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NIH allows flexibility for applicants affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

- Joe Munch

In early 2020, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services declared the COVID-19 pandemic a public health emergency. Accordingly, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) adjusted its grant application, review, and disbursement processes to help accommodate investigators affected by the pandemic. Some of the key adjustments the NIH made to increase flexibility in the application process are described below.

Applications for new awards can be submitted after the due date. The NIH has extended its policy for considering late application submissions to include those affected by the pandemic. Investigators can submit their applications up to 2 weeks after the submission deadline; they should explain the reason(s) for the late submission in a cover letter. (Please also see NOT-OD-15-039.)
Preliminary data can be submitted after the application submission. Citing the pandemic’s disruption of everyday research endeavors, the NIH now allows preliminary data to be provided as post-submission material. Such data must be limited to 1 page and must be submitted at least 30 days before the study section meeting. The relevant FOA must also allow the use of preliminary data in the application. (Please also see NOT-OD-21-179.)

Some applicants may have longer eligibility periods for certain grants. The pandemic has effectively placed some researchers’ careers on hold. Acknowledging this, many NIH institutes and centers are extending the eligibility window for career development grants. For example, eligible investigators applying for K99/R00 Pathway to Independence awards, who would typically be allowed to have no more than 48 months of postdoctoral research experience, now have a 2-cycle extension of eligibility (about 8 additional months). (Please also see NOT-OD-21-106.) In addition, eligible researchers can request extensions of their early-stage investigator status.

Application scores will not be affected by pandemic-related issues. NIH peer reviewers are being instructed to assume that any constraints stemming from the pandemic will be resolved during the project period and to disregard such issues when scoring applications. Thus, applicants need not include any plans for addressing such issues in their applications. However, applicants may describe in their Personal Statements any pandemic-related circumstances affecting their productivity and/or other factors reviewers might consider in their assessments. (Please also see NOT-OD-22-046.)

For the most up-to-date information about these and other pandemic-related adjustments in the NIH’s grant application, review, and disbursement processes, please see the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19): Information for NIH Applicants and Recipients of NIH Funding web page.

Whom to contact for help with your NIH grant applications

– Stephanie Deming

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently updated its Need Help? page, which shows whom to contact for different kinds of questions related to NIH funding opportunities and grants administration. Here we summarize key advice from that page for people applying for NIH funding.

For questions about specific funding opportunity announcements (FOAs) and applications, the NIH advises contacting staff at individual NIH institutes and centers. Those staff include the following:

- Program officials develop research initiatives at the NIH and write FOAs. Program officials can help applicants find the right funding opportunity for their research and help shape an application to best address the NIH’s goals. Program officials for specific FOAs are listed in section VII of the FOA under the heading “Scientific/Research Contacts.”
For applicants who have not yet chosen a specific FOA, the NIH offers a list of institute and center contacts and their areas of expertise (choose links for program or research program staff).

During the November 2021 NIH Virtual Seminar on Program Funding and Grants Administration, which was attended by several of the scientific editors in MD Anderson’s Research Medical Library, numerous presenters strongly encouraged applicants to contact a program official before submitting an application to discuss whether the application would be a good fit for a specific FOA. Typically, an applicant will email the program official a draft of the Specific Aims page for the application and ask if the applicant and program official might set up a time to discuss it.

Program officials also can discuss applicants’ summary statements and outcomes of completed peer reviews. Numerous presenters at the NIH’s November 2021 Virtual Seminar advised contacting the program official after receipt of the summary statement, even if the application was not discussed during the peer review meeting. Program officials attend peer review meetings and can offer insights into how applicants might revise an application to have a better chance of success during the next round of review.

- **Scientific review officers** oversee the peer review process. Applicants may contact scientific review officers to discuss concerns regarding the scientific review group to which their application was assigned; to request permission to submit additional materials after application submission, as allowed by NIH policies; and to discuss concerns, such as those regarding reviewer bias, after peer review is complete.

- **Receipt and referral staff** are the correct contacts if an applicant wishes to officially withdraw a submitted application from consideration prior to review.

For questions about processes and policies, the NIH advises that applicants start with the NIH’s Grants & Funding website and individuals at their own institutions. At MD Anderson, the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP) reviews and approves NIH proposals before submission and submits proposals to the NIH on behalf of applicants. The OSP’s Checklist for Initial Review and Proposal Submission Timeline may be of special interest. The OSP can answer questions about NIH policies and procedures, and the office maintains a very helpful list of answers to Frequently Asked Questions. Also, the Training Grants and Fellowships Office at MD Anderson is a fairly new group “that supports faculty, students, trainees, and administrators involved in the preparation, submission, and management of research education and training awards.”
How to write a peer review

– Amy Ninetto

Peer review is a cornerstone of the scientific research process. As a researcher, you benefit from having your work reviewed, so serving as a peer reviewer is a way to reciprocate. Moreover, contributing as a peer reviewer can help you establish your professional profile. Yet few early-career researchers receive specific training in how to write effective peer reviews. Fortunately, several journal publishers and professional organizations provide helpful guidance for new reviewers.

When you are asked to review a manuscript, you will usually be sent the title and abstract along with a proposed time frame. It’s important to respond to every request in a timely manner, even if the answer is “no.” You should only agree to review a manuscript if you can be fair, unbiased, and constructive; have no conflicts of interest; and are confident you can complete the review by the journal’s deadline (1,2). If your expertise in the topic of the manuscript is limited, you may choose to decline to review the manuscript if you don’t think you can fairly or thoroughly evaluate it, or you may communicate with the editor to limit the scope of your review to the area of your expertise (3).

Before you begin, be sure you understand the journal’s requirements. The editor may send you a questionnaire or scorecard to fill out, or the format of your review may be open-ended. In addition, log into the journal’s reviewer portal and review the journal’s peer review policies. There, in addition to formatting information, you’ll find information on the model of peer review used by the journal (e.g., double blind, single blind, open, cascading) and the journal’s ethical requirements for reviewers, which will always include keeping the contents of the manuscript confidential (2,4,5).

Next, check the manuscript for missing sections, figures and tables, or supplementary materials. Contact the journal editor if anything seems to be missing.

To get started, skim the entire manuscript, including any supplementary materials, to form your initial impression. Ask yourself the following questions (6,7):

- What is the manuscript’s main research question?
- Is this question relevant, interesting, and innovative?
- Are the conclusions supported by the data reported, and do they provide an answer to the central research question?
- Is the manuscript clear and easy to read?
- Do the tables and figures enhance, rather than simply repeat, the reported results?

Next, read the manuscript more closely, keeping detailed notes. In this reading, you’ll pay more attention to the science itself (6,7):
• Does the introduction identify an important gap in knowledge and effectively frame the research question to address this gap?
• Are the methods, including the statistical analyses, rigorous and appropriate? Do the methods meet the relevant ethical standards?
• Are the results presented clearly, and do they support the interpretations offered?
• Does the discussion provide appropriate interpretations of the context, implications, and limitations of the research?
• Do the abstract and title accurately reflect the content of the paper, and is the abstract easy to read?
• Are the tables, figures, and figure legends clear, and do the data presented in them support what is stated in the Results section?

Now you’re ready to write your review. Remember that your goal is to help the authors improve their manuscript, so keep your criticisms constructive and your tone professional. Instead of simply pointing out flaws in the manuscript, offer the authors concrete suggestions for improvement (7,8). In short, “review for others as you would have them review for you” (9). In addition:

• Start by summarizing the research question, its significance, and the authors’ conclusions.
• Number your comments and refer to specific line numbers, page numbers, or paragraphs (i.e., “the second paragraph of the Discussion”) where possible.
• Arrange your comments from the most important—issues that could prevent acceptance—to the least important (minor flaws that can be easily corrected).
• Don’t edit or rewrite the manuscript (that’s the job of an editor), but do comment on the overall clarity of the writing and point out passages that are unclear or ambiguous. Be considerate of authors who may be writing in a language that is not their native one.

Some journal editors may ask for additional, confidential comments that will not be shared with the author. Take the same professional tone in these comments and be sure your evaluation is consistent with the one the authors will see.

Do your best to return the review by the agreed-upon date. If you can’t, communicate openly with the journal editor. You can also let the editor know if you are willing to review a revised version of the manuscript.

For more step-by-step guidance on writing helpful and thorough peer reviews, see this flowchart. The journal publisher Wiley also has a comprehensive guide, including a series of videos, for new peer reviewers.
References


Council of Science Editors launches new podcast

– Ann Sutton

The Council of Science Editors (CSE), an organization for scientific publishing professionals, recently launched a new podcast, SPEAK (Scientific Publishing Exchange Around Knowledge). The podcast provides discussions of current and emerging issues in scientific publishing.

SPEAK is hosted by Jasmine Wallace, peer review manager at the American Society for Microbiology and CSE Treasurer-elect, and Carolyn deCourt, editorial client manager at J&J Editorial and CSE Professional Development Committee Co-Chair. Each episode also includes a special guest. New episodes are released monthly.

Five episodes had been released by the end of 2021; these are listed below, along with a brief overview of their content:

**Introducing SPEAK, with Interview of Past CSE President Dana Compton**
- Introduction to SPEAK and its hosts
- Personal experiences with CSE and Covid-19-related changes

**Politics in Peer Review, with Brit Stamey and Dr. Shelley Tremain**
- Ableism and inclusive language
- Helpful resources

**Managing Virtual Teams, with Josephine Sciortino**
- Virtual training and management of new hires
- Team engagement in virtual meetings

**Advancing an Early Career Remotely, with Meredith Adinolfi**
- Virtual training and conferences
- Remote management of early-career professionals

**Shifting Workplace Culture, with Kim Shankle**
- Workplace culture statements and safe spaces
- Emotional intelligence and workplace diversity

The podcast is available on most major platforms, such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify. Episodes and more information are available on the CSE website.
Unusual terms used in scientific writing and publishing: QWERTY, AZERTY, and Dvorak

– Bryan Tutt

QWERTY, AZERTY, and Dvorak are different layouts for keyboards that use the Latin alphabet. QWERTY and AZERTY are named for the first six letters on the keyboard (starting from the top left), whereas Dvorak is named for its inventor (1).

QWERTY is the most common layout for computer keyboards in English-speaking countries. QWERTY keyboards date back to the 1870s, when QWERTY was the layout for manual typewriters made by Remington and Sons (which also made firearms and sewing machines) (2). In 1893, when Remington Typewriter Company merged with several other manufacturers to form Union Typewriter Company, QWERTY became the standard layout for typewriters made in the United States.

AZERTY is a layout commonly used in France and Belgium because it enables quick access to the accented characters common in French (3). Similarly, a layout called QWERTZ enables easy use of umlauts and is commonly used in German-speaking countries.

In 1936, August Dvorak designed a keyboard with the most commonly used letters (A, O, E, U, I, D, H, T, N, and S) on the middle row (1,3,4). His intent was to increase the comfort and speed of typists. Although the design seems more efficient, Dvorak keyboards haven’t produced the increased speeds their inventor had hoped for (4,5).

References


**Editing services**

The scientific editors in the Research Medical Library help MD Anderson faculty and trainees get published and get funded. We provide a wide range of editorial, educational, and publishing services, free of charge, to the MD Anderson community, including:

- editing grant proposals and research articles;
- providing one-on-one consultations with authors at any stage of the writing process;
- teaching workshops and giving lectures on writing research articles and grant proposals;
- teaching scientific English for non-native speakers;
- providing writing advice and support, including online writing advice.

For more information about our editing services and how to use them, please visit [Our Editing Services](#), or contact us at [RML-Editing@mdanderson.org](mailto:RML-Editing@mdanderson.org).

**Upcoming events for authors**

*Please see the [Research Medical Library website](#) for more information about educational courses, a schedule of upcoming events, and recordings of past classes.*

**Writing Persuasive R01 Proposals.** The Research Medical Library is offering an online course on writing an NIH R01 grant proposal. Over the course of three 1-hour modules, scientific editors will provide practical advice on writing the Specific Aims and Research Strategy of an R01 application.

Registration is required. To streamline and simplify the registration process, the three separate modules of this session are set up as a series; registration for one module will register you for all three. You can attend any or all modules. The series will be repeated every few months.

The modules are as follows:

- **Tuesday, February 8:** Specific Aims
- **Tuesday, February 15:** Significance & Innovation
- **Tuesday, February 22:** Approach

[REGISTER HERE](#)

*Registration is required through the Research Medical Library. Details: John McCool ([jhmccool@mdanderson.org](mailto:jhmccool@mdanderson.org)).*
New Self-Paced Course: Writing and Publishing Scientific Articles (WAPSA). Writing and Publishing Scientific Articles is now available as a self-paced course in Study@MDAnderson. This six-part course developed by our expert scientific editors will guide participants through each step of writing a research article. Modules include:

- Getting Started
- The Introduction Section
- The Methods and Results Sections
- The Discussion Section
- The Abstract and Title
- Writing Clearly and Cohesively

MD Anderson faculty, staff, and students can enroll in the course with their MD Anderson email address. Upon completion of all six modules, learners will receive a certification of completion.

Online Courses in Scientific English for Non-Native Speakers of English. The Research Medical Library offers two online courses for non-native speakers of English on the Study@MDAnderson platform. Both courses are self-study and self-paced, but students have access to an instructor (Dr. Mark Picus) for support and questions. For more information and to register, please click here.

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