U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
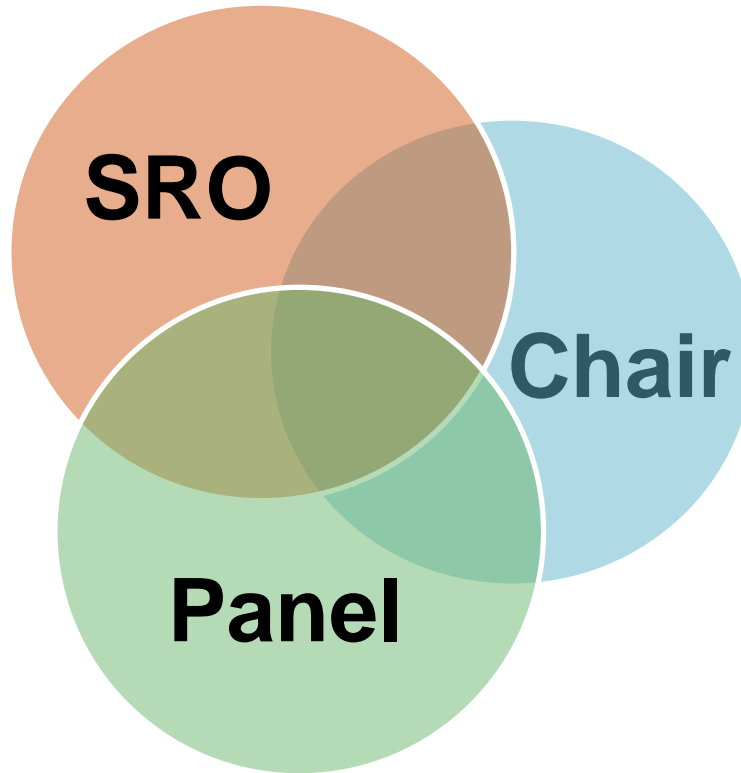
NIH Center for Scientific Review

Preparing to Chair

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Know the Roles

- Serves as DFO
- Is the review policy & practice expert
- Selects and trains reviewers
- Writes the resumes
- Teams with Chair to implement policies and promote good practices

- Leads discussion
- Facilitates discussion
- Summarizes discussion
- Teams with SRO to implement policies and promote good practices

SRO

Chair

Panel

- Provides detailed critiques
- Engages in discussion
- Votes

Why discuss at all?

- **Review outcomes are committee decisions. Everyone votes.**
  - every vote should reflect an informed, independent judgment.

- Oral critiques: should **explain to the panel** the basis for their scores

- Discussions allow for
  - Assigned reviewers to explore/explain their differences
  - Clarification
  - Hearing different perspectives
  - Filling in gaps
  - Score calibration

- The process should always inform panel members about the main strengths and weaknesses of each proposal.

- Clarity, not consensus, is the goal.

Get key questions answered

When a discussion concludes you (and the panel) should have an understanding of:

1. How important is the proposed research?
2. How rigorous and feasible is the approach?
3. Is the team well suited to the science and are the needed resources available?

And know which considerations are driving the assigned reviewers' scores.

Evaluate *Significance*

- Reviewers confuse public health need with scientific importance.

- Consider the likely value of the knowledge to be gained

- *"How will successful completion of the aims change the concepts, methods, technologies, treatments, services, or preventative interventions that drive this field?"*

- Intellectually challenging; easier to dissect the methodology

- Emotionally challenging; hard to say that the idea is bad, but it's unfair not to when that's so.

- **Requires breadth of perspective**—an important role of the panel

Set the tone

Lively, respectful engagement of the entire panel enables good discussions (and keeps things interesting)

- Maintain a collegial atmosphere where every voice matters
- Encourage disagreement, Don't tolerate disrespect.
- Beware of differences in power--Expect good manners
- Clarity, rather than consensus. Nobody has to win, nobody has to concede.
- Be neutral, be fair and cutoff discussions that are repetitive or nonproductive.
- Intervene if you hear bias. Model good critiques.
- Limit your "reviewer" comments while chairing

Listen for bias

Bias is most apparent in comments on investigators and environment.

- Big names may get a pass; unknowns may get extra scrutiny
- Evaluations should be specific and pertinent to the proposed science.
- Discourage general remarks on reputation. E.g. "This application comes from a world-renowned expert….leading authority….thought leader….
- Discourage empty comments on environment: "It's from Stanford so obviously the environment is fabulous…"

How to summarize

Summaries should focus the panel's attention on the score driving points.

- Good summaries are concise (a couple of minutes)

- **Chair's notes are for the chair, not the SRO.** SROs keep their own notes and independently prepare summaries. (The resume of discussion does not derive from the chair's summary)

DO
- Summarize score driving strengths and weaknesses
- Address "Significance"
- Note areas of consensus and points of difference
- Be balanced and fair

DON'T
- Spend more than a sentence describing the grant
- List every little point made
- Summarize the written critiques

Read applications and critiques in advance?

- CSR does not expect or recommend that you read every application, or every set of abstracts and aims. Ditto for critiques

- Read enough to be comfortable with what will be discussed. The SRO may occasionally suggest you read a critique/set of critiques.

- Assigned reviewers should be explaining the basis for their score to the panel. If you don't understand it, others likely don't, either.

Keeping on Time

Good time management is a matter of fairness

- Problems with time often reflect more fundamental problems, e.g.
  - Critiques that are overly descriptive, excessively detailed,
  - A focus on methodological minutiae
  - Repetitive or circular discussions
  - A failure to focus on what matters

- Well presented critiques and good discussions cover a lot of ground in 15 minutes.

- Be flexible, but keep on track

- Set expectations and stick to them.

Communicate with your SRO!
Before, during and after the meeting

At the premeeting meeting

- Process: Anything need attention? e.g. score compression, time management
- Policy/Practice: Anything new?
- People: ESA, tech support, new reviewers, ECRs
- Technology: how will you communicate in the meeting. What's your backup plan?

After the meeting

- Debrief: What went well, what didn't?
- Feedback: on ad hoc reviewers to SRO
- Plan ahead: Are there items that need attention going forward?

To be effective

1. Guide discussions to answer key questions

2. Set the tone; lead by example, protect with intervention

3. Stick to criteria

4. Keep it on time (don't be a slave to time)

5. Communicate with the SRO

And don't make it harder than it needs to be

1. Clear the deck, no multi-tasking

2. Use a cheat sheet

3. Have your in-meeting technology plan (and backup plan) set.

Thanks for your service!

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