

Top Reasons Reviewers Declined to Fund a Proposal

➤ **The reviewers felt the project wasn't a good fit for the program.**

The Program Officer is usually the person who instructs reviewers regarding the priorities and scope of the specific funding program, so this issue can easily be explored by talking to the Program Officer. You can respond to this critique by either submitting your proposal to a different program that's a better fit, or by modifying your project so that it better fits the program based on the Program Officer's advice.

➤ **The reviewers felt the scope of the project was inappropriate (either too ambitious for the funding and time available, or not ambitious enough).**

Talk to colleagues in your field to assess whether the reviewers might be correct. If you still feel that your project's scope is appropriate, revise your proposal to directly address this issue. Include a detailed project timeline showing how long it will take to accomplish each task. If reviewers felt the project was too ambitious, discuss your previous experience that demonstrates that you can accomplish what you're promising in the time allotted.

➤ **The reviewers had specific technical concerns.**

This is usually the easiest issue to address. Determine whether the reviewers' concerns are valid. If they are, revise your project plan accordingly. If you don't agree that the reviewers' concerns are valid, talk to colleagues to get their assessment. If you're still confident that you're correct, revise your proposal to specifically and respectfully explain, using data if possible, why those technical concerns aren't a problem.

➤ **The reviewers felt your research wasn't exciting or significant enough.**

This is a more difficult problem to address. First, honestly assess your project. Are they correct? If so, remember that the degree of innovation and impact expected varies by agency, so a project that may not be innovative enough for NSF might be considered by the Air Force Office of Sponsored Research if it meets one of their specific needs. (This is often the case for research that is more applied than basic.) In that case, you might want to explore revising and submitting your proposal to a different agency. If you do feel the project is significant, then you may simply need to do a better job of explaining that in your proposal. In that case, revise the text of your proposal to make a more compelling argument.

➤ **Most of the reviewers liked your proposal, but one reviewer panned it.**

This is a classic case where talking to the Program Officer can be extremely helpful. Usually the Program Officer was in the room during the review process and can give you some insight into the discussion. It's often the case with review panels that most of the reviewers are not experts in your particular subfield. If the reviewer who didn't like your proposal happened to be the reviewer who was most knowledgeable in your field, then that person's comments likely carried a lot of weight with the other reviewers, and you'll need to take those comments very seriously. However, if the one negative reviewer simply had a dyspeptic disposition or was acting on a pet peeve, and if (knowing that?) reviewers change with each cycle, the Program Officer may encourage you to resubmit with minimal changes. If it was clear from the reviews that the one negative reviewer was not knowledgeable in your field, or their comments seemed to come out of "left field," don't use a lot of space responding to those comments in your

proposal revision unless you're reasonably confident that that particular reviewer will be on the next panel.

- **The reviewers didn't seem to understand your proposal and brought up concerns that weren't applicable or that were addressed in the proposal.**

In this case it's tempting to dismiss the reviewers as incompetent. However, it's more likely that your proposal wasn't clear. Remember that reviewers aren't necessarily experts in your subfield; they may have to review a large number of proposals in a short period of time; and they may be reading your proposal at two a.m. Your project description needs to be clear, well-organized, and easy to follow. You need to make it very easy for reviewers to find the main points and to locate where you address each review criterion. Revise your proposal text and ask colleagues from outside your field to read it. If they can understand it, then it's likely that a tired reviewer reading your proposal at two a.m. will be able to understand it.

- **The reviewers weren't convinced that the project was likely to succeed (either because of a lack of preliminary data or because they felt the PI or team weren't sufficiently qualified).**

Reviewers want to fund projects that are likely to succeed. If your project appears to be risky, then you'll need to give the reviewers some evidence that these risks are manageable. If the reviewers identified one particular aspect of the project that they felt was too risky, you may need to generate some preliminary data to convince the reviewers that that issue is actually not risky, or you'll need to develop a plan to work around problems in that area to convince the reviewers that the project can still be successful even if that particular program component doesn't work out. If reviewers weren't convinced that you or your team had the required expertise, you might address that concern by generating preliminary data (and, ideally, publications in the topic). Another approach is to bring in a collaborator with the requisite background. If your idea is a high-risk, high-payoff idea, and you don't have the resources to generate the needed preliminary data, check to see whether there might be other programs set aside to fund such ideas (e.g., NSF's EAGER grants). In some cases, you may need to carve out a smaller project (for example, cutting back to a one-year project to allow you to develop proof-of-concept data rather than asking reviewers to risk three years of funding); or, you may need to find another funder that is more comfortable with higher-risk research (e.g., DARPA). This is another case where the Program Officer can give you invaluable advice.

- **The reviewers were generally complimentary, but didn't give the proposal a high enough score to be funded.**

This can be one of the most frustrating kinds of reviews – the reviewers were all generally complimentary; they might have brought up a few minor points but didn't mention any major shortcomings of the proposal, but they just didn't give the proposal high enough ratings to be funded. In fact, if it were an NSF panel, they might have recommended the proposal for funding, but didn't "highly recommend" it. In all likelihood, your project idea had merit, but it didn't excite the reviewers as much as some other proposals did. This is another case where it's important to talk to the Program Officer. Often, the Program Officer can give you an idea of how close you were to being funded, and she can tell you whether any other factors played a part (for example, yours may have been one of several good proposals in a narrow subtopic, and they only wanted to fund one). If the reviewers just weren't as excited about your

proposal as they were about others, you may need to rework your proposal to explain more compellingly what the ultimate outcome of the research will be, why it's significant, and what the impact will be. Be sure that you clearly communicate the big picture – how will this research advance your field? How does this particular project contribute to your long-term research goals? Ask your colleagues to read the reworked text and tell you whether they find the arguments persuasive.

Based on the information you've gathered by reading the reviews carefully, talking to your colleagues, and talking to the Program Officer, you can then decide whether to: (1) revise the proposal and resubmit to the same program; (2) revise the proposal and submit to a different program within the same agency; (3) revise the proposal and submit to a different agency; or (4) start over with a new or significantly modified project idea. Just remember that even when your proposal isn't funded, you have learned something from the process, and your next proposal is likely to be more competitive.