CommonRise COLLECTIVE

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# Why a Grant Review Matters (and How Ours Works)

A free guide from CommonRise Grants · For nonprofits, schools, small businesses, grant writers and foundations

## A good idea isn't enough

Grant reviewers don't fund the best idea. They score the application in front of them, one criterion at a time, using the sheet the funder gave them. A strong project with a missing section, an unsupported need statement or a budget that doesn't match the story loses points, and sometimes never gets read.

A grant review reads your proposal the way a reviewer will, before you submit, while you can still fix it.

## How grant reviewers actually score

- **The scoring sheet is in the RFP.** Federal funding notices are required to describe every review criterion and, when they differ in importance, how much each is worth. Many state, local and foundation RFPs do the same.
- **Points by criterion.** A typical notice might give Need 20 points, Approach 30, Evaluation 10, Impact 10, Capacity 20 and Budget 10.
- **Strengths and weaknesses.** Reviewers write strengths and weaknesses for each criterion, and the score has to match the comments. One serious weakness can outweigh several small strengths.
- **The whole application counts.** If your narrative says your staff have years of experience but the resumes don't show it, that's a weakness.
- **Panels.** Federal panels are often three reviewers and a chairperson. Many agencies send applicants a summary with the average score and the reviewers' comments.

## The 10 areas we review

| Area | What reviewers look for | Why it matters |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Eligibility and compliance** | You're eligible; every required section, form and attachment is there; page limits and formatting are followed | Applications that miss the rules can be rejected before anyone reads them |

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| **2. Need** | A clearly defined population and a problem shown with recent, local, sourced data | If the need isn't proven, nothing else matters |
| **3. Goals and objectives** | Measurable, dated objectives tied to the need, with real outcomes, not just counts | Vague goals make the project impossible to judge |
| **4. Approach and design** | Who does what, when and how; every required element covered; a clear logic from need to results | Usually the biggest share of points |
| **5. Evidence and innovation** | Practices backed by evidence, adapted to your community | Funders want approaches that are likely to work |
| **6. Capacity and partners** | Experience, qualified staff, enough time, committed partners, sound systems | Funders need to trust you can deliver |
| **7. Management and work plan** | Milestones, responsibilities, risks and reporting | Shows the project will run on time and on budget |
| **8. Evaluation** | Measures for each objective, how data is collected and by whom | Often its own scored criterion |
| **9. Budget** | Every cost explained, reasonable and matching the narrative | Mismatches cost points and trust |
| **10. Impact and sustainability** | Benefit beyond the grant and a plan to keep going | Funders want lasting results |

Across every area we also check writing and alignment: does each section answer the exact question, use the funder's own headings and words, and keep the facts the same everywhere?

## Where our review model comes from

We built it from how public funders tell their reviewers to score: the federal rules for funding notices, the Department of Education's standard selection criteria, HRSA's six standard review criteria, HHS review guidance on strengths and weaknesses, NIH's review framework and NSF's merit criteria. Then we adjust it to each RFP.

## How a CommonRise Grant Review works

- **1.** You upload the RFP. We build a review model for that exact funding opportunity: its criteria, its points and the specific things it asks for.
- **2.** You upload your proposal. It doesn't matter who wrote it.
- **3.** We test the proposal against that model. Three independent reviews, reconciled into one, like a review panel.
- **4.** You get a report: your score by criterion, strengths and weaknesses, and a ranked list of fixes

showing where each change goes and how many points are at stake.

- **5.** You decide what to change. Fix it yourself and re-score, add suggested rewrites, or ask us for an expert review.

## Before you submit: 10 questions to ask yourself

- **1.** Did I follow every rule in the RFP: sections, page limits, attachments, deadline?
- **2.** Is my need shown with recent, local numbers that name their source?
- **3.** Can someone measure every objective?
- **4.** Does every required program element have a clear answer?
- **5.** Do my staff resumes and partner letters back up what the narrative says?
- **6.** Is there a timeline with milestones and owners?
- **7.** Does every objective have a way to measure it?
- **8.** Does every budget line match something in the narrative?
- **9.** Did I explain what happens after the grant ends?
- **10.** Did I use the funder's own headings and words?

**If you answered "not sure" to any of these, a grant review is worth it.**

CommonRise Collective and/or its affiliates provide education and information to help you prepare your own applications. A review score shows how fully a proposal covers what the funder said it will judge; it does not predict funding, and we never guarantee a grant. Start a Grant Review at grants.commonrise.co/grant-review.