NHMRC PROJECT GRANT REBUTTAL GUIDE AND TIPS

westernsydney.edu.au/research/ors

THE REBUTTAL

A persuasive rebuttal can make the difference between being funded or not, so make every word count. Importantly, your rebuttal is presented by the Second Spokesperson (PS2) only and will be considered for no more than 8 minutes and usually less than that by the Peer Review Panel (PRP) so give the spokesperson the ammunition they need to support your application. Make it easy to digest so your spokesperson can convey a convincing and strong argument.

This guide contains advice for writing the rebuttal to the assessor’s comments for your NHMRC Project Grant. You will have 10 days (inclusive of weekends) to complete your Rebuttal from the time you receive the comments so we advise reading this quick guide.

BEFORE YOU START

A detailed guide to how the Grant Review Panel (GRP) reviews applications and the GRP processes are available at: http://www.uws.edu.au/research/ors.

We strongly advise that all Western Sydney University researchers read and understand the GRP process so you are able to craft a constructive rebuttal with all the necessary information for the Spokesperson to advocate on your behalf.

READING THE ASSESSORS’ COMMENTS

Read the Assessor Reports carefully. If the comments on the Assessor Reports are ‘snappy’ then put the Assessor Reports aside and read them again later. It is not uncommon to receive comments that are not in your favour so do not take these Assessor Reports personally.

To commence, immediately email the Assessor Reports to your CIs and AIs so they can arrange time aside to help you with the write up of your rebuttal (remember your CIs and AIs are very busy people like you as well so give them the respected time to read and process the Assessor Reports). Together, prepare a meeting, with your CIs and AIs, to compare notes on how to best respond and agree on a plan of attack to draft the response. We also advise to write the first draft ‘the way you feel’ then set it aside. By doing this, it will allow you to ‘vent’ and get it ‘out of your system’. Then prepare a well written, well thought supportive professional Rebuttal.
10 MISTAKES YOU NEVER REALISED YOU WERE MAKING WHEN WRITING A REBUTTAL

1. **Not completing a rebuttal:** This is a true fact. NHMRC has advised that in the 2014 round many applicants are not taking advantage of the Rebuttal process. Some researchers are not putting in a Rebuttal in which is extremely important if you want to rebut your application and any questions raised by the GRP.

2. **Do not attack the assessor or the system:** In the 2014 round, researchers have noticed that the Assessor’s Reports were ‘rather snappy’ than previous years. NHMRC have implemented re-education processes to improve this but there is no guarantee that this will stop. As Western Sydney University researchers we remember that two of the reports will be from external assessors (who will not see your rebuttal) and one of them is written by the panel member who is your Primary/First Spokes Person (PS1). Therefore, it is crucial that you project an air of confidence, professionalism and humility when writing your rebuttal. This means:

   - Do not use abusive or retaliative language
   - Do not question the competence of the assessors
   - Respond calmly and objectively
   - Provide evidence to back your assertions

3. **Beginning your Rebuttal by thanking the assessors:** Apart from the PS1 the assessors would not read your Rebuttal. You are provided with only 1 page to write your Rebuttal so thanking the assessor’s only wastes valuable space. An Assessor even said - ‘It is annoying!’- so do not do this.

4. **Beginning by summarising your grant application:** The PS1 and PS2 have already read your proposal so do not repeat it as you are wasting space. Try not to copy snippets of your application into the Rebuttal - you are again wasting valuable space. The time allocated for the GRP to review one application is 20 minutes maximum so use your space and time wisely so your PS1 and PS2 is only delivering the important points to the GRP.

5. **Using negative and not confident language:** Do not use words such as: Hope, wish, might, probably should not be used and shows a lack of confidence or weakness in your Rebuttal (Hopes and wishes might get you funded, but they probably won’t).

6. **Substantially redesigning the study:** Unless your project is a Clinical Trial project then the Rebuttal should not include information that indicates that you are redesigning your entire project. The GRP has already assessed your current submitted application and you will be assessed on that only. The PRP cannot re-evaluate a new study so focus on addressing the questions the External Assessors have raised. Do not introduce anything new unless it is pilot data, publications or references that will support your Rebuttal.
7. **Not using the NHMRC Project Grant Category Descriptors:** Throughout the GRP, the Chair constantly facilitates the group discussion by referencing how the project aligns with the NHMRC Project Grant Category Descriptors and re-confirms the scores from the GCP by persistently referring to the Category Descriptors. If your responses are not aligned with the Category Descriptors then your application will risk being scored in a lower category. (Category Descriptors: https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/grants/apply/funding_rules/2015/project_grants_funding_rules_2015_attachment_a_141215.pdf)

8. **Providing no or new updated results:** If you have new published pilot data or pilot data that is ‘on press’ and this supports questions raised by the External Assessors then add this in to make your Rebuttal convincing. Pilot data will strengthen your Rebuttal and will help justify to the GRP how feasible your project is. Provide references where needed to support contentions. *(Note: Feasibility is one of the components that are assessed in ‘Scientific Quality which is worth 50% of your total score).*

9. **Keeping your responses concise:** Keep positive comments and important features of your grant in the first 2-3 sentences. If you have to address technical issues, respond in lay terms so that it is accessible for all panel members.

10. **Justifying your PSP and direct costs poorly:** Respond to any major suggested cuts that may compromise ability to complete the grant. Clarify justification and workload as NHMRC matches the PSP level with the role. NHMRC has questioned the relevance of the PSP and if they are required. For instance, NHMRC has cut a PSP3 to a PSP2 justifying that the some roles of the PSP3 (Clinical Trial Coordinator) can be joined with the roles of the PSP2 (Clinical Trial Assistant).

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**STRUCTURING AND WRITING THE REBUTTAL**

How best to structure and write your rebuttal will depend on the number and kind of issues raised by the assessors and the style of writing that you, as a researcher, are most comfortable with. Whichever method you decide to use: ensure that your Rebuttal is written in the most simplest, concise and clearest way.

It is easy to run out of space when writing a Rebuttal if there are a lot of questions to address and/or there are fundamental criticisms of the study’s design, the project’s significance that will require considerable space to rebut properly. Below we have two (2) methods to write a Rebuttal.

**Option 1**

Respond to each matter in turn raised by Assessor 1, then each matter in turn raised by Assessor 2, and so on. You might arrange and number your responses like this. For example:
Dealing with over-lapping questions.
If Assessor 2, for example, asks a question you've already dealt with in your response to Assessor 1, quote Assessor 2's question and then simply cross-reference your earlier response (‘See 1.2’).

Option 2

**Topic Heading** (Mention the various issues raised) and then your (combined) response

**Example:**

**Data Collection (Topic Heading)**  
Assessors 1 and 2 raised questions about the data management strategies to be employed across the 5 years study. As in our previous trials, we will use a combination of electronic data capture tools and centralised data collection strategies to ensure data is systematically collected in real time... *(Your response)*

The advantage of this kind of structure, in addition to saving space, is that it gives you the opportunity to shape an *integrated proactive argument* rather than provide a series of *piecemeal reactive responses*. This is especially useful when you are confronted with fundamental criticisms that will undoubtedly disadvantage your proposal.

A disadvantage of this kind of structure is that by aggregating several related criticisms you may establish a more coherent argument *against* your project. It also means that the assessor will need to find the comments throughout the proposal.

A variation on Option 2 is to use the topic headings for the assessment criteria themselves. For example, if the assessors think the project for various reasons is lacking in ‘Team Quality and Capability’, you could write a combined response under the topic heading ‘Team Quality and Capability’.

Another variation is to use a combination of Options 1 and 2. You could use Option 1 for the straightforward, more technical responses; and Option 2 for any responses that demand the development of an argument or further backup with pilot data.
WHAT NEXT?
Depending on your style of work, always circulate your responses to your colleagues Co-investigators (CI’s and AI’s) and experienced but less emotionally involved colleagues before, during or after you have completed writing your rebuttal. Sharing your rebuttal with others allows you to ‘take your mind off it’, allows others to revise and provide constructive comments and allow the discussion of new ideas to prepare a stronger rebuttal.

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