

Common Problems Cited by Peer Reviewers

Problem with Goals, Objectives, Specific Aims General:

- Problem not important enough.
- Studies based on a shaky hypothesis or data.
- Alternative hypotheses not considered.
- Problem more complex than investigator appears to realize.
- Lack of focus in hypotheses, Specific Aims, or Research Plan.
- Lack of original or new ideas.
- Rationale for experiments not provided, i.e., why they are important or how they are relevant to the question.

Problems with significance:

- Significance is not clear / lack of compelling rationale
- Not significant to health-related research
- Study not likely to produce useful information
- Immediate impact/relevance of the research is unclear

Problems with team:

- PI doesn't have the clinical expertise.
- Investigator too inexperienced with the proposed techniques.
- No demonstration of research expertise by any of the investigators (especially the co-PI)
- No collaborators recruited or no letters from collaborators when it appears there should be

Problems with design/methodology:

- Direction or sense of priority not clearly defined, i.e., experiments do not follow one another and lack a clear starting or finishing point.
- Too little detail in the Research Plan to convince reviewers the investigator knows what he or she is doing, i.e., no recognition of potential problems and pitfalls
- Insufficient consideration of statistical needs.
- Experiments too dependent on success of an initial proposed experiment. Lack of alternative methods in case the primary approach does not work out.
- Proposed model system not appropriate to address the proposed questions.
- Relevant controls not included.
- Proposal lacking enough preliminary data, or preliminary data do not support project's feasibility.
- Over-ambitious Research Plan with an unrealistically large amount of work.
- Too much unnecessary experimental detail
- Not enough detail on approaches
- Feasibility of each aim not shown
- Little or no expertise with approach
- Methods don't match the approach e.g Lack of appropriate controls for an RCT or lack of rigor in a qualitative study
- Not directly testing hypothesis/answering the research question
- No discussion of potential pitfalls
- No discussion of interpretation of data
- Outdated approach, references
- Not clear which data were obtained by the investigator and which were reported by others.

Problems with environment:

- Little demonstration of supervisory/department support
- No appropriate space to manage the research project

Give the big picture (don't drown the reviewer in details) and state rationales

Three of the most common weaknesses in grant applications are:

1. Failure to give the big picture (why should the reviewer care?)
2. Drowning the reader in details (the reviewer doesn't want to know). Some details may be critical, but the application doesn't need equal detail everywhere. Excessive detail is usually just an inappropriate way by which the applicant is trying to reduce anxiety.
3. Failure to state rationales: why do these experiments need to be done.