

Grant review guide: top 6 ways to annoy a grant reviewer

When submitting a grant proposal, our motivation is to have the reviewer on “our side” – enthusiastic and positive about our project. In the grant review context, this is largely so that reviewers will write a positive review. This is done to increase the chance that the grant is retained for funding by the funding agency. Knowing that reviewers have lots of grant applications to cover, and that time is always of the essence, we want to ease the reading and “help” the reviewer get a positive impression. Once the basic tips for [grant writing](#) are in place, we’ll want to ensure we avoid annoying the reviewers during the grant review process. To minimize such occurrences, we have collected the top 6 most annoying practices in grant writing. We highly advise applicants to avoid the following points.

#1 Disregarding the template and formatting instructions

Most grants provide a template with clear formatting instructions. As a first rule of thumb, it is important to strictly adhere to all template instructions and guidelines. This shows the reviewers you have paid attention, read, and respected the instructions.

Also, the template often refers to strict page limits (either for specific sections or to the application as a whole). This is so that all applicants have an equal opportunity to present their project. Clearly, our recommendation is to follow this limit. But even more so, we recommend avoiding “tricks” to bypass it.

For example – narrow fonts.

Though using narrow fonts will enable adding roughly 20% more text under the page limit, this is a way to bend the rules and get an unfair competitive advantage over applicants that use regular fonts. Reviewers have a keen eye for such attempts, and they generally do not respond well to them.

Speaking of fonts – avoid using a mixture of font styles in the text. Additionally, refrain from using font size smaller than allowed. Beyond the “strict” instructions, note that some of the reviewers may have a hard time reading very small fonts. Being unable to read the actual text is a sure way to successfully annoy the grant reviewer.

#2 – Opening the application with a long background text

Despite the common practice of opening the proposal with a comprehensive background review, it is not recommended here. Keep in mind that the reviewers are experts in the given field of research. Their biggest interest is to learn what the project at hand is about. They adamantly prefer this information appears as soon as possible. In most cases, experienced reviewers with prior relevant knowledge in this field will find a large part of a comprehensive background text trivial. Truth be told, many may even skip reading it entirely (and may miss important information that you do need them to read). Therefore, the motivation is to “get to the point” as soon as possible, just as the reviewers expect. We recommend including the minimal background needed for understanding your project in no more than half a page. Expecting the reviewers to read several pages of background text before getting to what the project aims to achieve is a sure way to dampen their enthusiasm and curiosity at best, or annoy them at worst. Additional background can be provided later in the text in relevant sections of the grant application.

#3 – Various text sources

Various text sources is the polite way of saying “copy & paste”. It is typical that applicants use text from various sources when drafting the full research proposal. These sources can be text they wrote in the past as part of previous proposals or papers. Otherwise, it can be text written by colleagues, partners or any other available sources. Including several sources within one application often results in a kind of “patch work” of texts, which do not use a single unified voice and – without proper editing and attention – can add up to an incoherent message. The reviewers may find this quite negative as it conveys that not much time was invested in the preparation of this grant proposal. From experience, researchers can easily miss incoherent messages since they read their text so frequently. On the contrary, reviewers who read it only once surely will not miss this. As you write, take periodical breaks from the text that can help to see it in a new light, or even better, ask someone else who has never read it before to do a round of critical reading. [Additional writing tips](#) can be included, refer to more this our dedicated post.

#4 – Redundancies and repetition in the text

Essentially, the research proposal should tell an exciting story to the reviewers during the grant review. In order to tell an exciting story, we should ensure clear and smooth text flow. Repeating texts, either by using identical text or rephrasing messages already stated, is one of the easiest ways to annoy the reviewers. Many times, this is a result of using various text sources, but it is not limited to that. Make sure to have as little repetitions and redundancies in the text as possible.

#5 – Lack of consistency in the project concept AKA “surprises” during the grant review

Another bad practice is having a “surprise” in the text – the sudden emergence of a new concept / item / element / aspect / feature / solution that was not mentioned earlier in the text and the logic behind its emergence is unclear. Such an occurrence usually drives reviewers to give the researcher the benefit of the doubt and go back in the text to see whether they’ve missed something important. However, once they realize they didn’t miss anything, benefit of the doubt will be replaced by additional annoyances. “Surprises” in the text reflect an inconsistent and incoherent presentation of the project proposal. This can happen when the project’s concept was revised or changed along the way, but the text was not reviewed fully to align with the change (recall the desired unified single voice). It can also be a result of various text sources or writers and lack of harmonization. This can badly affect the reviewers’ feedback as essentially it reflects that the concept was not properly crystallized and/or that not enough effort was given to the proposal writing.

#6 – Mixing the “What” and the “How

When telling the story of your proposed project, it is imperative to clearly distinguish between “what your project is about” and “how you are going to achieve the project goals”. The former refers to the conceptual presentation of the project, while the latter refers to the methodology, work plan and any other operational aspects. While both are important, reviewers are typically interested to learn first about the “what” before getting deep into the details of the “how”. Additionally, they expect to have a good conceptual overview of the project rather early in the text and not to learn completely new conceptual details at an advanced stage of the reading. Lack of distinction between these two types of information can also result in repetitive and redundant text (i.e. describing the concept again together with the work plan). Therefore, clearly defining the “what” and the “how” can positively influence the reviewer during the grant review. Specifically for Horizon 2020

applicants, we advise to refer as well to our dedicated post which [dives deep into the inner logic of the Horizon 2020 grant](#).

Conclusion – Apply above tips and insights and avoid annoying the reviewer during the grant review process

When applying for funding, and even more so to competitive funding, it is crucial that all odds are in your favor. Allocating time and effort to writing a good project proposal and making it easy for the reviewers to read and understand it, as well as showing the reviewers you've paid attention to instructions, will help them be positive about your project application. When the reviewers are on your side – you are already a few steps closer to your goal.