available after today's presentation



TODAY'S TOPICS

WHY A REJECTION IS PRACTICAL

TO REVISE OR NOT TO REVISE?

WHO & HOW

TIPS & TRICKS FOR PLAN B

Q&A





WHY A REJECTION IS PRACTICAL

PROPOSAL REJECTION ISN'T SO BAD

Most proposals are rejected (75-90%)

Very few applications are funded on the first submission

Rejection is a part of the grant-seeking process

Rejection will allow you to join an esteemed group of colleagues!



WHAT PROPOSAL REJECTION *IS*

Proposal rejection is
complex but useful.



AN OPPORTUNITY TO

- Learn from your mistakes
- Understand someone else's perspective (AKA *the Reviewers*) and see that they are not always wrong
- Know the rules of the peer review "system" and use them to your advantage
- Cultivate your determination and develop an intentional strategy to be successful

WHAT PROPOSAL REJECTION IS NOT

- A rejection of your interests or your life's work.
- A rejection of the quality of the proposed research project or research design.



"My project is simply this. I want to find out once and for all whether there's any truth in the belief that money can't buy happiness."

COMMON REASONS TO BE REJECTED

Your proposal will not be funded.

- Your proposal was rejected for administrative reasons.
- Your proposal was not a good fit.
- You are not equipped with adequate resources.
- You failed to convey 'intellectual merit'.
- Your budget does not align with your proposed scope of work.
- Presentation, presentation, presentation.



TO REVISE OR NOT TO REVISE?

REJECTION OFTEN LEADS TO POSITIVE RESULTS

Resubmissions have a higher success rate

- In 2017, the overall NIH success rate for first-time Research Project Grant submissions was only 13.0% (>38,000 applications).¹
 - Compared to 30.1% for resubmissions
- In 2016, the NSF received >49,000 proposals and made nearly 12,000 awards (24% funding rate).²
 - Resubmission success rates are higher across nearly all federal agencies.



¹Table 210: NIH Research Project Grants and R01-Equivalent Grants, Fiscal Years 2008-2017

²National Science Foundation, <https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2018/nsf18021/nsf18021.pdf>

CONSIDERATIONS *BEFORE* A REVISION

**FEDERAL VS
FOUNDATION**

**NOT ALL-
INCLUSIVE**

**IMPROVED
LIKELIHOOD OF
SUCCESS**

**MULTI-
FACETED
DECISION-
MAKING**

- Federal grant rejections provide the benefit of reviewer comments.
- Foundation rejections typically do not provide comments or reasons for rejection.
- Reviewer comments are not “all-inclusive.”
- Resubmission improves the likelihood of success, but does not guarantee it.

WHAT DOES IT SAY?

- Were the reviews generally positive?
- Do the strengths outweigh the weaknesses?
- What types of issues were identified by the reviewers?
 - Why was the proposal rejected?
- Are there consistencies among the comments?



REALITY OF REVIEWS

- Reviewers are human too.
- Reviewers may disagree with each other.
- A poor panel fit could lead to an unhelpful review of a relatively strong proposal.
- Negative reviews may not necessarily cover all of the proposal's weaknesses.



IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

	YES	NO
Were the reviewers right? Can you see their point?	↔	↔
What did the reviewers generally agree upon? Any outstanding issues?	↔	↔
Were the reviewers wrong or did your proposal fall short of what you had hoped for?	↔	↔
Did the reviewers misinterpret terminology or data?	↔	↔
Did you fail to include details that you have addressed reviewer concerns?	↔	↔
Can reviewer concerns be rectified?	↔	↔
Is the overall tone of the review positive? What does your “gut” tell you?	↔	↔

Evaluate critically

THEN WHAT?



1. Get another objective opinion.
2. Reassess your time, your commitment, and the effort needed for a revision and resubmission. Ask yourself:
 - a. Can I reasonably revise the proposal and address all identified weaknesses before the application window closes?
 - b. Do I *still* have the time/bandwidth to dedicate to the project?
 - c. Are there other considerations or changes in circumstances (e.g., change in position or teaching schedule, a successful grant award, other commitments)?
3. Reassess your institution's commitment to this effort.
4. Decide if your project is still of interest and still relevant.
5. **Contact the Program Officer.**

ANSWER THE MORE ADMINISTRATIVE QUESTIONS



1. Are there a maximum number of submissions/resubmissions allowed?
2. Have I reached the resubmission limit for this particular agency?
3. Is this specific funding mechanism/RFP/program still available?
 - a. If closed, is the program expected to open again? When?
 - b. If not, what are the future deadlines?
4. Is my proposal time-sensitive?
 - a. Does the resubmission window work with my own time constraints?

Remember >> Funding occurs approximately 6-9 months from the date of resubmission for the federal sponsors.

FATALLY FLAWED REVIEWS



- The proposed research is neither important nor innovative.
- The hypothesis is not supported by pilot data or others' work.
- The literature review was:
 - incomplete,
 - outdated, or
 - resulted in conclusions that were not evidence-based.
- The proposed research has already been completed by someone else or replicates existing or previously completed research.
- The proposed methods are not suitable for testing the stated hypothesis.

POP QUIZ! GOOD & BAD WEAKNESSES



The plans for outreach and dissemination are not especially innovative.



While the proposed work is novel and important in its investigation of X, the integration of disciplines is weakly described.



Although the panel agreed that the proposed activities are noteworthy and well-organized, there was disagreement as to whether the project methodology provided sufficient detail. There was also concern that the two proposed activities A and B were distinct activities that did not have clear complementary goals.



The panel concurred that there was little discussion about how researchers and/or the university would sustain this program after the possible funding period has ended.



Peer-led learning is a great way for "each one to reach one and to teach one." However, the proposed activities and budget do not corroborate this scenario. The desired effect of the proposed changes should be reflected by the budget.



WHO & HOW



NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION



NSF PERSPECTIVE ON RESUBMISSIONS

- A declined proposal may be resubmitted after substantial revision
- Revised proposals are *NEW* proposals – same standard review procedures
- Return to sender: if a resubmitted proposal has not addressed major comments/concerns of prior NSF review or if the moratorium has not ended (e.g., waiting period).
 - Some programs that accept proposals any time may have rules of when declined proposal can be resubmitted
- Agency-specific resubmission policies
- Some panel members may be the same; but new panels members cannot access previous proposal versions
- If a PO confirms – applicant may want to include an Introduction paragraph explaining changes

THE NSF REVIEW PROCESS



PHASE I

PROPOSAL
PREPARATION
AND SUBMISSION
90 DAYS



PHASE II

PROPOSAL
REVIEW AND
PROCESSING
6 MONTHS



PHASE III

AWARD
PROCESSING
30 DAYS



1. Intellectual Merit
2. Broader Impacts

A TYPICAL NSF PANEL SUMMARY

- Description of the Project
- Intellectual Merit
- Broader Impact
- Summary Statement
- Score
 - (E)xcellent, (V)ery Good, (G)ood, (F)air and (P)oor, and
 - Intermediate grades of E/V, G/F etc.
- Categorization
 - Not Competitive – will not be funded and probably should not consider resubmission
 - Low Competitive – will not be funded; resubmission possible with major overhaul
 - Competitive – may be funded but likely needs some attention and a resubmission
 - Highly Competitive – probably funded; if not, find out why before resubmitting

AN NSF REVIEWER EXAMPLE

- Comments from the cognizant Program Officer:
 - *In the absence of strong support for this proposal in comparison with other proposals reviewed, a declination is recommended. The PI is advised to attend a grant-writing workshop and overhaul this proposal with clear hypotheses and connections between data collection methods, interpretation strategies, and expected outcomes. A better coverage of other methods from the literature is also welcome.*

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH



NIH PEER REVIEW MODEL

- Prevalent scientific peer review model and review process
 - Dual peer review system
 - First Level of Review
 - Scientific Review Group (SRG) composed primarily of non-federal scientists who have expertise in relevant scientific disciplines and current research areas
 - Second Level Of Review - Advisory Council/Board
 - The second level of review is performed by Institute and Center (IC) National Advisory Councils or Boards. Councils are composed of both scientific and public representatives chosen for their expertise, interest, or activity in matters related to health and disease
- Adopted by several research-based funding agencies

HOW ABOUT THE NUMBERS?

Significance – Investigator(s) – Innovation – Approach – Environment

Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor	Additional Guidance
High	1	Exceptional	Exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses
	2	Outstanding	Extremely strong with negligible weaknesses
	3	Excellent	Very strong with only some minor weaknesses
Medium	4	Very Good	Strong but with numerous minor weaknesses
	5	Good	Strong but with at least one moderate weakness
	6	Satisfactory	Some strengths but also some moderate weaknesses
Low	7	Fair	Some strengths but with at least one major weakness
	8	Marginal	A few strengths and a few major weaknesses
	9	Poor	Very few strengths and numerous major weaknesses

HOW ABOUT THE NUMBERS?

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Overall Impact or Criterion Strength	Score	Descriptor
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Medium	4	Very Good
	5	Good
	6	Satisfactory
Low	7	Fair
	8	Marginal
	9	Poor



Discussed vs Not Discussed (ND)
Impact Score (average of all reviewer impact scores x10)
10-30: likely to be funded
31-45: occasionally funded
46+: almost never funded
Percentile: Percentage of proposals with a better impact score than your proposal



NIH IMPACT SCORES: A GUIDE

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Resubmit</u>	<u>New Submission</u>	<u>Something Else</u>
Impact score	<46	46+	Not Discussed
Enthusiasm	High	Moderate to High	Low
Weaknesses	Fixable	Fixable / Fatal	Fatal
Timing	< 1 year	> 1 year	N/A
Fit	Good panel fit	Poor panel fit	Good panel fit

This table is a guide not a rule!

EXAMPLES FROM A SUMMARY STATEMENT

CRITIQUE 1:

Significance: 2
Investigator(s): 4
Innovation: 3
Approach: 6
Environment: 3

CRITIQUE 2:

Significance: 7
Investigator(s): 5
Innovation: 7
Approach: 7
Environment: 3

CRITIQUE 3:

Significance: 4
Investigator(s): 5
Innovation: 1
Approach: 7
Environment: 1

EXAMPLES FROM A SUMMARY STATEMENT

1. Significance:

Strengths

- Studies the feasibility and efficacy of a school-based intervention to reduce childhood obesity among young children.
- Study will be conducted in urban and rural schools in a very high risk population in a state with one of the highest rates of childhood overweight and obesity.
- The intervention being tested is based on children being agents of change in their homes.

Weaknesses

- None noted.

2. Investigator(s):

Strengths

- PI is a family nurse practitioner in a school-based health clinic.
- Dr. [REDACTED] is an established researcher, although she has a pharm D background.

Weaknesses

- PI has very limited research and publication track record.
- No nutritionist/dietician or physical activity expertise on the team.

3. Innovation:

Strengths

- Leveraging School Health Council in the design and implementation of the intervention provides a framework for statewide scalability.
- Train-the-trainer approach with children as the intended trainer.

Weaknesses

- None noted.

4. Approach:

Strengths

- Strong recruitment and implementation plan.
- Strong buy-in from study schools.
- Intervention will be integrated into the school curriculum and will be taught by school teachers throughout the school term.
- Multiple data collection points – baseline, end of intervention (end of school term), and 4-weeks post intervention.
- BMI will be measured.
- Use of existing health behavior surveys will allow comparability to other studies.

Weaknesses

- No control group (moderate). How will the study assess whether the changes observed are not time trends?
- Not much detail provided about the curriculum content. While I understand that it will be developed as part of the study, some examples of the types of things included in the curriculum would be useful to get a sense for how exactly training the child as trainer would work.

5. Environment:

Strengths

- good research environment and strong partnerships.

Weaknesses

- None noted

Weaknesses

- The approach for the changes in child behavior is based upon the Social Cognitive Theory. However, considering the study is using the community and leveraging stakeholders etc. it would seem that the approach should be based on a model such as the social ecological model.
- The timeline of 6-months for the development phase is very aggressive, especially considering the PI has little experience (i.e., early stage investigator) and working with school boards and school districts takes a significant amount of time. It is of particular concern that there is no mention of IRB approval in these first 6-months.
- The recruitment will take place through informational sessions for parents (e.g., open house, parent/teacher conferences, or the like). This is a moderate weakness of the study as parents that attend these school meetings are often the “low hanging fruit”. How will the more unengaged parents be recruited?
- The implementation phase is also very aggressive and this is a moderate to major concern of the application as recruitment, implementation, and analysis of data in 6-months may be difficult. Additionally, a major concern is that the applicants expect no challenges with retention; this is especially concerning given the known retention rates in at-risk populations. The investigators justify their estimate of no challenges with retention based on one study in 2005 in an at risk population.
- The CATCH questionnaire for the measurement of health behaviors in 8-10 years olds is concerning and a moderate weakness. Children in this age group may not be able to recall the information and facilitation by an adult will not improve this. Additionally the tool has 95 questions. Qualitative data (e.g., focus groups) may be better suited or a shorter tool.
- The investigators are highly underestimating the challenges with their approach based on the literature in similar settings and populations and are a major weakness.

NIH RESUBMISSION POLICY

The NIH resubmission policy applies to all applications submitted to all grant and cooperative agreement funding opportunities that allow resubmissions, including all fellowship, training, and career development awards



- Only one resubmission (A1) of an original application (A0) will be accepted.
 - A1 applications can be submitted to any program announcement that accepts resubmissions so long as eligibility and other requirements are met.
 - Review criteria will be used from the current FOA (vs the criteria of the AO FOA).

MORE ON THE NIH RESUBMISSION POLICY



- Subsequent resubmission should reflect how the field has changed over the interim between the time of submission of the A0 and A1 >> include new prelim data, relevant literature, letters of reference.
- The activity code – e.g. R01, K01, U01 – may not change between the A0 and A1 (unless FOA changes activity code at time of re-issue).
- Resubmissions must be submitted within 37 months of the original A0; an A1 must not be submitted until the Summary Statement of the A0 has been received.

KNOW THE RULES

A resubmission (A1) allows you to tell reviewers how you have addressed their critiques (or why you did not).

- 1-page Introduction:
 - A summary of substantial additions, deletions, and changes to the application
 - A response to weaknesses raised in the Summary Statement.
 - A different application title is allowable.
- A PD/PI can be added to or removed from the resubmission application.
- Identifying individual changes in the text is not needed
- Use most current forms – info may need to be transferred
- Provide substantive justification as to why you disagree

THE INTRODUCTION

- Include title and proposal number of original submission
- Thank reviewers, emphasize strengths and positive comments
- Address critique – all of it
 - Use Reviewer numbers (i.e. R1, R2, R3)
 - Most important concerns should receive the most space in your response
 - Make sure your responses refer to a section of your proposal
 - Try to be brief and direct > be cognizant of page limits.
 - Use some style tips >> use the active voice, use plural first-person (“we”), and don’t use too much space apologizing.
- If you aren’t sure whether to include responses, **ask your Program Officer.**
- Ask a colleague to read the response.



A SAMPLE INTRO

Example format for Introduction: *This is a resubmission of DKxxxxx-01 “An Exercise Intervention to Prevent Diabetes” to test the hypothesis that an exercise intervention is an effective tool for preventing diabetes. The comments of the review panel were very helpful in revising this proposal. As the reviewers noted, “The application addresses a highly significant area in women’s health that may have a lasting impact in a high-risk population for development of obesity and diabetes.” “Using moderate intensity exercise to diabetes is innovative and could easily be translated into clinical practice.” Changes made to the proposal are highlighted in italics throughout the text.*

A SAMPLE INTRO

Example format for Introduction: *This is a **resubmission** of DKxxxxx-01 “An Exercise Intervention to Prevent Diabetes” to test the hypothesis that an exercise intervention is an effective tool for preventing diabetes. The comments of the review panel **were very helpful** in revising this proposal. **As the reviewers noted**, “The application addresses a highly significant area in women’s health that may have a lasting impact in a high-risk population for development of obesity and diabetes.” “Using moderate intensity exercise to diabetes is innovative and could easily be translated into clinical practice.”*

AFTER THE INTRO BUT BEFORE RESUBMISSION



Don't forget to make changes **in the body of the proposal!**

- Check and double-check this because the reviewers will.

...unless the Reviewers told you to delete something.

Source: *Writing Dissertation and Grant Proposals:*
Chapter 20, Resubmission of the Grant Proposal

FOUNDATIONS AND NON-FEDERAL SPONSORS



FOUNDATION APPROACHES

- A foundation generally does not provide reviewer comments and the reason for rejection from a foundation may not be provided.
 - They often lack clear definition for their criteria and processes – or they choose not to follow what they adopt
- A foundation may or may not have a program officer to speak with.
- As a general rule, foundations typically prefer pre-application contact.
- Revisit your proposal after the rejection.
- Ask a trusted colleague to review the proposal and provide feedback.



THE SPENCER FOUNDATION

- Reviewers consist of experts in the field of study/methodology as well as generalists in educational research
- Receives about 2,000 proposals annually
 - Funds between 5-10% of them (only!)
- They do attempt to return written feedback on as many of them as possible
- Take the time to review, revise, and resubmit
 - Create a proposal planning timeline that offers you deliverable targets
 - Give yourself plenty of lead time
- Consider adding a new collaborator, an expert, a colleague with more experience
- Use available resources online, e.g., *A Guide to Writing Successful Field-Initiated Research Grant Proposals*

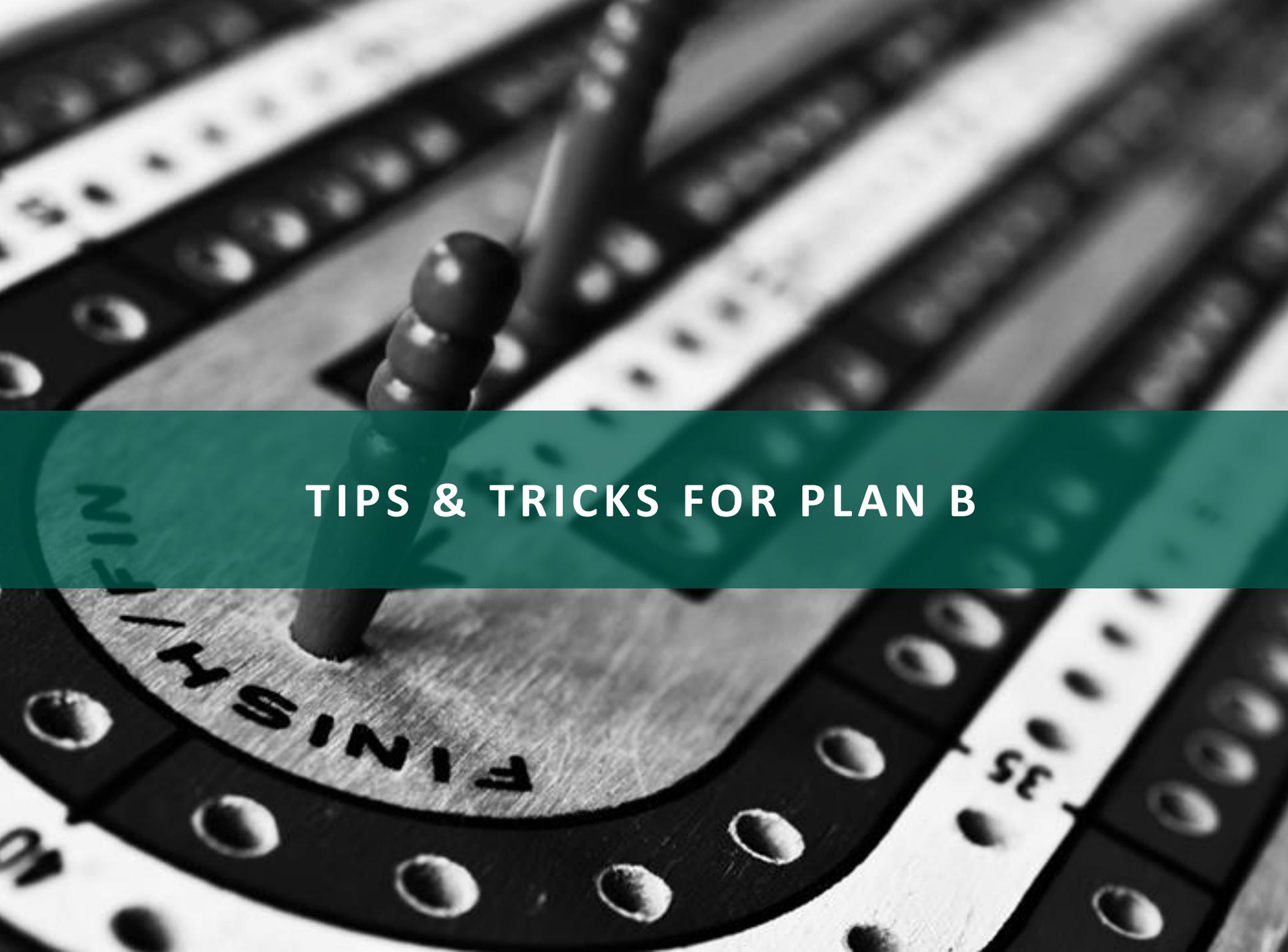
SPENCER



GRANTS

CULTIVATION IS KEY

- ✓ The secret to many Foundation funding successes is **CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS before, during, and after** the formal grant process.

A close-up, black and white photograph of a vintage abacus. The device features a circular dial with a needle pointing to a scale. The dial has markings for 'MIN' and '1/4 MIN'. The needle is positioned near the '1/4 MIN' mark. A green semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the center of the image, containing the text 'TIPS & TRICKS FOR PLAN B'.

TIPS & TRICKS FOR PLAN B

EXAMPLE 1: RESPOND, DON'T DEFEND

R1. Recommend the addition of a 6-month follow-up study to ascertain if the effect persists after the structured intervention.

Defensive

We chose not to conduct a follow-up study as our primary focus in this application was to determine whether the intervention could be effective in real time.

Responsive

The reviewer raises an important point. Therefore, we have added a three-month post intervention focus group that will assess whether the family continues to dance together, how often, and in what format. We are unable to follow the participants for six months due to the fact that recruitment is rolling over the first two years of the grant, leaving insufficient time to follow the last recruited family. However, we will also perform a six-month focus group in a subgroup of the first 50 recruited families.



How not to respond to reviewers' comments.

EXAMPLE 2: REVIEWER MISSED INFORMATION

Defensive

We already included age as a matching criteria as noted on page 18 of the original application.

Responsive

We apologize for our lack of clarity in describing the study design. We will include age as a matching criteria. Specifically, cases and controls will be matched on age <18, age ≥ 18 (see Section C.4. Study Design).



IF REVIEWERS WERE CRITICAL OF:

- Your proposal's **Significance**: Emphasize how your project addresses a key gap in knowledge and how it aligns with the funder's mission.
- Your **Methods**: Update prelim findings, present the methods to match with project aims/objectives, give an outline of your approach even if your methods are commonly known; explain design decision; identify possible challenges and alternative approaches.
- Your **Experience**: Discuss relevant experience in addition to just uploading biosketches, recruit new collaborators or consultants, if needed. Consider a more interdisciplinary approach. Integrate an Advisory Board.
- Your application's **Presentation**: Beef up the Project Description with GREAT graphics.



THE LIST OF 'DON'T FORGETS'

- Solicit new Letters of Support
- Use any new templates and follow any new guidelines/requirements
- Update Biographical Sketches
- Do not obsess over prior critiques
- Ask for outside help and peer reviewers



ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS



- Identify a different study section within the same agency
- Submit to another opportunity within the same funding agency
- Submit to another funder – A poor program fit could lead to a poor review of a good proposal
- Move on from that project
 - Difficult, but sometimes necessary
 - Don't throw good effort after bad
- Design a pilot project help to demonstrate feasibility

KEY POINTS

- **Expect it**
 - Grants rarely get funded on initial submission
 - Start planning the minute you submit to make the resubmission better
- **Accept it**
 - Reviewer is ALWAYS right, even when he or she isn't
 - Reviewers will always find flaws
 - Reviewers point out imperfections in *what* you propose and *how* you propose it
- **Perfect it**
 - Develop a plan
 - Successfully address concerns



EXPECT IT! ACCEPT IT! PERFECT IT!



QUESTIONS?

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*Thank
you!*