

Responding to peer review comments

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You've applied for a grant/fellowship

- Most funders send applications out to be reviewed by experts in the field (*or the closest they can get to experts from their list of reviewers – so don't assume your application is going to be read by experts*)
- They often (not always) then send you the reviewer comments and give you a chance to respond before they make a decision (this may happen at the interview stage for Fellowships)

At the grants/fellowships committee

- Anyone with a conflict of interest leaves the room
- Often a subset of the panel (usually only two) specialise on each application
- Some others will have read it in detail, others not at all
- The informed panel members comment briefly on what they think of the application, and give it a provisional score
- If the provisional scores are high enough, or very divergent, the application is discussed in detail; if not, it is rejected and the panel moves on to the next one

NERC scoring system (as an example):

10 = Outstanding, world-leading

9 = Excellent, world-class

8 = Very good, aspects of excellence

7 = Very good, internationally competitive

6 = Good, international/national borderline

5 = Good quality, but not at leading edge

4 = Good quality, but has some weaknesses

3 = Satisfactory, but fails to provide justification for funding

2 = Weak, has only a few strengths

1 = Unsatisfactory

NERC scoring system (as an example):

- 10 = Outstanding, world-leading. **Highest priority for funding**
- 9 = Excellent, world-class. **Very high priority for funding**
- 8 = Very good, aspects of excellence. **High priority for funding**
- 7 = Very good, internationally competitive. **Should be funded if possible**
- 6 = Good, international/national borderline. **Potentially fundable**
- 5 = Good quality, but not at leading edge. **Suitable for funding in principle**
- 4 = Good quality, but has some weaknesses. **Not recommended for funding**
- 3 = Satisfactory, but fails to provide justification for funding
- 2 = Weak, has only a few strengths
- 1 = Unsatisfactory

NERC scoring system (as an example):

10 = Outstanding, world-leading. **Will be funded**

9 = Excellent, world-class. **Will be funded**

8 = Very good, aspects of excellence. **Maybe 25% will be funded**

7 = Very good, internationally competitive.

6 = Good, international/national borderline.

5 = Good quality, but not at leading edge.

4 = Good quality, but has some weaknesses.

3 = Satisfactory, but fails to provide justification for funding

2 = Weak, has only a few strengths

1 = Unsatisfactory

NERC scoring system (as an example):

10 = Outstanding, world-leading. Will be funded	1%
9 = Excellent, world-class. Will be funded	6%
8 = Very good, aspects of excellence. Maybe 25% funded	21%
7 = Very good, internationally competitive.	25%
6 = Good, international/national borderline.	47% score 1-6
5 = Good quality, but not at leading edge.	
4 = Good quality, but has some weaknesses.	
3 = Satisfactory, but fails to provide justification for funding	
2 = Weak, has only a few strengths	
1 = Unsatisfactory	

At the grants/fellowships committee

- The detailed discussion will focus heavily on the comments from the expert reviewers (since the panel members are unlikely to be experts in the field)
- They will try and weigh up whether your responses deal adequately with the concerns of the reviewers
- So how can you convince them to give you a high enough score that you get the grant?

How best to deal with
reviewer criticisms

Is the criticism valid?

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

A. Not mention this criticism at all when you reply

Just 'forget' to include it in the list of responses, in the hope that the panel won't notice its omission

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

B. Confess you made a real mistake

‘We are grateful to Reviewer X for pointing out this error, and, umm, will endeavour to find a way around it by working extra hard/paying for it from another grant/hoping someone will develop the right technique while we are waiting endlessly for HR to allow us to appoint the postdoc...’

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

C. Fudge the issue by saying you didn't have space in the proposal to explain this point fully

'We apologise for the lack of clarity over this issue in the proposal, due to space limitations. We can now clarify the point as follows. Yes, of course we meant to say nonsignificant rather than significant, but didn't have space for the extra letters.'

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

D. Admit the error but suggest it is not important for the success of the project

‘While the review’s point is correct, in fact it will make no material difference to the outcome of the project since we will have time to make a replacement/can obtain the data from another source/will not really need these data anyway/can easily learn modelling in our spare time.’

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

E. Try and convince panel that in fact the reviewer is not actually correct

*‘While on a superficial reading it might appear that $1+1=2$, in fact this fails to take into account the geometric complexity of the link algorithm and the non-linear steady state dynamics of the orthogonal transformation.’
[add references to obscure papers in Russian, preferably ‘in press’ so unobtainable]*

The criticism is **valid** – how should you respond?

- A. Not mention this criticism at all when you reply
- B. Confess you made a real mistake
- C. Fudge the issue by saying you didn't have space in the proposal to explain this point fully
- D. Admit the error but suggest it is not important for the success of the project
- E. Try and convince panel that in fact the reviewer is not actually correct

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

A. Point out that the reviewer is ignorant

‘This reviewer does not seem competent to judge our proposal, and has made an elementary mistake. We suggest that your organisation does not use such an amateur again.’

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

B. Suggest that the reviewer is biased against you

‘This reviewer is clearly not objective and is biased against the proposal and the applicants. From the tone and insider knowledge we’re pretty sure it’s Anton Muscatelli. His comments should be completely disregarded and her own grant applications should be shredded upon receipt.’

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

C. Be polite, but point out forcefully that the reviewer is wrong

‘With respect we would like to suggest that the reviewer is incorrect for the following reasons: (1) We know more about this than they do; (2) we’ve done pilot experiments and we know this is gonna work; (3) even our Head of Department thinks this is gonna work.’

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

D. Suggest that the reviewer has misread the application, and made a mistake

‘The reviewer has misunderstood the method by which we are going to reduce our relative alcohol intake in the coming year – as explained on page 5 para 2 this will be achieved not by drinking less, but by gaining body weight and hence increasing the degree of fluid dilution.’

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

E. Apologise for not writing the proposal more clearly, so causing a misunderstanding

‘We can now see that, due to the haste with which we threw this together and our complete failure to do any proof-reading, we may have given the impression that the plan was to spend the grant money on a holiday in Bermuda. This is not the case. We prefer the Maldives.’

The criticism is **not valid** – what to say now?

- A. Point out that the reviewer is ignorant
- B. Suggest that the reviewer is biased against you
- C. Be polite, but point out forcefully that the reviewer is wrong
- D. Suggest that the reviewer has misread the application, and made a mistake
- E. Apologise for not writing the proposal more clearly, so causing a misunderstanding

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

- A. Ignore this comment (on the grounds that it is best not to draw attention to things you should have included in the project)

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

B. Admit you should have thought of this, and will add it

'The reviewer's suggested addition to the project is an excellent one; the pity is that co-applicant Miles Padgett was not bright enough to think of it himself.'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

C. Say you'll add it but will need to increase the budget

'This is an excellent idea and we will incorporate it into the project, although in order to do so we now ask for an additional £20,000 to cover the cost of the extra pencils now needed.'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

D. Say you can easily incorporate this into the existing workplan, with no need for extra resources

'This is an excellent idea that we can easily fit into the programme since we left ourselves plenty of free time in the work plan and have over-budgeted so can easily cover the extra expense.'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

E. Say it would be nice to add but this is impractical

'In an ideal world it would be good to incorporate the reviewer's suggestion into the project but everyone except Miles Padgett will be oh so very busy that we simply won't have time (and he is not capable of doing it unsupervised).'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

F. Say you had considered but rejected it since not core

'Well of course we thought of this ourselves (we're not stupid), but decided not to include it since it's really rather a boring side-issue. The reviewer might think it worth doing this kind of science but we do not.'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

G. Say it is not a good idea to add it

'This is a silly idea that definitely would not improve the project. We're surprised that the reviewer thought it worth mentioning.'

The reviewer suggests adding something to the project – what's the best response?

- A. Ignore this comment
- B. Admit you should have thought of this, and will add it
- C. Say you'll add it but will need to increase the budget
- D. Say you can easily incorporate this into the existing workplan, with no need for extra resources
- E. Say it would be nice to add but this is impractical
- F. Say you had considered but rejected it since not core
- G. Say it is not a good idea to add it