

Research Development & Grant Writing News

No Tweaking, No Nudging, No Band Aids, Please

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When researchers consider whether or not to resubmit a declined proposal, they often mistakenly assume that “tweaking” the original narrative in response to reviewers’ comments will make it competitive. However, in most cases, declined proposals are not likely next in line for funding if only sufficient money could be found to fund one more worthy project. While Band Aid solutions to declined proposals may take significantly less time for all involved in the resubmission, they amount to the least competitive resubmission strategy possible. Tweaking in response to rejection underestimates not only the amount of work required to salvage a declined proposal but also the degree of improvement over the original that will be required to achieve competitiveness.

For example, if the funding rate for any particular program, say at NSF, is 10%, then a declined proposal has been ranked among the 90% that were not funded. So, for every 100 proposals submitted to a program that funds 10% of applicants, your declined proposal puts you among the 90% of unfunded applicants. In this example, you have absolutely no way of knowing precisely where your proposal is ranked among those not funded. Was your declined proposal 11th or 100th in line for funding? Where exactly did your declined proposal fall along the number line from 11 to 100?

You might glean some information from the reviews that will give you confidence in making some **very general assumptions** about your proposal’s competitiveness, particularly at agencies that provide an overall numerical score as compared to agencies using a ranking system involving terms such as excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor, or some variant of these. Regardless, when a proposal is declined, the ambiguity and “noise” in the review system make it all but impossible to determine how close you actually came to being funded. It’s therefore prudent to assume that the further your declined proposal sits from “next in line for funding,” the less appropriate it is to apply such minor fixes as tweaking, nudging, and Band Aids in hopes of achieving a competitive metamorphosis. Magically turning a frog into a prince works in Brothers Grimm fairy tales and Disney movies, but not so well in research narratives.

Moreover, it is helpful to keep in mind that your likely competitors for the next program due date will include a significant number of the 90 percent of those whose proposals were also declined in the last competition. In this context, keep in mind the old adage about success being 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, or, as Thomas Edison said, “many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”

In proposal writing, not giving up most often means refusing the easy road of tweaks, nudges, and Band Aids in an attempt to save time and effort. Keep in mind that those who transform a declined proposal to a successful proposal in the next competition will likely be those who put in the hard work, or perspiration, of transforming the declined proposal into an essentially new proposal. After all, the goal is a metamorphosis of the declined proposal into a funded proposal, or transitioning a somewhat non-descript chrysalis sac (declined proposal) into a beautiful butterfly (funded proposal). **The most likely outcome of using tweaks, nudges,**

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and Band Aids on a declined proposal is nothing more than turning a previously declined proposal into a newly declined proposal.

If a compelling idea is disguised in a declined proposal, ***set it free by unshackling it from the original project narrative*** so that it might better flourish in a new project narrative that both addresses the reviewers' comments and reflects the growth of your research idea since the last submission. If a research idea has remained static over the year between annual due dates, then the new submission will lose its competitive edge. Successful proposals advance new ideas in the context of a disciplinary field that is also rapidly advancing. Tweaks, nudges, and Band Aids characterize static research rather than compelling research.

Moreover, the structure, logic, rationale, and arguments advanced in a declined proposal should be assumed insufficient for a new effort. After all, they were rejected by the reviewers in their original version. Unfortunately, proposals have the shelf life of refrigerated fish, degrading rapidly after the date of submission and soon becoming obsolete. A declined proposal requires a deep rethinking of the research ideas and how to best present them. ***That means starting anew.***