

Section 2.8

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**Learning from Failure:  
Resubmitting Your Rejected Proposal**

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*Encouragement from a federal grant program office, with tips for turning rejections into winning proposals.*

Few applicants are fortunate enough to receive grants from a competitive program on their first try. Putting together an initial application can be difficult and frustrating. It is usually done under extreme time pressure, frequently by a group of people working together for the first time, who are often in the dark about the practices and priorities of a particular funding agency. Procedures that have been successful in one program may not be well received in another.

Because writing an original proposal is such a large investment and offers such a valuable learning experience, probably the single most important thing a grant applicant can do is profit from an unsuccessful application. So if you have had a proposal rejected (and what successful proposal writer do you know who hasn't?), don't become discouraged. View the experience as an *opportunity* to get guidance, which will help you to "win" in future competitions. Consider the first application as Step One in your plan to receive funding for a valuable project.

**From No. 139 to No. 3**

Examples of previously rejected proposals that have been submitted and funded are quite common. One such proposal was submitted in 1980 to a grant program within the U.S. Department of Education. It was ranked 139. Since only 19 proposals were funded that year, this proposal was far out of the running.

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After this failure, the proposed project director and a member of his staff asked for copies of the proposal reviews and then requested a meeting with the grants officer. This meeting, which took less than two hours, provided the applicants with detailed information on the strengths and weaknesses of their proposal; allowed for the exchange of ideas and suggestions for future proposals; and gave the applicants a better understanding of the goals and procedures of the grant program to which they were applying. It also enabled them to see successful grant proposals (which are public information) and to learn what a good proposal looks like.

As a result of this review, the applicants rewrote their proposal and resubmitted it in 1981. The government project officer who had conducted the proposal briefing was not involved in the evaluation of this resubmission. Four independent reviewers who read this proposal were not aware that it was a resubmission. These reviewers were unanimous in recommending the revised proposal for funding; they ranked it third out of the 186 proposals submitted.

In the revised proposal *the basic content and thrust of the project was unchanged and yet the results were completely different from the initial submission*. During my service as a federal program officer, I have seen just this type of reversal occur many times. It can happen to you.

## Capitalizing on Defeat

Resubmitting a previously rejected proposal is far less work than writing the original proposal. You have already done most of the work, you have had time since the first submission to think about the proposal, and, most important, you can get the results of the evaluation to use as guidance in rewriting your proposal.

How, specifically, *do* you capitalize on defeat? The purpose of this article is to describe the process you may follow to turn your rejected proposal into a winning application. The procedures that are described are essentially those of the U.S. Department of Education, but similar principles apply to most grant programs.

### Ask for the Reviews

When your proposal is rejected, you will usually receive a form letter that provides little specific information on your individual proposal. However, it does contain one piece of valuable information: the name, address, and phone number of the responsible person to contact for a detailed review. The first step is to write and request copies of the reviews of your proposal. You are entitled to this information under government law.

As a result of your request, you should receive copies of the reviewers' scores and comments (with the reviewers' names deleted) as well as the average score and ranking of your proposal. In many federal grant programs, reviewers are asked to assign "points" to each of several pre-specified proposal evaluation criteria. Space on the review form is also included for general comments.

You may wish to read the comments to get an overall impression and then set them aside for later analysis. The scores alone will provide a useful profile of the strengths and weaknesses of your proposal. For example, if there were four reviewers and seven sets of criteria, the profile might look like that depicted in Table I.

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Table I. Evaluation Profile Summary

Criteria	Reviewer scores			
	1	2	3	4
1. Plan of operation (25 points)	22	20	20	15
2. Key personnel (20 points)	15	11	9	6
3. Budget and cost effectiveness (15 points)	12	10	8	8
4. Evaluation (5 points)	5	4	4	3
5. Adequacy of resources (10 points)	10	9	9	8
6. Need (20 points)	18	16	14	10
7. Dissemination (5 points)	5	4	4	3
Total	87	74	68	53

**Average Score 70.5**

### Interpret the Reviews

This is a fairly typical profile and illustrates several problems. There is a large discrepancy between the top scorer and the low scorer. This may merely be the tendency of some reviewers to be generous or stingy with their scoring. If so, this need not be a concern since the scores are usually normalized and the ranking of the proposal is based on the  $Z$ -scores (i.e., statistically "normalized" scores) rather than the raw scores. However, there is the "luck of the draw" to consider also. A reviewer may score a proposal low because he doesn't understand it or has some conscious or unconscious bias against the proposal. If this appears to be the case, his comments are best ignored. Good grant program officials evaluate their reviewers to eliminate bad reviewers, but there is a constant turnover and unfair reviews do happen. You might as well curse, or accept, your fate (depending on your temperament) and move on to the reviews that you can do something about.

The next step in examining a review profile is to look for specific areas of strengths and weaknesses. In the sample profile, it is obvious that "Evaluations," "Resources," and

“Dissemination” were strong areas and do not need revision.

“Key Personnel” had a relatively low score and should be looked at carefully. Frequently, low scores for personnel are not because the personnel are unqualified. They may be experts in their particular field but without experience in the type of activities proposed. For example, the proposed project director may have no administrative experience; the project focuses on microcomputers or some form of media and none of the key staff have a substantial background in this area; or the time commitment of key personnel is unrealistic.

“Budget” and “Plan of Operation” were also areas of the sample profile that leave room for improvement. Usually, low scores here indicate that the proposal was not specific enough. The applicant may have known how he planned to operate and what the budget details and justifications were—but the reviewers obviously didn’t.

“Need” received variable scores on the sample profile but is the area that should be examined most closely. Although all seven criteria should be scored independently, the need is a central factor that probably influences readers in scoring the other criteria. Theoretically, a project could be perfect in all other areas except need and score over 80 points. The need could be negligible or the results could have little potential or impact beyond the immediate project. In actual practice a project rarely receives high scores if the need is perceived as low. If a proposal receives low or variable scores on need, the applicant has not convinced the reviewers that this project should be funded and this will influence the reviewers’ other scores.

We are now at the stage where we can make a more qualitative appraisal by reading the comments of the reviewers. Comments that are common to more than one reviewer should be attended to first, since they are probably valid. Different reviewers may see different things and sometimes these may be in direct opposition. It is best to consider each negative comment, even if you feel it is incorrect. If a reviewer did not notice that the resume of one of the key

personnel included media experience and scored low for that reason, be sure to point up that

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experience in your revision. Reviewers are reading a large number of proposals in a comparatively short time. It definitely helps to identify the sections in your proposal according to the criteria so the reviewer will not miss something because it is not where he expects it to be.

### **Call on the Funding Agency for Help**

You now have all the information you can use from the reviews but there are still a few more things you can do. You can call the grants officer and discuss the proposal and comments with her. She may be able to provide some additional information from staff comments or expand on the comments made by the reviewers. She may also be able to make some suggestions to improve your proposal or provide you with some directions or priorities the agency is considering for the next grant cycle. Finally, you can make an appointment to come to the funding agency to talk with the people who work with the program. While you are there, you can look at some of the proposals that were funded during the last grant cycle. These can serve as excellent models of successful grantsmanship.

### **Consider That...**

The most common faults of rejections are probably faults in writing or organizing the proposal rather than poor content.

Actually, one of the first things you should do *before* submitting any proposal (new or revised) is to understand the funding agency’s priorities, criteria, and evaluation procedures. (This information is usually published, but it is surprising to see it ignored so frequently, and applicants lose evaluation points needlessly.)

Then, you must communicate as clearly and concisely as possible what you want to do, how you plan to do it, and why it should be done. It will also help if you organize your proposal with the evaluation criteria as headings or sections

that can be readily found by the reader. A reviewer can't help by be impressed by a concise, well-organized proposal. The proposal itself is a sample of the quality of work that the applicant can do.

Since many people typically contribute to the proposal, it is difficult to maintain a single

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focus or style in the proposal. It is often useful to hire an editor or assign one person to be responsible for the total proposal. Sometimes it helps to have a "dry run" of the evaluation by asking a colleague to review the document before submitting it. (Give your colleague the evaluation criteria and points when you do this.)

### **Be Realistic**

After you have completed your review of the original proposal evaluation results, it is time to take a realistic look at the chances for future funding. Perhaps you have targeted the

wrong agency or program, maybe you are out of step with the times, or you simply may not be competitive with other applicants with greater resources. If your review leads you to any of these conclusions, it would be useful to call the government grants officer again, to discuss your analysis with her frankly. Depending on your and her diagnosis, you might want to redirect your energies to other projects or funding sources.

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*There is a time to fold your tent, but don't do it until you have given your original proposal a fair chance to succeed.*

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Before giving up, however, remember: *The most common causes of rejections are probably faults in writing or organizing the proposal rather than poor content.* You, and probably many others, have invested a great deal of energy and talent in planning a worthwhile project to address an important need. There is a time to fold your tent, but don't do it until you have given your original proposal a fair chance to succeed.