



CAIRIBU ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM

WRITING SPECIFIC AIMS STATEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
March 11, 2026



ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM

FEATURING: Gregory Tasian, MD, MSC, MSCE and
Chad Vezina, PhD

**GOAL: Strategies for developing strong
specific aims**

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

Summary

Specific Aims Statements and Why They Matter

Overview

- [Dr. Chad Vezina](#) (UW-Madison) emphasized the importance of the specific aims page as the elevator pitch for the entire proposal; [Dr. Greg Tasian](#) (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia) echoed that the specific aims page is the most important part of the grant.
- During the NIH grant review process, grants are assigned to 12-15 reviewers who discuss strengths and weaknesses.
- The specific aims page provides the foundation and the framework for reviewers to understand your work and may be the **only** part that some reviewers read.
- **Conveying how irresistible your research idea is and defining why the investigator and institution are the right people for the job is critical.**
- Conduct a thorough literature review and check for overlapping grants via NIH RePorter to confirm your proposed research is unique and innovative.

Writing Your Specific Aims

How to Start Writing

- Dr. Vezina recommended the "**And But Therefore Impact**" (ABTI) formula for crafting specific aims, abstracts, and introductions.
- This format starts with what is known ("And"), describes a critical knowledge gap ("But"), and outlines proposed research to fill that gap ("Therefore") and how it will be impactful to human health.
- **Avoid the domino effect, where the success of one aim depends on the success of another**, by creating independent aims. This way, the success of Aim 2 does not hinge on the success of Aim 1.

What to Cover

- Include your overarching hypothesis that ties everything together and 1-3 research objectives written as short, digestible hypotheses
- **A good hypothesis is specific and testable**, states expected directional changes, and uses independent clauses to insulate each clause in case one fails to develop.
- Specify the necessity of your work and how the research will advance the field.
- Include objective reasons why your idea / team / environment is ideal (*KEY SUGGESTION: Use wording that addresses the funding criteria specific to the mechanism/NOFO.*)

Additional Tips

- Aims that are clear, concise, simple, and compelling and clearly linked to the priorities of the funding institute are strongest.
- Given that some reviewers will be non-experts, use AI to flag jargon/complex ideas. **Have a true non-expert review your writing to shed light on areas that are difficult to understand.**
- Revise weekly before submission.
- Use a reviewer sheet and address scoring criteria in Aims page, mirroring key language from said criteria.
- For training grants, link your research to your training area.
- Depending on the application, sub-aims might make your grant more understandable by dividing it into chunks that are more reviewer-friendly.

Audience Questions

How do I balance independent and interdependent aims?

- Use preliminary data as needed to support interdependent aims and to show low likelihood of aim failure.
- For implementation science, it is common to describe formative work that leads to an intervention and ultimately intervention testing. For each aim – in potential problems and alternative approaches – show that your work can still proceed if the earlier aims fail.
- In general, make sure to address pitfalls throughout your proposal and highlight your backup plans.

Should specific aims pages include references?

- Yes, and 3-5 key references is ideal.