“Ancillary” Sections of Your NIH Application

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Partially based on “The Grant Application Writer’s Workbook”
by Stephen W. Russell and David C. Morrison

Importance of the Summary/Narrative

- Used by the CSR’s Division of Receipt & Referral for assignment of your proposal to an Institute/Program and Study Section (Sometimes even with a cover letter)
- It and your Specific Aims section are the only parts of your proposal the entire review panel is likely to read, not just assigned reviewers.
- Becomes public information once you’re proposal is funded.
Project Summary as Your “Elevator Speech”

- Should play the role of a primer – a basic, high-level introduction to your project
  - Just enough info to give a sense of what you’re talking about and desire to know more
  - Designed for knowledgeable non-experts
  - Designed not to overwhelm your audience with too much information – “a drinking fountain, not a fire hose.”
    - Elevator Pitch Essentials, by Chris O’Leary

Project Summary (Abstract) – NIH Instructions

“The Project Summary is meant to serve as a succinct and accurate description of the proposed work when separated from the application. State the application's broad, long-term objectives and specific aims, making reference to the health relatedness of the project (i.e., relevance to the mission of the agency).”
Project Summary (NIH – 2)

“Describe concisely the research design and rationale and techniques for achieving the stated goals. This section should be informative to other persons working in the same or related fields and insofar as possible understandable to a scientifically or technically literate reader. Avoid describing past accomplishments and the use of the first person.” (Maximum of 30 lines allowed)

Writing the Summary/Narrative (1)

- R&M: Write last, but not “as an afterthought”
- Avoid “self-plagiar”; don’t “cut and paste” from the Aims — paraphrase if possible so reviewers don’t get déjà vu in Section 2
  - Vary word order, use thesaurus (carefully)
- Skilled grant-writers minimize, but don’t completely avoid use of the first person (but never “I”)
  - Aim 1 is to…
Writing the Summary/Narrative (2)

- Introduction should be no more than 25%
- Include central hypothesis/pressing need
- Aims should be numbered, so reviewers can pick them out readily
- Can usually only mention in broad terms the approaches used to achieve the Aims
- Payoff can usually be incorporated into the Project Narrative section

Project Narrative (Health Relevance)

“The second component of the Description is Relevance. Using no more than two or three sentences, describe the relevance of this research to public health. In this section be succinct, and use plain language that can be understood by a general, lay audience.”

- Often called the “lay abstract”
- Can partially ease the burden of establishing health-relatedness in your main abstract
- Focus on long-term benefits to public health
Project Narrative (2)

- Can “cheat” on length a bit by using one compound sentence (best with semicolon)
- R&M: Is a lay-language condensed paraphrase from “payoff paragraph” of Aims section and the Significance and Innovation subsections of your Research Strategy section.
- Highlight your long-term goal, like your “elevator speech”

A Compelling Title

- Emphasize importance (payoff) of your work, as well as its novelty
  - But, avoid implying project is more clinical than it really is
- Must also accurately reflect project’s topic
- Limit length (NIH: 81 characters & spaces)
- Avoid use of non-standard abbreviations
- Develop a “short list” of 6-10; try them out on colleagues
  - May also need to provide Summary/Narrative
Cover Letter Basics

- Application Title
- FOA number (even if “parent” FOA”
- Assignment requests (w brief justification):
  - Institute/Center (and Program if applicable)
  - Scientific Review Group (“Study Section”
- Other PI(s) if Multiple-PI
- Disciplines involved, if multi-disciplinary
- List of competitors who shouldn’t review

Cover Letter Basics (2)

- Approver if >500k/yr, explanation if late
- NIH recommends one request per line; I’d follow each with its explanatory paragraph, rather than lumping them at the end as the PHS 398 Instructions suggest.
Cover Letter Basics (3)

Please assign this application to the following:

Institutes/Centers
National Cancer Institute – NCI, primary
National Institute for Dental and Craniofacial Research – NIDCR, secondary

Scientific Review Groups
Molecular Oncogenesis Study Section – MONC
Cancer Etiology Study Section – CE

Please do not assign this application to the following:

Scientific Review Groups
Cancer Genetics Study Section – CG