

Study Section Chair Selection and Training

The purpose of this document is:

- To provide Scientific Review Officers (SROs) with guidance on how to identify potential Chairpersons
- To help Chairs to be effective leaders of Scientific Review Groups (SRG)
- To assist the Chairs to fulfill their key role in the function and success of the peer review process to yield review of the highest quality and fairness

SELECTION OF CHAIRPERSONS

SROs routinely evaluate study section members as potential future Chairpersons on their SRG. In terms of credentials, most study section nominees should be recruited as potential Chairs. Since CSR prefers that Chairs serve for 2 years, SROs should keep in mind that only SRG members who have served for 2 (or 3) years are normally eligible to be nominated as Chairs of SRGs. The SRO should identify members whose opinions are respected by the other members, who listen well, demonstrate the ability to compromise when appropriate, and participate fully in the discussions. The SRO should identify leadership potential in members by asking them to chair discussion of applications when the current Chair has a conflict or is a reviewer on an application, rotating this responsibility around the table to different Chair candidates over the course of an SRG meeting. Alternatively, 1-2 different vice Chairs can be selected for every meeting ahead of time, giving them the information necessary to chair a set of applications (when the Chair is not available, reviewing or in conflict with applications).

Characteristics of potential Chairs include:

- Established scientist; leader in the field
- Strong publication and funding track record
- Broad scientific perspective
- Articulate reviewer and active participant in discussions
- Willingness to do the work required
- Reputation for integrity and fairness
- Respected by SRG panel members
- Supportive of NIH/CSR review policies
- Works appropriately with the SRO
- Able to run meeting well, manage length of reviewer presentation, and summarize discussion succinctly

Once the field of Chair candidates has been narrowed to one or two members, the SRO could have the candidate(s) serve informally as vice Chair at a study section meeting, acting when the Chair has a conflict or is a reviewer on an application. The SRO must clearly define the role of Chairperson vs. the role of the SRO, setting clear expectations of what the vice Chair (and, eventually, Chair) must do at the meeting. The SRO may enlist the assistance of the current Chair to serve as a mentor to the vice Chair.

ORIENTATION OF CHAIRPERSONS

Once the Chairperson has been selected, orientation must advance to the next level of detail, to include training in pre- and post-meeting responsibilities as well as training that addresses meeting management skills (as needed).

Pre-Meeting Responsibilities:

- Be available to the SRO for discussion of meeting plans and expected changes in procedure
- Assist in training new members, particularly in how to write and present critiques
- Familiarize him/herself with all of the applications that will be reviewed at the meeting; read critiques for applications where there is wide divergence in preliminary scores to help guide discussion of those applications at the meeting. (Chairs should continue to be an assigned reviewer of proposals, since it enables them to serve as a role model for other panel members, although they may ask for a lighter assignment load in order to devote time to reviewing all the applications)
- Know the specific criteria relevant to the particular meeting, as well as the non-score driving, administrative issues that must be addressed
- Model good behavior, by posting critiques on time, with substantive sections on Significance/Impact, and spreading preliminary scores

Additionally, in partnership with the SRO, the Chair might constructively communicate directly with the SRG members on topics of administrative importance (e.g., score spreading, implementation of new review procedures, etc).

Meeting Responsibilities:

- Operate consistently with NIH/CSR review procedures and practices, and actively support the SRO's implementation of them
- State clearly at the outset of a meeting that all reviewers are expected to be present for the entire meeting
- Effectively set the tone of the discussion
- Keep members engaged during discussions
- Run the meeting on schedule without cutting off discussion prematurely. *Remember that discussion does not always lead to consensus, since consensus on score is not required.* It is essential that all major issues are aired, and the reasons for differences of opinion are clear to all and recorded in the summary statement
- Ensure review is fair, equitable and free of bias. Watch for evidence that a reviewer may be influenced by inappropriate personal interests (competition, scientific bias, personal antagonism etc.) and speak to the SRO
- *Beware of his/her own potential biases:* Although the Chair should not hesitate to state his/her scientific opinion when appropriate, it is essential to be cognizant of the role as Chair, without championing favorite areas of science over others. To allow for third-party moderation of all review discussions, the SRO will appoint an "alternate" Chair when the Chairperson is assigned as a reviewer/discussant on an application
- Work with the SRO regarding inadequate reviews and irregularities when they arise

- Chair and monitor discussion threads if the application is reviewed during an Asynchronous Electronic Discussion meetings

Meeting logistics and procedures that the Chair should practice include:

- Announce application that is being reviewed
- Clarify differences in the review of different categories of applications. For example, R21s do not require the same degree of preliminary data as R01s; they are not mini-R01s and should not be evaluated the same. After the SRO has made clear the differences reviewers are to keep in mind for each mechanism, the Chair should make sure the discussion follows those parameters
- Ensure that conflicts are out of the room (with the assistance of the SRO or NIH staff)
- Announce reviewers by name
- Ask reviewers to provide their initial level of enthusiasm or preliminary score
- Ensure that reviewers always speak clearly into microphones or telephones
- Ask reviewers to provide concise review of applications with emphasis on its impact on the field and its strength and weaknesses. The entire review (all reviewers) should be limited to 15 minutes, less if there is consistency of preliminary scores or lack of controversy.
- Open up the review for further discussion by all members of the panel
- Ask for any comments about human subject research, vertebrate animal research, or biohazards (prior to scoring)
- Briefly summarize the reviews, pointing out any disagreements among the reviewers
- Ask for reviewers' final scores
- Ask if any scores will be 0.1 or greater outside the range; if so, ask those scoring 0.2 or more outside the range to state the rationale
- Remind reviewers that they should modify their written critiques in light of the discussion
- After final scores have been entered, ask about budget recommendations and any other non-scorable issues

Post-Meeting Responsibilities:

The SRO should plan to have a post-meeting discussion with the Chairperson, in which the Chair will be expected to:

- Provide feedback on reviewer (and SRO) performance
- Assess suitability of any temporary reviewers for SRG membership
- Discuss issues and problems that arose during the meeting and potential solutions

Further, the Chair should be available to:

- Consult with the SRO on Resume and Summary of Discussion, particularly in cases where the SRO needs confirmation that it accurately reflects the final recommendations of the SRG

- Assist in evaluation, selection, and training of the next Chairperson, when it is appropriate
- Be open to candid feedback from the SRO and reviewers (through the SRO), and modify practices when necessary

Finally, once/year a proactive Chair should send a post-meeting e-mail to all panel members, soliciting feedback and suggestions to improve study section function.