

The Role of Study Section Chair

Center for Scientific Review (CSR)

Summer 2025



Preparing to be a study section chair

- Scientific expertise
- Experience as a reviewer
- Knowledge of peer review policy
- Familiarity with how reviewers and study sections behave
- Understanding of the role

Complementary meeting roles

SRO

- Designated Federal Official
 - Authority regarding attendees, meeting process and review policy
 - Keeps official records
 - Must be present for all proceedings
- Works to implement policies and promote good practices
- **Takes notes and writes the resumes of discussion**

Chair

- Leads discussion
- Works to implement policies and promote good practices
- ~~Summarizes discussion~~

Every Reviewer

- **On assigned applications**
 - Writes critiques
 - Presents to panel on discussed apps
 - Considers others' views
- **On every application**
 - Casts an informed vote
 - Questions/comments as needed
 - Judges the merits of the application

Why discuss applications?

Interactive committee discussions are a signature feature of NIH review.

- **Legal perspective:** SRGs are FACA committees. Review outcomes are determined by committee vote.
 - All votes count equally. Reviewers' votes should be *informed* and *independent*.
- **Measurement perspective:**
 - Multiple assessments lead to more accurate, more reliable estimates of scientific merit
 - Non-assigned reviewers can add valuable **additional perspectives on importance** and on **rigor and feasibility**: fundamentals of design, rigor and reproducibility, assessing feasibility often does not require deep understanding of technical methods
- **Process perspective:**
 - Presenting to peers encourages careful work
 - Promotes transparency
 - Can reduce bias and improve fairness

A template for discussing an application

- **Presentations of Critiques:**
 - **Each reviewer should explain to the panel why they gave it the score they propose**
 - Focus should be on score driving issues, both positive and negative
 - Simplified Review encourages brevity and better focus on the big questions of review
- **Panel Discussion:**
 - Assigned reviewers should explore their differences regarding facts, weighting, perspective, scoring etc.
 - Panelists should request clarifications and/or offer new (score-driving) considerations
 - Score calibration is important
- **Well presented critiques and a good panel discussion together give members the information they need to make informed judgments about the application.**
- **Clarity, not consensus, is the goal.**

Make sure key questions are answered

When a discussion concludes you and the panel should understand:

1. *Should it be done?* (How important is the research?)

- a) Evaluating the importance of the science is hard, but vital.
- b) Reviewers confuse public health need with scientific importance.
- c) A clear message that significance is lacking can be a favor to everyone.

2. *Can it be done well?* (How rigorous and feasible is the approach?)

- a) Don't nit pick.
- b) Don't require certainty—can they overcome challenges.
- c) Do require rigorous and feasible methods.

3. *Are the expertise and resources in place to do it?*

- a) Binary rating provides the input NIH needs without leaving room for reputational bias.
- b) Evaluations should be specific and pertinent to the proposed project.

Facilitate discussion and encourage engagement

Better review comes from thoughtful, lively discussions that, over the course of the day, engage the entire panel.

- Maintain a collegial atmosphere where every voice matters
- Encourage disagreement; don't tolerate disrespect.
- Be aware of differences in power--expect good manners.
- Aim for clarity, rather than consensus. No one needs to win and no one needs to concede.
- Be neutral, be fair.

Step in when needed

- **End long descriptions of the application; discourage weedy discussion of methods**
- **Step in to mitigate reputational bias.**
 - If expertise/resources are ‘appropriate’, no comments needed; reviewers should focus on the science as presented.
 - Seemingly harmless laudatory comments can introduce bias into the evaluation.
- **Wrap up discussions that carry on after the score-drivers are clear.**
 - E.g., the interesting but tangential scientific discussion
 - E.g., a battle to win the point
- **Not your job alone, but if no one asks, you should, when:**
 - Importance of the research is not made clear.
 - Major differences in assigned reviewers’ views are unexplored.
 - There is significant discrepancy between comments and scores.
- Limit your “reviewer” comments.

Mind the time

Good time management is a matter of fairness.

Good discussions make time management easier.

Well presented critiques and good discussions cover a lot of ground in 15 minutes. People tune out when discussions are not focused.

- Be flexible but stay on track.
- Set expectations and enforce them.
- Problems with time often reflect a failure to focus on what matters, e.g.
 - Critiques that are overly descriptive, excessively detailed
 - A focus on methodological minutiae
 - Repetitive or circular discussions

Read applications and critiques in advance?

- Generally not. Remember your role is to facilitate discussions.
- Assigned reviewers should be explaining the basis for their score to the panel. If you don't understand it, others likely don't, either. Use the discussion to clarify things.
- Read enough to be comfortable with what will be discussed.

Implement and work with your SRO

- **Shift your role**
- **Take this opportunity to change things**
 - How well do your study section practices align with today's talk?
 - If there are differences, talk about them today, plan to change.
- **Breaking with past practice requires culture change**
- **Work in partnership with the SRO**
 - Expect that SROs will be communicating with you before and after the meeting.
 - The premeeting meeting is for planning: Nuts and bolts; touch on big picture goals as appropriate.
 - The post-meeting meeting is for feedback and lessons learned: Clear up questions, review sticky situations; give feedback on ad hocs.
 - Make sure you and the SRO are on the same page.

Thank you for your service!