

Standards for a High-Quality Individual Review Form (IRF)

The comments in your IRF document your assessment, serve as the basis of the panel discussion, and are provided to the applicant as feedback from the review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and other requirements. As such, they must be appropriate and useful and must clearly correspond with the selection criteria from the sections that you are asked to assess. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between your ratings and comments, are extremely important. Provided below is guidance on **writing meaningful comments**, as well as example **sentence starters** to point you in the right direction with constructing high-quality comments.

Writing Meaningful Comments

Scope of Comments

- **Limit your assessment to information in the application only.** Do not include information from outside sources, consider the applicant's known reputation, or compare applications to one another, etc.
- **Limit comments to the most significant strengths and weaknesses of the application only.** Do not focus on generating a particular number of comments or on providing a comment for every criterion. The quality of the comments is much more important than the quantity. A strength becomes significant when it shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of and the ability to address a key issue in program implementation or management. A weakness becomes significant when a criterion is not addressed at all or is addressed poorly, causing concern about the applicant's ability to successfully implement the proposed project.

Content of Comments

- **Describe an application's quality by comparing the content to the Selection Criteria.** Do not describe an application from the panel's/Reviewer's perspective or provide general suggestions for enhancement. Refrain from comparing one application to another. It may be necessary to reference details of the application, but avoid copying information from the application to serve as a strength or weakness. Rather, address what is strong or weak about aspects of the application as it relates to the criteria. Use the whole application, as instructed, to assess the quality of the applicant's response to each criterion.
- **Align the selected rating with the comments provided for each section.** For example: If your rating indicates that the application did not meet the criterion, your comments should address the significant weakness(es) identified. If the selected rating indicates that the application exceeded the criterion, your comments should reflect the significant strength(s). For applications that meet or partially meet the criterion, it may be appropriate to comment on both strengths and weaknesses if you consider both to be significant. If there are no significant strengths and weaknesses for a particular criterion, do not provide a comment.
- **Ensure that the strengths and weaknesses identified do not contradict each other.** If the applicant's response to a particular criterion has both strengths and weaknesses, please enter your comments in the appropriate comment box and clearly identify the strong and weak aspects of the response.
- **Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately.** Avoid making suggestions for improvement, and resist the urge to tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Instead, describe what was lacking and how this deficiency affected the quality of the proposal.

Language and Grammar

- **Use evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application.** Give your assessment of what is strong or weak about the application as it relates to the criteria. Consider the question, “How well did the applicant respond to the requirements?” Do not simply re-state information or statistics provided in the application as a strength or weakness; instead, evaluate the information provided.
i.e.: This statement is reiterative summary: “The applicant states that 50% of the children in City X are reading below grade level.”
To effectively rephrase this as a strength, you can indicate: “The applicant provided clear and specific data to support the need to improve literacy in City X.”
- **Do not use inflammatory or inappropriate statements.** Exercise care in how you articulate your assessment. Do not phrase your comments as questions, and take care to avoid harsh tones or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the “grant writer” for the application, etc.
i.e.: Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the criteria?
The training plan was virtually non-existent.
The applicant never even stated who the target population was!
The grant writer was creative and a good writer, but there was little substance to the proposal.
- **Write complete sentences with correct grammar and spelling.** Sentences should be complete, and avoid run-on sentences. Limit each sentence to a clear, single point or idea. Use spell check, and reread the assessment after you have completed it to ensure that it is clear and well written. You will be asked to re-write any comments that have spelling or grammatical errors.

Characteristics of High-Quality Assessment Comments

1. Comments are directly relevant to the Selection Criteria.
2. Comments are focused on significant strengths and weaknesses that have an impact on the selected rating.
3. Comments focus on a single point or idea.
4. Comments include evidence or an assessment, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.
5. Comments are written in complete sentences with no spelling or grammatical errors.

Examples of High-Quality Comments:

- The applicant presents a compelling case for the benefits of one-on-one and small group tutoring in County Y middle schools to increase academic success among low performing, rural poverty-level students.
- The description of major activities includes a detailed timeline that incorporates major planning milestones for developing and distributing educational materials including identifying target schools for distribution and teacher orientation sessions.
- The application includes specific details of the applicant’s capacity to manage the cooperative agreement, plan to engage required participants in the planning and implementation of the regional conferences, and prior experience leading national service training events.

Characteristics of Low-Quality Assessment Comments

1. Comments are ambiguous and/or not clearly related to the Selection Criteria.
2. Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (e.g., commenting that the program has received more than its fair share of funding).
3. There are no specific details provided to substantiate what was strong/weak about the application. The comment is generic and could apply to any application (i.e., “the need is well supported and articulated” instead of “the need for health services in Austin was well-supported with relevant statistics”).

4. Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements, or inappropriate or unprofessional language.
5. A large portion of the language in the comment is copied directly from the application.
6. Sentences are long and confusing and/or include a mixture of strengths and weaknesses.
7. Comments include identifying information about the reviewer or panel.
8. Comments include significant errors in grammar or punctuation.

Examples of Low-Quality Comments:

- The applicant's budget is not very cost effective.
- Solid evidence is provided by the applicant to support the intervention.
- 20% of the population is below the poverty level, the need was justified.
- The program could be improved and reach more students if they extended the tutoring through grade 8.
- As a professional educator, this reviewer does not feel that the tutoring program proposed by the applicant will be successful in improving student reading skills.

Sentence Starters

The sentence starters below may be useful in forming constructive review comments in the IRFs. Keep in mind that the sentence starters are not exclusive statements and that CNCS is neither prescribing them nor limiting you to their use. The purpose is to provide you with resources to help you succeed in your review.

Sentence Starters for Strengths

- Compelling/strong data/evidence is provided to support/substantiate...[description of community problem/need]
- The applicant presents a clear/feasible/comprehensive/well-designed/logical plan for...[description of programmatic element]
- The proposed...[intervention] is/are likely to be successful/effective in...[description of problem that the intervention will solve]

Sentence Starters for Weaknesses

- The applicant presents limited/inadequate information about...[description of problem/need, intervention, or other programmatic element]
- The application does not sufficiently describe/explain/address...[description of programmatic element]
- The proposed activities do not...[explanation of how the activities do not support or align with the problem/need or desired outcomes]
- The absence of information on... [programmatic element] makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of the program in ...[description of intended outcome]
- Insufficient data/evidence is presented to support...[description of intervention]