A Former "Insider's" Take on Writing for the GEAR UP Peer Review

By Alex Chough – July 14, 2017

An article shining a light on the mysterious GEAR UP peer review process, with tips and recommendations for overcoming known barriers.

In theory, the peer review of GEAR UP grant proposals is an elegant process. Three deeply committed, highly experienced experts deliberate on the intricate details of your proposal and apply their wisdom to inform the selection of the very best. In practice, however, the peer review looks very different.

While it’s been some time since I’ve sat in on a U.S. Department of Education (ED) sponsored peer review, the general process and certainly the underlying dynamics are still relevant. So, here’s what I’ve learned over the years; I hope that it may be of some help as you review, edit, and finalize your application text.

Despite the careful orchestration, oversight, and training that ED (or any agency for that matter) provides for the peer review, there are limited ways to overcome the reality that there are basic human dynamics in play. One reason why it’s good to gain some experience as a reviewer, is that you gain insights into the harsh reality of the process and learn ways to mitigate against human error, reviewer fatigue, and the overall pace of the review process.

Let’s begin with a reality check. A grant peer review is nothing like a peer review for a journal article. Your readers will not have weeks to read carefully, reflect deeply, and discuss endlessly. A grant peer review has the toughest elements of both a sprint and a marathon: it is fast, fatiguing, and long.

As such it should come as no surprise that “chance” (or some would say, “luck”) plays a role in how well you score. Is your application the first to be read by a panel, or the last? Does your panel have three people who have respect and genuine affection for one another, or is a divisive one? Is the name of your project just similar enough to another random proposal, that readers confuse one for the other? These are just a few examples of the human factors that are simply out of your control.

Despite the peer reviewers’ best intentions and the support structure they receive, at some point the process takes over. Reviewers are expected to read way too many pages of dry, data-driven text; apply judgement in coherent, consistent, and transparent ways; provide checks and balances through negotiations; provide meaningful and insightful written comments; and do it all within a remarkably short window of time given the sheer volume of their review. When I say “the process takes over,” what I mean is that at some point, there is a tipping point when the instinct to be a careful and thoughtful reviewer begins to give way to the basic desire to simply go home.

Here’s how I’d describe the typical reader: smart; well-intended; extremely tired; a little cranky that she can’t quickly find what she’s looking for in your proposal; growing increasingly concerned about all the work they’re missing at their day job; and eventually, ready for the peer review to be over with.

Now I don’t mean to portray reviewers poorly as people. To the contrary, they are good people taking on a very tough and thankless job. Your responsibility as an applicant is to make their job as easy as possible. Now that you have a sense of their context, here are some ways you can align to their needs as you review your text and finalize your application.

- **Do not assume your reviewers are experts on GEAR UP.** ED casts a very wide net to secure enough qualified reviewers to staff the process, so their pool may be much wider than GEAR UP experts. In some cases, their exposure to GEAR UP will be limited to the training they receive from ED. Further, given that in any typical year there are more peer review panels than GEAR UP ED staff, they need to recruit other ED program officers from across the agency to help oversee these panels. They may or may not be GEAR UP experts either. Keep this in mind as you review your text.

- **Focus like a laser on the selection criteria.** Peer reviewers are trained to judge your proposal based entirely on the selection criteria. They cannot deduct or give you points for any reason that is not reasonably attributable to the selection criteria. As you review your text, if a sentence or paragraph does nothing to help you earn points relative to the selection criteria or enhance the confidence a reader has in your proposal, ask yourself: what is this for?

- **Don’t give away points.** First and foremost, commit to not senselessly giving away points by omitting information required by the criteria. Reviewers are trained several different ways, but it’s quite common for them to assume you’re starting each selection criterion with a perfect score, then they make deductions along the way. They use their judgment here, so obviously, quality matters. However, the most maddening point deduction is for information that the reader cannot find easily or at all. Create a section criteria rubric and if during your review, you can’t easily find all the stated dimensions of the selection criterion in the proposal, you’re at risk of needlessly giving away points. Fix that immediately.

- **Write for recall.** Since your application will be one of many being read, make it easy on the reader during their review and in the subsequent panel discussion. Each reviewer will independently read, score, and provide written feedback on your proposal. They will eventually discuss it, but it will not be immediately following their read—it could be days, or it could be longer. As such, do some simple things to help a tired reader score and prepare for those panel conversations. If you are referring to different sections of the proposal to link ideas, cite the page number. If you have initiatives that are important and will be cited frequently, give them a memorable name so they remember it. Be cognizant of the little things that help readers avoid the painful search for information and make it easy for them to remember why they loved your proposal.

- **Remember, there are checks and balances, but they’re not perfect.** The panel of reviewers who scored your application will come together at some point to justify their scores, correct one another if something was missed, and to come to agreement on weaknesses. In addition, the scores and comments will be reviewed by ED staff to ensure consistency and minimize anomalies (i.e. an outlier score or contradictory comment). But the process is far from perfect. The focus on weaknesses is very important in the process. If there’s a wide variance in scores for any criterion, they will need to discuss it and they’ll want to close the gap, but they aren’t necessarily required to. It’s not uncommon for some negotiations to come into play— “I’ll go up one point, if you go down two points.” The key takeaways? If two of the readers have missed an important line of text, you’re in trouble. If one reviewer missed an important line of text that the others saw, you’re likely fine; they’ll be outnumbered and they can modify the outlying score. This is why you’ll want to...
• Don’t underestimate the management plan and key personnel. Historically, when GEAR UP applicants get their scores back from the review there’s always one area of the proposal that elicits more outrage than others. In my experience, GEAR UP proposals are especially susceptible to losing points in the Quality of Personnel and Quality of the Management Plan sections. I suspect it is related to two factors. The first is that not all the readers are GEAR UP experts, so for them, understanding how complex K12-higher education collaborations are managed isn’t always apparent. The second is that given the tight page limits, many applicants tend to be especially brief here, assuming that the reader can infer key insights. Under the wrong conditions, this obviously creates a vicious cycle. Just keep this frequent misstep in mind as you balance your space allocation.

• Keep the page limitations in perspective. Speaking of space, yes, the double spacing of tables, charts, and graphs is an exceptionally challenging element introduced in the 2017 competition. We dislike it as much as you do. At the risk of sounding insensitive, let me urge you to keep a little perspective here as there are a few important things to note. First, it’s not your application that is being singled out, it’s all of them. Everyone is going to be hampered by it, but this certainly favors experienced GEAR UP applicants over novice applicants. Will it be harder to earn your points? Yes. Will it make it harder for you to win an award? Probably not. The reason I believe this is that since the requirement is global, the downstream effects are likely to be global too. If anything, we’ll see the average winning score go down by some extent, but in the end, that does not matter. There is no hard and fast score that gets you funded—it’s your relative rank from the top of the funding slate (applicants are ranked from highest to lowest score) that matters. They fund down from the top of the slate until they run out of money. As an example, if everyone’s score drops by an average of three points because of the change, the rank order slate is in all actuality, not that different. Again, I’m not saying this to be insensitive to your challenge, I just want you to know that your worst fears may not be realized. (A prediction: we will see the longest budget narratives in the history of the GEAR UP program.)

• Don’t ignore the abstract. I know this may sound absurd, but the abstract has more use than you think in the peer review. It can be a great recall tool for your reviewers after they have forgotten what your proposal was all about. Be sure to be clearly state in the abstract on how many cohort and/or priority students you will be serving, how many middle and high schools you’ll be serving, and if you are proposing a 6- or 7-year grant. I know this sounds silly, but use the abstract (you get a full page!) to your advantage to remind them of your scope, core strategies, and state your expected impact relative to your most important objectives. Merely restating the legislative goals of the GEAR UP program in the abstract does not help you at all—focus on your uniqueness. If you’re obtuse or bland in your abstract, you’re giving your reviewers another reason to forget why they liked you.

• Simulate the review. So, if you have a draft that is 90% done, go ahead and find some critical friends (outside of contributors to the application development) and put them to work. Hand them your draft proposal, the selection criteria, and have them independently read, score, and provide written feedback on the proposal just like a real peer reviewer would do. If you have time, have them discuss their scores, feedback, and have them identify areas where they all saw weaknesses—let them do this without you. Then ask them to share their criticisms with you. A few additional notes: Be sure to empower your friends to be highly critical. You’re not looking for praise, you’re looking for areas to improve. It’s also okay if they only have a short window to do this—in fact, that’s better as it will mimic a real peer review. Just get the feedback back in time that you can do something with it before the deadline. Don’t forget to buy them a nice lunch when it’s over, so they remain your friends.

• Now that your final review has checked off the technical boxes, make a final edit to inspire confidence. Okay, you’ve hit all the selection criteria, you’ve minimized unnecessary complexity, and you’ve addressed any early weaknesses. Are you done? Not exactly. Make a final pass—and get some help if needed—to ensure that you’re maximizing every opportunity to inspire confidence in the reviewer that your plan is the best option for the problems you’ve described. This is an elusive quality, but one that indirectly affects all the selection criteria. Remember, this is not a graduate school paper, it’s a competition. It is your obligation to be as persuasive as you can be. Revisit your verbs. Tout your expertise. Brag about your accomplishments and outcomes. Put your best foot forward.