NHMRC Project Grants
Tips for writing rebuttals

A compelling and persuasive rebuttal can make the difference between being funded or not.

This guide contains advice and suggestions for writing the rebuttal (or applicant response) to the assessor comments on your Project Grant proposal. You will have up to 10 days to complete your rebuttal from the time you receive the assessor comments.

Please refer to http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/apply-funding/project-grants for information about:

- the dates when you are likely to receive the assessor comments and will be expected to complete your rebuttal
- how to upload your rebuttal
- how to give your RAO permission to submit your rebuttal to the NHMRC.

Information about how to format the rebuttal and how to name the rebuttal file will be given in the letter you receive with the assessor comments.

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1 Before you start

You may want to familiarise yourself with the Project Grants peer review process. Key points are:

- Once your rebuttal has been received, the primary and secondary spokespersons for your application will reconsider the research proposal in light of the assessors’ comments and your responses. They may then rescoring your application.
- The assessors’ comments and your rebuttal will also be made available to the other members of the Peer Review Panel (PRP).
- At the PRP meeting, one of the duties of the secondary spokesperson is to discuss the assessors’ comments and the adequacy of your response to them.

More information about the peer review process is available at: http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/grants/apply-funding/project-grants

2 Reading the assessors’ comments

- Make sure you identify every issue, large or small, raised by each assessor. You might want to log them in a separate document.
- Note where two or more assessors raise a similar issue. Such issues will obviously require serious attention.

3 Writing the rebuttal

3.1 Preliminaries

- If you found the assessors’ comments irritating or upsetting, don’t start writing your rebuttal yet. Sleep on it first.
- Bear in mind that you are not writing to the assessors themselves; your audience is the PRP. The single exception is the primary spokesperson, who is both an assessor and a member of the PRP; and there is no sure way of knowing which of the assessors that is...although everyone tries to guess.
- Your rebuttal should address the questions raised; it is not, according to the NHMRC, an opportunity to ‘propose changes to the project plan, methodology or team membership.’ On the other hand, if an assessor constructively suggests a modification or addition of a minor kind, might it not be worthwhile to acknowledge its value and incorporate it (‘This is an interesting idea which we will incorporate...’) People may have different views about this.

3.2 Do’s

- For each issue, clearly identify both the assessor and the question/comment to which you are responding. There’s nothing worse for the reader than having to trawl through the assessors’ reports to locate the issue being addressed. It will help the reader if you selectively quote the assessor’s words and/or paraphrase them to succinctly capture the essence of the issue. (See also Structuring your rebuttal below.)
- Respond to issues in proportion to their importance. If the issue is minor, write a brief response. If it’s major, allow enough space to respond to it adequately and convincingly. In general, if you write too much (‘too much’ is quite subjective of course), it can look like you’re being defensive.
- Answer the question/comment directly and clearly. Waffle is annoying, and wastes valuable space. Evasion, bluffing and other such tactics are usually very transparent.
- Be as impartial as you can. You will probably write a more persuasive response if you can see both sides of the question, so genuinely try to understand the assessor’s point of view, even if it irritates you.
• If an assessor’s criticism is unwarranted or without foundation, challenge it. But do so in a calm and rational way (‘This is not correct...’, ‘Contrary to the assessor’s claim, the literature shows that...’). Provide evidence to support your position, quoting from the literature or, in the case of preliminary data, from your application.

• If you quote from or refer back to your original application, provide a page number. If an assessor has overlooked something important in your original application, you don’t want the PRP to overlook it too. So make it quick and easy for readers to find what you’re referring to by providing the page number and perhaps even the heading of the relevant subsection.

• Consider concluding your rebuttal on a positive note, with an update. You might want to mention any new publications, project-related developments or track record achievements since the original application was submitted. The more directly relevant to the project, the better.

• Seek feedback on the draft. As well as asking the other CIs to review the draft rebuttal, ask one or two colleagues not involved in the project to read it. Their perspective will be more disinterested.

3.3 Don’ts

• Do not give an overview of your research. The PRP has already read your proposal.

• Do not thank the assessors. Apart from the primary spokesperson, the assessors won’t read your rebuttal. Also, this wastes valuable space, and feedback from PRPs indicates they find it irritating.

• Do not quote or paraphrase positive comments from the assessors. Again, this wastes valuable space, and again PRPs have indicated that they find it irritating. Also, more often than not, applicants manage to distort the tenor of the assessors’ feedback overall.

• Do not display anger. Whatever you may be feeling, make sure that what you write appears calm and in control. Remember too that the assessor you’re angry with is unlikely to see your rebuttal.

• Do not use one assessor’s views to rebut another’s. This quickly dissolves into a battle of opinions; and if the opinion of the supportive assessor is not one the PRP agrees with, using it may actually work against you. It’s always better to go back to the published literature or solid preliminary data.

4 Structuring the rebuttal

How best to structure your rebuttal will depend on the number and kind of issues raised by the assessors. The simplest, clearest way to structure it is Option A; but this is only possible when you don’t have too many questions or comments to deal with.

4.1 Option A

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:

Assessor 1

Scientific Quality
1.1 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.2 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...

Significance and/or Innovation
1.3 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.4 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...

Track Record
1.5 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.6 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
Budget
1.7 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.8 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...

Overall Comments
1.9 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.10 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...

Assessor 2
Scientific Quality
1.11 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...
1.12 Quote or paraphrase question. Your response...

...and so on.

Overlapping questions. If Assessor 3, for example, asks a question you’ve already dealt with in your response to Assessor 2, quote or paraphrase Assessor 3’s question and then simply cross-reference your earlier response (‘See 2.3’).

4.2 Option B

You are likely to run out of space with the Option A structure if (a) there are a lot of questions and/or (b) there are fundamental criticisms of the study’s design, the project’s significance, or whatever, that will require considerable space to rebut properly. In these situations, you might consider this Option B structure, or something like it.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic heading</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quote or paraphrase the various issues raised. Your (combined) response...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic heading</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote or paraphrase the various issues raised. Your (combined) response...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...and so on.</td>
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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 for getting ‘back on the front foot’ when you are confronted with fundamental criticisms that will undoubtedly sink your proposal unless you can persuade the PRP otherwise.

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

Another variation is to use a combination of Options A and B. You could use Option A for the straightforward, perhaps more technical, responses, and Option B for any responses that demand the development of an argument.