How To Write Useful NSF Reviews (from Nina Amla)

We need your rating AND your reasoning. Please JUSTIFY your rating, don’t just say “bold and insightful” or “routine and unexciting.” Tell us why you think the proposal has these qualities. Please give examples. Support your claims with citations.

Program Directors (PDs) must justify their funding decisions to the Division Director and their declination decisions to the investigators (PIs). We respect and value your opinions, but “Joe Expert said so” is not enough reason to award or decline. PIs need to know why they aren’t funded and what to do better next time, or why they are funded and what you like most or think they should focus on.

Please include in every review, separately for Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts, each of: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Suggestions for Improvement. In very rare cases there may be no strengths or no weaknesses (but never none of either!). It may more frequently be true that you have no suggestions for improvement, but please give it some thought and try to provide some.

Please do NOT include “I am not an expert” or “I am not qualified” or similar phrases. You ARE an expert in the general area of the proposal, which is why you are being asked to provide reviews.

Please be POLITE, clear and unbiased in your reviews. The following phrases are not useful feedback: “this idea is like throwing the baby out with the bath water”, “the PI already has tons of papers on this useless topic” or “I can’t assign any meaning whatsoever to X”.

Please direct criticism towards the proposal and NOT the PI; for example “the proposal does not cite this important related work” would be received better than “the PI seems completely unaware of this important related work”.

Reviewer Ratings:

From best to worst, they are: E (Excellent), V (Very Good), G (Good), F (Fair), P (Poor). (You also have the option to choose two adjacent ratings, e.g., E/V, V/G, etc.).

1. An **E** indicates strong advocacy for funding the proposal, and your review will explain why this proposal is a high priority for funding.

2. A **V** is a Vote for the proposal, and the review will advocate for the proposal. Your review will report strengths which outweigh the weaknesses, with suggestions for improvement.

3. A **G** indicates you think the proposal is ok, but the advocacy of others will probably be necessary to make this proposal a candidate for funding. Try to make solid suggestions for improving the proposal. Proposals without ratings above G are unlikely to be recommended for funding.

4. An **F** rating indicates your opinion that the proposal should probably not be funded. Your review should identify what you liked about it but the weaknesses will
outweigh the strengths. Express weaknesses as suggestions for improvement when possible.

5. A P rating is for a proposal which you think is definitely a waste of money, and you should diplomatically explain the lack of merit/impact. You probably won’t have many suggestions for improvement, because you are stating that the proposal has little redeemable value.

Your review should justify, i.e., be consistent with, your rating. Proposals that get funded usually have some E and V ratings.