

# Grant Application Reviews: Read, React & Respond

*How to interpret reviewer comments  
and decide on next steps*

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December 12, 2016



Atlanta Clinical  
& Translational  
Science Institute



Children's<sup>SM</sup>  
Healthcare of Atlanta



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# Survey Drawing

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# Bonus Prize Offering:

Today marks how many K-Clubs?

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# Panelists/Acknowledgement

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**Ann Chahroudi, MD, PhD**, Assistant Professor, Department of Pediatrics

**Jonathan Ho-Youn Kim, MD**, Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine

**Igho Ofotokun, MD**, Professor, Department of Medicine

**Thomas Ziegler, MD**, Professor, Co-Program Director, Research Education, Training and Career Development Core, ACTSI

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*Facilitated by: **Stacy Heilman, PhD**, Assistant Professor & Director Pediatric Research Operations*

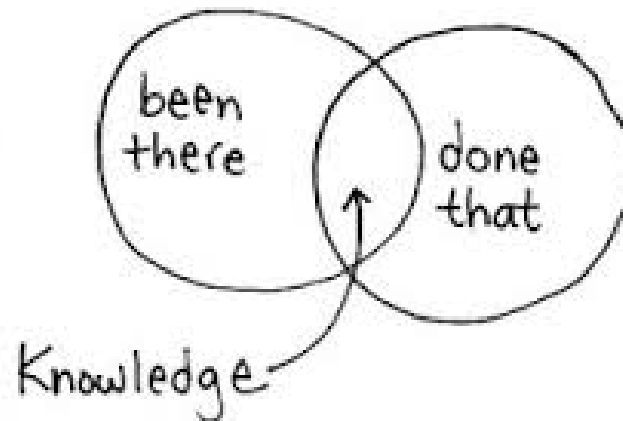
*Some advice/information offered by **David C. Steffens, MD, MHS**, in his “Responding to a Grant Review” presentation*

# Today's Format

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Outline a step-by-step approach to evaluate the choices and make a decision on what to do about an application that was assigned a score outside of the ICs funding range.

Hear real-life experiences and valuable tips from our panelists who have “been there and done that.”

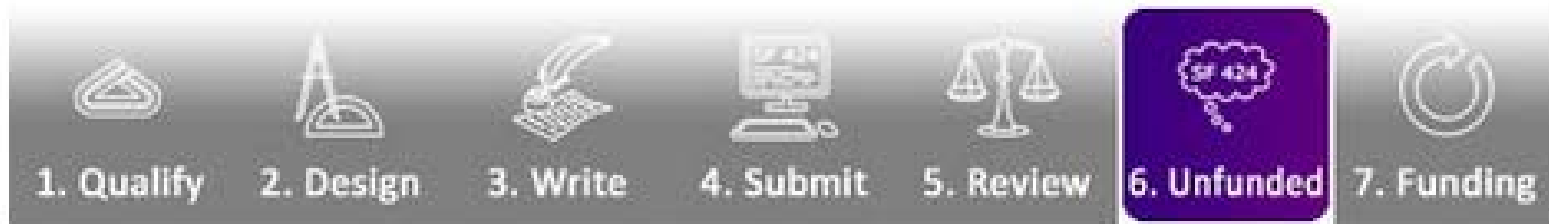


# What is a Resubmission?

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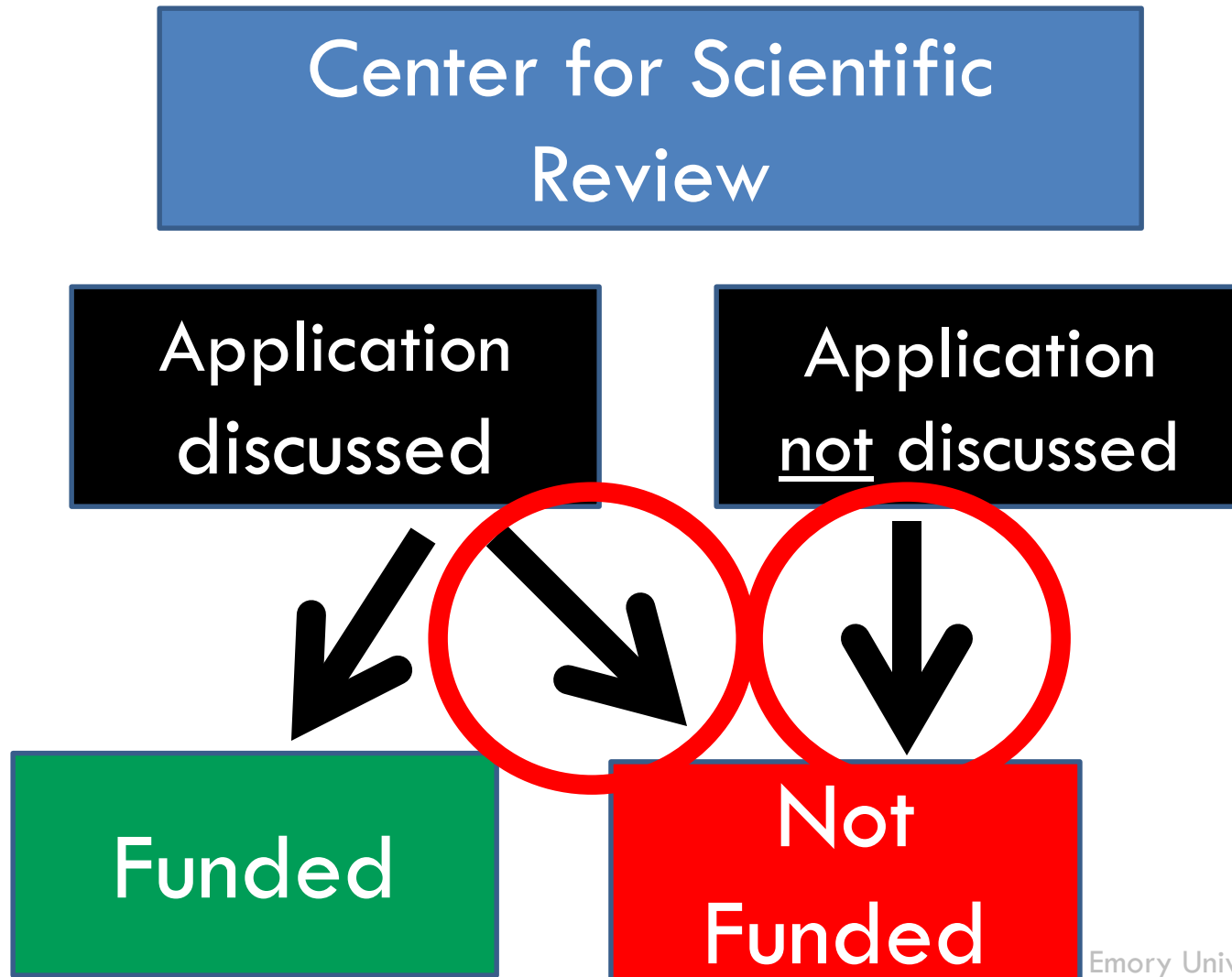
- An application that has been previously submitted, but was not funded, and is being resubmitted for new consideration.

## Strategy for NIH Funding



# Possible Outcomes After Proposal is Submitted to NIH

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# Discussed versus Not Discussed

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- Decision varies across committees and funding mechanisms, but generally bottom 50% of scored proposals are not discussed
- If not discussed, you still get a Summary Sheet with full comments, but without benefit of full committee discussion/group scoring so comments and scoring are somewhat in a vacuum
- Being in the lower 50th percentile may indicate a fatal flaw in the application



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# REACT: Dealing with the Initial Shock

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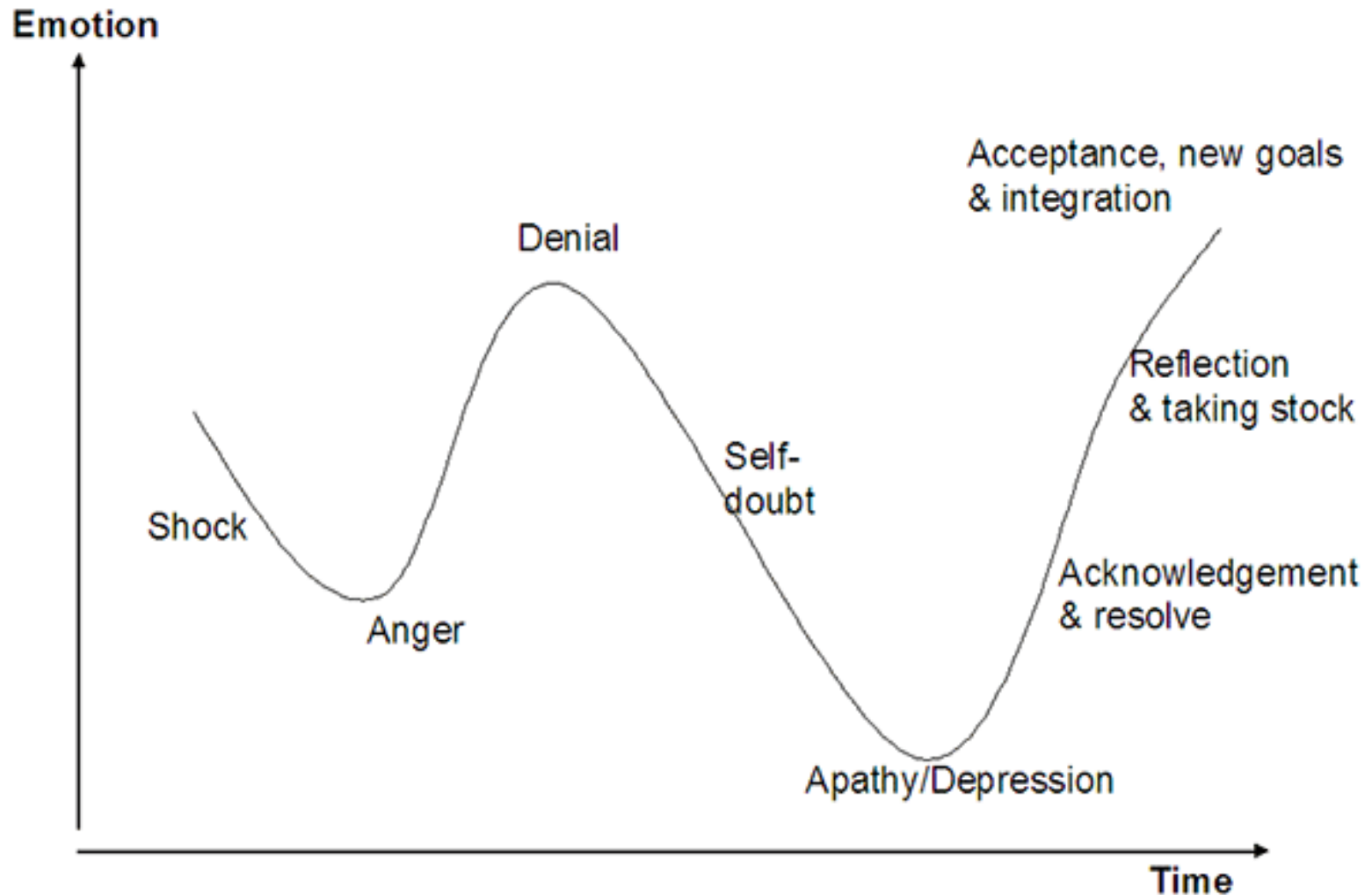
- Do an initial lookover of the “pink sheets” (which are not really pink) and then PUT THEM AWAY FOR A WEEK.
- Have whatever emotional reaction you are going to have over the next week (after all, they did just call your baby “ugly” or at least “not pretty”!)



# The Five Stages of Grief

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## Transition Curve (based on Kubler-Ross)



# Five stages of grief:

## applied to an unfunded grant application

- **Denial:** “There was nothing wrong with my grant proposal. It must have gotten mixed up with another one at CSR.”
- **Anger:** “The reviewers are a bunch of idiots.”
- **Bargaining:** “Maybe if I respond to a few of the concerns, it won’t be too difficult to resubmit.”
- **Depression:** “Maybe I’m not cut out to be a scientist...”
- **Acceptance:** “I have got to deal with it, so I might as well evaluate and figure out what to do next.”

# READ: Take a second look

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- Read the pink sheets again, and try not to take the criticism personally - Remember, this is about the “best science” from the perspective of a committee that may or may not know your specific content area.
- Make an itemized list of criticisms from each reviewer and group the comments into themes.
- Some concerns may be overlapping and addressed by a common remedy.



# Go/No-Go Decision

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Seek guidance to determine if there is a **Fatal Flaw**

- Talk to mentors/experts/colleagues
  - Have seen many, many reviews, including unfavorable ones
  - They have also acted as reviewers
  - They can be helpful in considering the gravity of the critiques and if there is a message “between the lines”
- Also valuable to talk to others who have already obtained funding via that same type of mechanism

**Panelists – What process do you recommend in reaching a sound decision about resubmission with the same/similar study question and Specific Aims?**

# To Resubmit or Not Resubmit...

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That is the question...



# Assuming The Criticisms Are Addressable

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# Gather More Information

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**You should base your decision for next steps on evidence**

- Talk to the Program Officer assigned to your grant
- Assess resubmission funding data
- Verify funding priorities at the specific agency



# Talk to the Program Officer

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- Talk to the PO assigned to your grant (NOT the Scientific Review Administrator – it's out of his/her hands now).
- If the grant was discussed, find out what the “**feeling**” in the room was as well as the principal concern in the discussion of the grant.
- Uncover the **meaning** of the score – in addition to considering the percentile rank, was there enthusiasm for revising and resubmitting?
- What should be emphasized or addressed extensively in a revision?

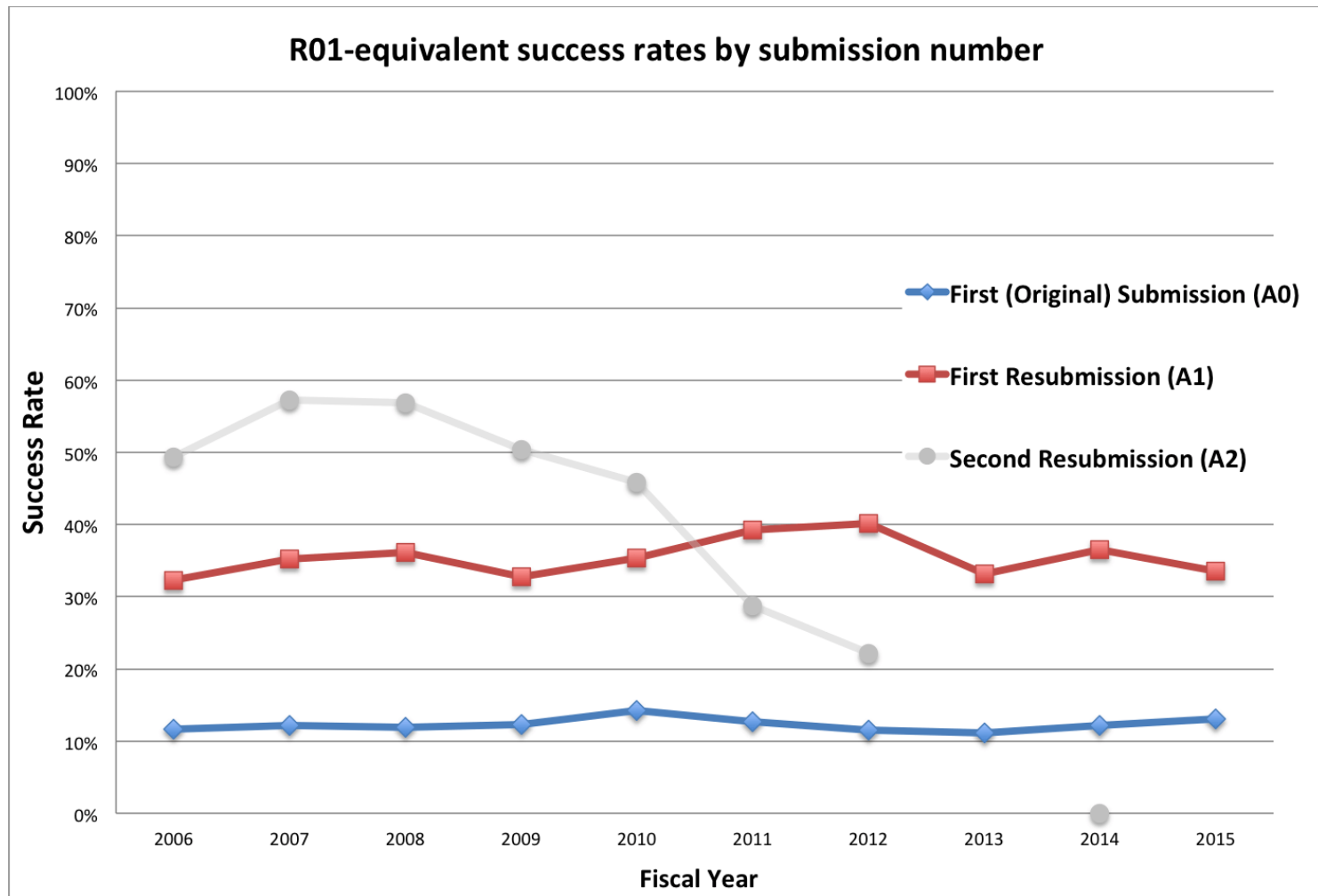


# Panelist Input

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- What if the PO wasn't there during the review?
- Is this still a helpful step if your application was “not discussed”?
- Is there an optimal timing for when the PO should be contacted? Is phone or email better?
- Do you have any examples of when taking this action worked particularly well and yielded a good outcome?
- Is there anything that can be done to maximize your chances to be considered for a special pay line?
- What if the PO doesn't respond to you?

# Assess Resubmission Likelihood of Funding: R01 Funding Success by Submission Number



# Verify IC Specific Funding Priorities & Portfolio

- Scientific priorities -

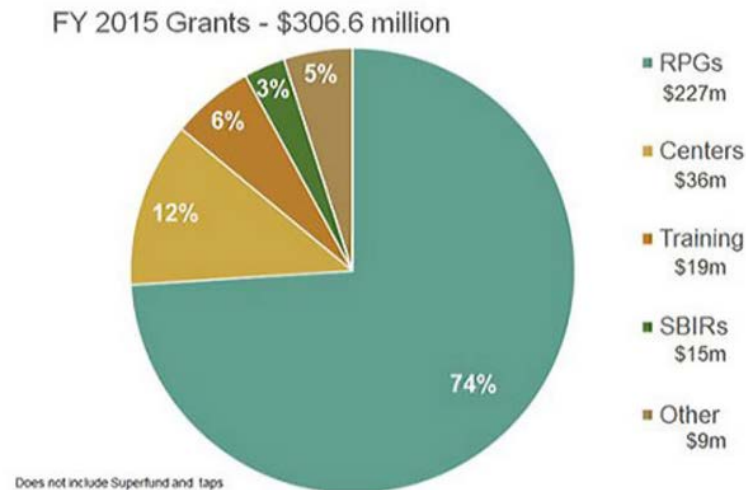
<https://report.nih.gov/strategicplans/index.aspx>

- Balance of types and short-term vs longer duration grants in portfolio -

<https://grants.nih.gov/policy/nih-funding-strategies.htm>

NIEHS FY2015 Extramural Grants Distribution

(Excludes Superfund; dollars in thousands)



FY 2016

The Fiscal Year 2016 NIEHS appropriation provides for an overall budget for grants of **\$318.3M**.

# Verify Funding Behavior of Agency/IC

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- Historical payline
- New Investigator and/or Early Stage Investigator status may provide a competitive advantage
  - Only for R01 applications
  - Exact policy/approach differs by IC

## ***Example information obtained from NIEHS Website:***

“For FY2016, NIEHS has established a payline of 10% for investigator-initiated R01, R03, and R21 applications. In some cases, applications with scores outside this payline can be considered if, for instance, they are from Early Stage Investigators, if they address a high priority area in the NIEHS Strategic Plan, or to continue a previously supported resource.

For the most current information, you are encouraged to check with the appropriate Program Officer”

# Panelist Input

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- Examples of when you considered another IC or grant mechanism for your resubmission? What was the rationale of doing so and what are the pros and cons?
- What about other agencies (federal and non federal) that may have a budget for your type of research?
- How important is the Study Section assignment in the review process? Is there an opportunity to try and route it to a different one upon resubmission and what are the pros and cons of requesting a new study section?

# RESPOND with a Resubmission

(or submission of same aims to a new agency)

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Revisions to consider:

- Redesigning the study
- Need for additional pilot data
- Adding expertise or adjusting the team
- Revising the budget
- Do nothing (if to a new agency or study section)
- **What else?**





# Voluntary Changes

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- Changing something that was NOT identified as a problem is usually a **MISTAKE**.
- Unless it is truly a weakness that you missed the first time and absolutely need to fix it.
- Making a change in study design risks opening up a new opportunity for the reviewer to find a flaw that was not in the initial submission.
- Make sure any changes make the grant better!



# Writing Your Reply

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- Start early to organize your time and allow you to comprehensively address the concerns.
- If submitted to the same agency/IC is likely that most of the reviewers will still be on the study section and will be assigned to review your grant again.

# No Matter What You Really Think...

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- The reviewer is ALWAYS right!
- Reviewers should be acknowledged, thanked, and yes, praised!
- In writing the response, keep in mind that the reviewer has generally spent hours reading and thinking about your grant and is essentially donating time to advance the quality of science in the field.

I'm not arguing,  
I'm just explaining  
why I'm right.

# Thanks, Thanks and More Thanks...

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- Thank the reviewer for the detailed review and constructive comments
- Mention any and all ways that the critique will result in improving the study.
- REMEMBER, if the reviewer simply DID NOT UNDERSTAND what you were trying to say, it is YOUR problem... not the reviewer's
- “Thanks to the reviewers’ helpful comments, we’ve been able to improve our application.”



# The Format of Your Response

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- Respond in detail, point by point to the itemized list of concerns
- This is your opportunity to show the reviewers how thoughtful, careful and responsive you are



# Taking Issue with a Review

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- Select your battles VERY carefully.
- In general, it is wise to use the review as a “blue print” for revision.
- If you do not agree with the critique and want to argue for NOT making a requested revision, make sure that you have EXTENSIVE justification.
- Check with senior researchers and colleagues to make sure that you want to take this on.
- **Panelists – What is your general advice on this?**

# Triple Check Your Work

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- When you have written and re-written the response and revised the grant, read the reviews one more time
- Make sure that you have responded to the spirit, intent, and specifics of the critique
- If time allows, send the revised grant and your response to one or two advisors who are familiar with the grant to date



# Finally...Post Resubmission

- Panelist Advice?



**MR. WORRY**

By Roger Hargreaves



HAKUNA

MATATA

Time to officially remember what day of the week it is.

