Rhetorical Patterns and Components of an NIH SPECIFIC AIDS PAGE

Introduction: The Specific Aims page is arguably the most important section of your grant application, and it is likely the first thing your assigned reviewers will read. In fact, because only three reviewers are assigned to each proposal, the Specific Aims page might be the only section of your proposal that some members of the study section will read. The Specific Aims page should provide a clear roadmap of your entire proposal and serve as an elevator pitch to “sell” your research to the reviewers.

There is no template for a strong Specific Aims page, but there are established rhetorical patterns apparent in Specific Aims pages from successful proposals. There is likewise no right or wrong way to organize the key components of a strong Specific Aims page. There are, however, strategic and logistical organization patterns. Generally, the Specific Aims page should clearly demonstrate to the reviewers 1) the importance of the research and the critical barrier to progress or gap(s) in knowledge being addressed, 2) the foundational research that you or others have conducted to that led to the formulation of a central hypothesis, 3) that the Aims will address the barrier/gap knowledge and test your hypothesis, 4) that the approach is innovative and the investigative team is uniquely qualified to conduct the proposed research, and 5) that the outcomes of the research will advance current knowledge and offer collateral benefits even if the hypothesis is not proven.

Rhetorical Components of a strong Introductory section of a Specific Aims page (first 1-2 paragraphs):

- General Context/Significance
- Focused Context
- Your Research Contribution
- Barrier/Gap in Knowledge
- Long-term goal of the Research
- Short-term goal of the Proposal
- Summary of Research
- Hypothesis
- Qualifications of the Team

General Guidance:

First Sentence = The Hook: The opening sentence should briefly describe WHAT the research topic is and WHY it is important to conduct the research. Importantly, you want your opening sentence to engage your reviewers – avoid simply stating a fact or statistic that is widely known. Tell the reviewers something they might not know.

The What, Why, and Whom. It is important to introduce the solution you intend to pursue to fill the identified gap in knowledge (i.e., the long- and short-term goals). Importantly, you want to convince your reviewers that you have the solution to address the current barrier/knowledge gap and the expertise to accomplish the research proposed. Keep your wording simple, relevant, and concise to address the following points:

- What is your solution? Your solution should relate directly to the stated gap in knowledge.
- What is your central hypothesis?
What is your proposed approach for testing your hypothesis?

You can 1) state your long-term research goal (broad), which should align with the mission of the funding agency; 2) your proposed solution (narrowed context), which should match the critical need, and 3) your central hypothesis (explicit statement). Describing the expertise of the team and/or your preliminary findings can likewise convey to the reviewers that your experimental design and your team are the best to accomplish the proposed research.

The Specific Aims. Briefly describe each of the Aims and the associated experimental approach you will use to test your central hypothesis (approximately 2-4 sentences each). Each Aim should:

- Be testable and measurable;
- Be based upon current findings or evidence;
- Flow logically and clearly relate to the proposed solution;
- Avoid being completely dependent upon other aims.

The Final Summary Paragraph = The Payoff. This paragraph is often overlooked, but it is vital for the impact of the proposal! You do not want to end with the statement of the Aims because you will end on fine details and a narrow scope. You want to use the final paragraph to describe the potential impact of the outcomes of your study, with a specific emphasis on how your study could deliver value, alter current research or clinical practice paradigms, or open new research avenues. The last paragraph should round out the summary of your research and end on a broad scope. The goal of the Specific Aims page is to captivate your reviewers and to provide them with a detailed overview of the problem and why and how you will solve it!

Mapping the Components of a Specific Aims Page to the Research Strategy: