

Grant Writing: Reviewer's Perspective

- Grant success is rarely determined by science alone — it is determined by how reviewers interpret your proposal.
- **Today's goal:** help you see your application through the reviewer's lens.
- We will focus on mental models rather than mechanics.
- These insights come from patterns observed across many applications and review settings.
- Small shifts in grantsmanship can dramatically change outcomes.

How Reviewers Actually Read Your Grant



Reviewers are looking for reasons to say YES — but must justify NO.



Confusion creates perceived risk.



Cognitive overload leads to conservative scoring.



If a reviewer has to work hard to understand your science, your score will reflect that effort.

Grants Are Not Written — They Are Engineered



Design your grant for scan behavior, not deep reading.



Use strong headers, strategic repetition, and visual structure.



Write declaratively — confidence is persuasive.



Your grant should be skimmable at 11pm.

Specific Aims

The goal of this project is to investigate the molecular mechanisms underlying X disease and to develop new therapeutic interventions. Our research will focus on identifying key pathways that contribute to disease progression and potential targets for treatment.

Aim 1: Determine the role of Protein A in the pathogenesis of X disease.

- We will test the hypothesis that Protein A regulates signaling pathways involved in cellular dysfunction.
- Investigate the effect of Protein A knockdown on cell survival and proliferation.
- Analyze downstream signaling mechanisms activated by Protein A.

Aim 2: Identify therapeutic inhibitors of Protein B.

- We will screen small molecule libraries to identify inhibitors of Protein B.
- Perform high-throughput screening to find lead compounds.

Aim 3: Investigate the role of Pathway Y in disease progression.

- Examine how Pathway Y influences the development of X disease.
- Elucidate the molecular interactions between Pathway Y and other key factors.

SPECIFIC AIMS

The MAIN GOAL of this project is TO STUDY the MOLECULAR MECHANISMS of X DISEASE and DEVELOP NEW THERAPIES. Our OBJECTIVE is to IDENTIFY PATHWAYS involved in the DISEASE and TARGETS for TREATMENT!!!

Aim 1: DETERMINE the ROLE of PROTEIN A in X DISEASE!!

- Test Hypothesis: Protein A IS KEY in signaling!
- STUDY Effect of PROTEIN A KNOCKDOWN on SURVIVAL & ELUFERATION!!!
- CHECK SIGNALING PATHWAYS!!!

Aim 2: IDENTIFY INHIBITORS OF PROTEIN B!!! UNDERLINE

- SCREEN Small Molecules to FIND INHIBITORS!!
- Evaluate Efficacy and SPECIFICITY of Inhibitors!!!!

Aim 3: STUDY PATHWAY Y in DISEASE PROGRESSION!!!

- INVESTIGATE Pathway Y's ROLE!! IN ANIMALS!
- Look at MOLECULAR INTERACTIONS with Pathway Y !!!

Specific Aims Drive the Score



Reviewers often form a preliminary score after reading the Specific Aims.



The rest of the application confirms that first impression.

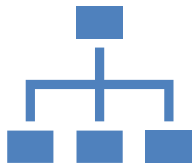


Avoid too many aims, incremental science, or methods-heavy framing.



If your Specific Aims are unclear, nothing downstream rescues you.

Reduce Reviewer Anxiety



Your grant is fundamentally a risk-management document.



Signal feasibility early and often.



Preempt weaknesses and justify design choices.



Show prior momentum and capability.

Write to the NOFO Like It's a Contract



Review criteria are scoring instructions — mirror their language.



Make responsiveness obvious; never make reviewers hunt for compliance.



Align your narrative with the priorities of the funding announcement.



Strong grants read as inevitable fits.

Dr. Sarma's Timeline

1999: PhD in Epidemiology, UM

1998: Research Fellow
Epidemiology, Mayo Clinic

1999: Postdoctoral
Research Fellow,
Epidemiology, UM

2000: Postdoctoral Research
Fellow, Urology, UM

2000: Co-I, U01 Grant

2000: NIH/NIDDK Grant
Triaged



2003: PI, Army/DOD Grant

2003: 2 NIH/NIDDK grants
unfunded

2004: Member, American
Urological Assoc.; MI Diabetes
Research and Training Center;
Comprehensive Cancer Center

2004: Excellence in Research
Award, BCBS Foundation of
Michigan

2004: PI, NIH/NIDDK Grant
Funded

2011: Promoted to Associate
Professor, Epidemiology &
Urology

2011: PI, NIH/NIDDK Grant
Funded (SubK w/ UCLA)

2011: Member, UM IRB;
American College of
Epidemiology; Society for Basic
Urologic Research

2011: 1 NIH/NIDDK Grants
Unfunded

2016: Co-PI, K12 Funded

2016: Co-PI, NIH/NIDDK Grants
Funded (SubK w/ CDC; SubK w/
UW)

2016: Member, Society for
Women in Urology

2000
-
2003

2000
-
2003

2003
-
2004

2005
-
2010

2011

2012
-
2015

2016

2018
-
2021

2000: Member, American Public
Health Association; Society for
Epidemiologic Research

2002: PI, GlaxoSmithKline Grant

2002: Reviewer, *Journal of
Urology*

2003: Assistant Professor,
Epidemiology, UM

2003: Assistant
Professor, Urology, UM

2005: Adjunct LEO Lecturer,
Epidemiology, UM

2006-9: 3 NIH/NIDDK Grants
Unfunded

2007: Outstanding Teacher
Award, UM SPH, OJOC

2009: 3 NIH Grants Funded

2010: Co-I, U01 Funded

2010: Reviewer, *Cancer Causes
& Control*

2012: PI, NIH/NCI Grant (SubK
w/ UT)

2012: Reviewer, *Journal of
Women's Health, Diabetes Care,
JAMA, NEJM*

2013: Co-PI, R01

2015: Member, APRAPT

2015: 2 NIH/NIDDK Grants
Unfunded

2018: Promoted to Research
Professor, Epidemiology &
Urology

2018: Chief, Dow Division of
Health Services Research,
Urology

2021: 3 NIH/NIDDK Grants
Funded

2021: 2 NIH/NIDDK Grants
Unfunded

Final Takeaways

- Fundable grants are not just scientifically strong — they are strategically constructed.
- Clarity is more persuasive than brilliance.
- Reviewers fund trajectories, not just projects.
- Reduce uncertainty and make feasibility unmistakable.
- Never make a reviewer work to understand your impact.
- Strong grants feel inevitable.