

Enhancing Peer Review: What Applicants Need to Know Now

Transcript Accompanying Video of Dr. Alan Willard, November 2009

Slide 1

Hello. My name is Alan Willard. I am Chief of the Scientific Review Branch at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. I am also the Coordinator of several groups that have been charged with the implementation of a set of Enhancements to the NIH Peer Review system.

Slide 2

This video will discuss some of the upcoming changes to the structure of NIH applications and how those changes are related to the peer review system. We will place particular emphasis on how these changes will affect people who are preparing applications that will be submitted for due dates that fall on or after January 25, 2010.

This video will also serve as a supplement to the extensive resources already available on the NIH Enhancing Peer Review Web site. The URL for this website is shown on this slide. You can also access this site by going to the main NIH Web site www.nih.gov and clicking on the peer review link OR you can do a simple internet search for the words “enhancing NIH peer review.” Regardless of how you get to this site, the page has several additional resources, including a video overview of the full set of enhancements to the NIH peer review system, a set of frequently asked questions and answers, and a page dedicated to walking you through the changes to application forms and instructions. We recommend that you check this Web site frequently.

Slide 3

This slide reminds us that a number of changes have already been implemented and it shows that one more set of changes will take place in January 2010.

Last January, by which I mean January 2009, NIH began a phased implementation of a new policy on resubmissions, specifically reducing the number of resubmissions from two to one, Steps were also taken to identify R01 applications from new and early stage investigators. I will also remind you that, at that same time, NIH set a goal that the success rates for R01 applications from new and early stage investigators would be equivalent to the success rates for new R01 applications from established investigators. Let me also remind you that a new investigator is someone who has never successfully competed for their own R01 or R01 equivalent award from NIH and that Early Stage Investigators are a subset of new investigators who have completed their PhD or clinical training less than 10 years ago.

Beginning with the May/June 2009 review meetings, several additional changes took effect, including the use of enhanced review criteria that place greater emphasis on the overall impact of applications, a simple 9 point scoring system, having assigned reviewers give scores to individual core review criteria, and providing templates to reviewers to help them focus their critiques on the appropriate review criteria. In addition, at most CSR study

sections, applications are now discussed in the order of their preliminary scores, with the goal of achieving more consistent scoring. R01 applications from new and early stage investigators are now clustered and discussed as a group.

I will now discuss two upcoming changes that will affect all competing applications submitted for due dates on or after January 25, 2010.

Slide 4

These two changes are a restructuring of the application forms, and a new set of instructions about the types of information to include in applications. The most obvious of these changes will be shorter page limits for research plans, but there are also some other important changes to the structure of the application that I will discuss.

Please note that these changes will affect ALL competing applications: new, renewal, revision, and resubmission.

The only applicants who should continue to use the old forms after January 25, 2010 are those who are eligible for continuous submission and who are submitting R01, R21, or R34 AIDS-research applications until February 7, 2010 (these submissions will correspond to AIDS applications that would otherwise have been due on January 7, 2010).

Slide 5

Before we get to the details, I will first discuss the goals of these two changes.

One major overall goal is to achieve an explicit alignment between the content of an application and the review criteria by which it will be evaluated. It is hoped that this alignment will ensure a more efficient and transparent review process.

Slide 6

Another goal of these changes is to reduce the burden, both of writing applications and of reviewing them, by reducing the volume of technical details and by increasing review focus on the importance of the projects being proposed and on the likely overall impact of each application.

Slide 7

OK. With that brief background, let me now discuss the restructured applications.

There will be changes to three of the sections of application forms and instructions. Specifically, there will be changes to the Research Plan, Biographical Sketch, and Resources and Facilities.

Slide 8

Let me draw your attention to two of the ways the Research Plan will be changed.

First, in the Specific Aims section, which will have its own separate page, applicants will be asked to discuss explicitly, albeit briefly, the expected overall impact of the proposed research.

Second, three of the current sections of the Research Plan, specifically Background & Significance, Preliminary Studies/Progress Report, and Research Design and Methods, will be combined into a single section called “Research Strategy.” The information in this section should explicitly address the three enhanced review criteria: Significance, Innovation, and Approach.

Slide 9

This slide outlines the sections of an application for a research grant or cooperative agreement. Note that there would be different sections for other types of applications, such as ones for fellowships or career development awards.

Slide 10

Another major change in the application forms and instructions is in the Biographical Sketch. The new instructions will ask for a personal statement from each key personnel explicitly discussing why their experience and qualifications make them particularly well-suited for their role in the project. These changes serve to better align the Biosketch with the Investigator(s) review criterion.

The instructions will also recommend that the list of publications or manuscripts be limited to no more than 15, with the selection being based on recency, importance to the field, and/or relevance to the application. Or, as some people have dubbed it “show us your latest and greatest”.

Slide 11

Finally, application forms and instructions will be revised in the Resources and Facilities section, for better alignment with the Environment review criterion. The new instructions will ask for a description of how the scientific environment will contribute to the probability of success of the project.

Additionally, New or Early Stage Investigators are asked to describe their institution’s investment in the success of their project.

Slide 12

This slide helps show how the new application forms will align with the Enhanced Review Criteria for research grants and cooperative agreements. You’ll note that the Significance, Innovation, and Approach criteria correspond to the 3 sections of the Research Strategy, while Investigator(s) and Environment correspond to the Biographical Sketch and Resources sections, respectively.

To see the alignment for other types of applications (such as fellowships or career development awards) please see documents available on the Enhancing Peer Review Web site.

Slide 13

This slide provides an overview of the new page limits. The Research Strategy for all types of applications has been reduced, generally to either 6 or 12 pages. I will mention two other details. First, all applications will be allowed one page for a separate Specific Aims section. Although the specific aims page was previously included in the 25 page limit for the Research Plan of R01 applications for example, it is now separate from the 12 pages for the research strategy section of an R01. A second detail is that for most resubmission and revision applications, the Introduction will be limited to one page, again separate from the research strategy section.

Please note that it is ALWAYS essential to read each Funding Opportunity Announcement carefully because some will have page limit requirements that differ from the page limits that are found in the generic instructions for application forms. In such cases, the Funding Opportunity Announcement instructions are the ones that should be followed.

A full table of the page limits, with information for each Activity Code, is available on the Enhancing Peer Review website, and the URL is shown here. You can also find this page by doing an internet search for NIH new page limits.

Slide 14

Now, let's talk about the timeline for all of these changes. For the purposes of this video "now" means October and November of 2009. At this time, there are still due dates for which the current application forms still need to be used. In order to reduce opportunities to use the wrong forms, NIH will not be making the new forms available for download until after the due dates that require the old forms. However, we know that many people are eager to start preparing for the use of the new forms.

At this time, existing Funding Opportunity Announcements are being updated and new Parent Announcements will be reissued. These updated Funding Opportunity Announcements and new Parent Announcements will be available in December 2009. Although it is important to begin reading about the changes now, you should wait to download the new application forms when they become available in December. All submissions for due dates on or after January 25, 2010 will require the new forms.

Slide 15

Let's talk about TIMING. We have come up with some recommended steps to help ensure a successful application submission for due dates on or after January 25.

The first step is to familiarize yourself now with the upcoming changes to application forms and instructions, so that you can begin writing your Research Strategy.

This includes going to the Enhancing Peer Review website to read the Policy Announcements, Details of Application Changes, and other resources that are available on the Training & Communications Resources page of the website.

Slide 16

The second step is to go back to the updated Funding Opportunity Announcements or the reissued Parent Announcements in December and download the correct application packages at that time.

For a period of time between now and late February, many Funding Opportunity Announcements will exist in two versions, so applicants must carefully select the version of the Funding Opportunity Announcement and application package that they should be using, based on the application due date.

For due dates on or after January 25, 2010, choose ADOBE_FORMS_B for the SF 424 electronic packages and the package with the “June 2009” revision date for the PHS 398 paper application packages.

PLEASE NOTE: It is absolutely crucial that you choose the correct application packages, as applications submitted using incorrect forms will be delayed and might not get reviewed!

Slide 17

The final step for success is to read the new application instructions carefully. You should pay close attention to the new instructions and shorter page limits.

Slide 18

Finally, let me remind you of several important things that have not changed. These include:

- the necessity of having a good idea about how to answer an important question or how to accomplish an important project
- the need for reviewers to be able to understand WHAT you are proposing to do, why it is important, and for them to be convinced that there is a reasonable probability that YOU, with your approach, your resources and your collaborators can do it
- And finally, it is always important to communicate with NIH staff and to read Funding Opportunity Announcements carefully to make sure that your goals are well aligned with those of an NIH Institute or Center.

Slide 19

This concludes our overview of the changes that will affect you as an applicant submitting for due dates on or after January 25, 2010. As I have said throughout this video, extensive additional information can be found at the Enhancing Peer Review Web site. I will remind you that you can get to the Web site by bookmarking the URL that is shown in this slide, by going to the NIH home page and clicking on “peer review,” or by doing an internet search for “NIH peer review changes” or “enhancements.”

We hope that you have found the information in this video useful and wish you success with your upcoming application. Thank you.