

**BOARD OF SCIENTIFIC ADVISORS  
NCI LISTENS Q & AS**

**Based on most frequently asked questions from research community attending NCI  
Listens sessions at national meetings from 1997 to 2007.**

**PEER REVIEW**

- **Where can you find basic information about peer review?**

See [Grant Application Basics](#) and the [Peer Review Process](#) for information.

The Center for Scientific Review also provides an overview on the [Peer Review Process](#) including a video of a study section meeting. [Guidelines for Reviewers](#) provides important information on the review criteria for grant applications including guidelines for human subjects research and specific grant mechanisms.

- **How do you determine the best study section for your application?**

On the NIH [Center for Scientific Review](#) (CSR) Web site, go to [CSR Study Section Roster Index](#) to find descriptions of the research areas for each study section and the study section membership. This information can help you determine the appropriate study section. In many cases, there may be more than one study section suitable for your grant application. It is highly recommended that you contact your [NCI program director](#) or the study section [Scientific Review Officer](#) who can assist you in determining the best study section.

To request a specific study section and institute assignment, include the information in your [cover letter](#).

- **Is there a way to shorten the review process so that investigators can receive the review outcome and resubmit more rapidly?**

Beginning with the September/October 2007 study section meetings, [new investigators](#) now have the option of submitting a [resubmission/amended](#) R01 application for consecutive review cycles, saving four months. The [summary statements](#) for qualifying applications will have an explicit note indicating eligibility for next cycle submission. See [NOT-OD-07-083](#) for more information.

- **How does NIH ensure that peer review panels have the appropriate expertise and experience and how can I ensure that my application gets an appropriate review?**

Peer review is conducted by panels of reviewers with broad expertise. These panels may include some ad hoc review members with expertise in relevant areas of science. However, it is impossible to have experts in each grant application's specific research area on study sections that review up to 120 applications. If you feel the assigned study section does not have the appropriate expertise, contact the [Scientific Review Officer](#) (SRO) to discuss the general areas of expertise needed. You may also include this information in a [cover letter](#).

One of the [Enhancing Peer Review at NIH](#) recommendations that have recently been instituted is the clustering of new investigator and clinical applications in study sections.

- **What is being done to recruit senior and experienced peer reviewers?**

[Scientific Review Officers](#) strive to recruit senior and experienced peer reviewers whenever possible. The majority of reviewers serving on CSR study sections are successful peer reviewed investigators at the Associate Professor level or above. Training committees or ad hoc committees organized to review specific initiatives, such as [RFAs](#), may have junior investigators if the scientific area is a narrow research field and many of the senior experts have applied. A description of "[How Scientists are Selected for Study Section Service](#)" is provided on the CSR web site.

NIH is striving to recruit experienced reviewers and improve reviewer retention by providing reviewers more flexibility regarding their tour of duty, and by instituting a continuous R01 applications submission process for members of standing NIH study sections ([NOT-OD-08-026](#)) and reviewers with recent substantial service ([NOT-OD-09-155](#)). See the [Enhancing Peer Review at NIH](#) web site for more information on recommendations for recruiting the best reviewers.

- **How can participation in peer review be increased?**

To address this problem and others, the NIH Director called upon leaders from across the scientific community and NIH to join a trans-NIH effort to examine the two-level NIH peer review system with the goal of optimizing its efficiency and effectiveness. Information on their recommendations is available on the NIH web site, [Enhancing Peer Review](#). New policies include the expanded use of teleconferences and virtual reviews. Standing study section members are now offered the option of serving a four-year (three meetings a year) or six-year (two meetings a year) term.

In addition, NIH has implemented an alternate plan for submission and review of research grant applications from appointed members of chartered CSR study sections and reviewers with recent substantial service in order to recognize their outstanding service and to minimize disincentives to study section service. See [NOT-OD-08-026](#) for more information.

- **Summary statements do not clearly reflect the peer review discussion and review of resubmissions often focuses on new concerns rather than the previous critique.**

In summary statements that are scored, a summary of discussion is included prior to the individual reviewer critiques to reflect the peer review discussion at the study section meeting. For resubmitted (amended) applications, new reviewers in addition to previous reviewers are usually assigned. They are instructed to review whether previous concerns have been addressed as well as comment on any new concerns. Contact your [program director](#) to discuss how to best respond to your summary statement.

- **There is concern that innovation in research is not adequately emphasized in peer review.**

The NIH Common Fund (formerly Roadmap) has created new high risk research programs to encourage innovation such as the [NIH Director's Pioneer Award](#), [NIH Director's New](#)

[Innovator Award](#), [NIH Director's Early Independence Award](#), and the [Transformative R01 Program](#).

In addition, many of the recommendations of the NIH report on “Enhancing Peer Review at NIH” encourage reviewers to emphasize innovation rather than methodology in their reviews. See the NIH web site, [Enhancing Peer Review](#), for more information and a timeline for implementation.

- **How does the appeals process actually function?**

NIH has a formal process to resolve disagreements between applicants and NIH review committees and/or NIH staff concerning the referral (assignment) and review of applications. Note that disagreements are not necessarily grounds for appeal. The [NIH appeals policy and process](#) is described in the *NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts*.

Before beginning the appeals process, the applicant is strongly advised to speak with the NCI [program director](#) responsible for the application. The program director can explain the options and their consequences and is often in a position to help the applicant understand the study section's recommendation. Appeal letters should be submitted to the NCI [program director](#). NCI will make the appeal letter together with the staff recommendation available to the [National Cancer Advisory Board](#) for the second level of review.

- **Can administrative cuts be appealed? Is there a process for restoration of administrative cuts?**

Administrative cuts cannot be appealed. If you find that you are unable to perform the research included in your grant application due to substantial administrative cuts, contact your [program director](#). The work scope of your research grant may be renegotiated or an administrative supplement may be considered in unusual circumstances.