



CAIRIBU ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM

GRANT WRITING TIPS, TRAPS, AND EVOLVING EXPECTATIONS: FROM THE REVIEWER'S PERSPECTIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
February 11, 2026



ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM
FEAT: ARUNA SARMA, PHD, MHA

GOAL: Learn how to effectively communicate your science, avoid common missteps, and respond to evolving review criteria in your grant submissions

A recording of this and prior CAIRIBU ARCTICS Community forums is available on the CAIRIBU YouTube channel [HERE](#)

Summary

Introduction to Grant Success

Overview

- [Dr. Aruna Sarma](#) (University of Michigan, PI of the CAIRIBU KUroEpi Program) opened by highlighting that grant success hinges on how reviewers interpret proposals
- Drawing from the grant submission and review experiences of mentors, colleagues, and herself, she noted that **small changes in grantsmanship can dramatically change outcomes**
- Mental models for grant writing help applicants see their application through the reviewer's lens and set them up for success
- The major points of grant review are **clarity, feasibility, innovation, and impact**

How Reviewers Read Grants

Mental notes when scoring

- Reviewers look for reasons to say YES but must justify NO
- Confusion creates perceived risk
- **Cognitive overload results in conservative scoring**
 - If a reviewer has to work hard to understand your science, your score will reflect that effort
- Key takeaway: Make it easy for reviewers to understand your proposal; clarity is more persuasive than brilliance
 - Have a trusted peer or mentor read and provide feedback on grants to ensure clarity and avoid confusion

Engineering a grant for ease-of-review

- Design grants for scanning, not deep reading (*"Would I be able to skim this late at night?"*)
- Use **strong headers, strategic repetition, and visual structure**; incorporate simple formatting and highlight your key points
- Write declaratively – confidence is persuasive

Craft specific aims carefully

- The Specific Aims page gives a reviewer their first impression and drives their preliminary score. The rest of the application confirms this first impression.
- **Without clear specific aims, the rest of the application is irredeemable**
- Avoid too many aims, incremental science, or methods-heavy framing
- Keep your aims to two or three, and ensure they are conceptually driven and reflect the project's goals

How to reduce uncertainty in your proposal

- Given that your grant is fundamentally a risk-management document, make sure to:
 - Signal feasibility early and often
 - Preempt weaknesses and justify design choices
 - Show prior momentum and capability with preliminary data

Respond to the NOFO effectively

- Mirror the language of review criteria
- **Align your narrative with the funding announcement's priorities**

- Make responsiveness clear – **never make reviewers search for compliance or impact**
- Strong grants will read as inevitable fits

Audience Questions

Tackling writer's block

- Find a partner/co-PI to share the work of writing a grant and to hold you accountable. **Clinician-scientist partnerships marry methodological expertise with clinical knowledge and can drive grant success.**
- Give yourself five or six bullet points to build from
- Though it may be tempting to use AI to spur ideas or aid in early writing stages, grant writing is a muscle and depending too much on AI stymies your development and growth as a scientist in the long run
- If you have a lot of ideas, try to contextualize these ideas within your career timeline and the disease timeline. This helps frame which questions should be answered first and how the ideas fit together.

Simplified review framework and grant writing approach

- Take a similar approach, but simplify the way you address the criteria into fewer categories

Balancing project ambition with grant timeline

- **A single grant should have a single message or takeaway**
- Be realistic about what you can accomplish in the time you have, accounting for time spent starting and wrapping up the project

Responding to reviewers

- On your own – privately, without including in your response to reviewers – articulate your frustration with the critiques
- Make lists of the feedback you think is worth pursuing
- Share your response with peers, and ask for their feedback – do they echo what the reviewer(s) said?
- **Organize your introduction to the resubmission based on salient criticism**, particularly items raised by all reviewers, followed by smaller items

What do the best grants have that others don't?

- Many of the most favorably scored grants are revisions
- The “best” ones:
 - Have strong science
 - Are cleanly written and both easy AND fun to read (through use of white space, simple language, and anecdotal examples)
 - Address previously raised issues
 - Have a clear and meaningful impact