

WRITING MEANINGFUL COMMENTS: GUIDANCE AND EXAMPLES AND SENTENCE STARTERS

Standards for a High-Quality IRW

The comments from your Individual Review Worksheet will serve as the basis of the panel discussion, serve as the documentation of your assessment, and are provided to the applicant as feedback from the external review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and other requirements. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between your Ratings and comments are extremely important. As such, they must be appropriate, useful, and clearly correspond with the Selection Criteria that External Reviewers are asked to assess. 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

- ◆ Limit your assessment to information that is found in the reviewed application. *Do not include information from outside sources, the applicant's known reputation; or compare the application to another applicant, etc.*
- ◆ Present evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application. *Tell what you thought about the proposal, give your assessment of what is strong or weak about the application, how does this detail make it strong, how well did the information that the applicant included respond to the selection criteria?*
- ◆ Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately
 - *Avoid making suggestions for improvement; resist the urge to tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Rather phrase what was lacking, and how this deficiency affects the proposal.*
- ◆ Refrain from using inflammatory or inappropriate statements
Exercise care in how you articulate your assessment. Do not ask questions in your comments, avoid harsh tones, or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the "grant writer" for the application, etc.
Examples:
 - Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the Criteria?*
 - The training plan was virtually non-existent.*
 - The applicant never clearly stated who the target population was!*
 - The grant writer was slick and creative, but there was little substance to the proposal.*
- ◆ Sentences are complete, with correct grammar and spelling.
Use spell check, and reread the assessment after you have completed it to ensure that it is clear and well written.
- ◆ Comments should address the SIF Selection Criteria only, do not comment on aspects of the proposal that are not within the scope of the external review.
- ◆ Comments should be limited to the most significant strengths and weaknesses of the application, and should be grouped into Strengths and Weaknesses for clarity. Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses do not contradict each other. If there are strong and weak aspects of a Criterion that you would like to comment on, phrase the comment appropriately.

- *i.e. While the applicants proposed a comprehensive training plan to engage subapplicants and create a focused service experience, the proposed leader of these activities was one of the subgrantees, about whom there was little evidence of their qualifications.*
- ◆ The selected Rating should align 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.
- ◆ Applicant Feedback Summary should contain balanced appropriate feedback. Summary comments should be placed in this section—the comments should not be brand new, but should be the Strengths and Weaknesses from previous Criteria that had the greatest weight on the overall assessment and Rating.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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 Comments

- ◆ Keep comments focused on significant strengths and weaknesses (those that have an impact on the selected Rating).
 - 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.
- ◆ Significant strengths and weaknesses must relate to the Selection Criteria as specified in the *Notice* and described in the IRW.
- ◆ The difference is clear between comments based on fact and those based on professional judgment. (Both are helpful, but the distinction is necessary.)
- ◆ Comments include evidence or an evaluation, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.
- ◆ The “so what” question is answered.

Characteristics of Low Quality Comments

- ◆ There is little or no relevant information to connect the statement to a particular application. The comment is generic and can be read to apply to any application.
- ◆ Comment includes a large portion of information that was copied directly from the application.
- ◆ There is little or no relevant information to indicate overall quality of the section.
- ◆ The sentence is long and confusing, so that the assessment is altogether unclear.

- ◆ There is little documentation or no evidence provided about what was strong/weak, or how it was good/bad.
- ◆ Comments are ambiguous and not clearly related to the Selection Criteria.
- ◆ Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (for example, commenting that the applicant has received more than its fair share of funding).
- ◆ Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements.
- ◆ Comments are facetious, pejorative, or otherwise inappropriate or unprofessional.

Sentence Starters

The sentence starters below may be useful in forming constructive review comments in the Individual Reviewer Worksheets. 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.

Problem(s) identified

1. Community needs to be addressed are compelling and well-documented/missing... as evidenced by the following...
2. The target community (does not) appears to have been effectively involved in planning (or implementing) the program in the following way/because...
3. Proposed activities (do not) address the identified needs...to support their assertion that...
4. The applicant demonstrates previous relevant success as evidenced by.../The applicant does not make the case that they have been successful ...
5. The applicant presents limited information about the need to be addressed...they propose to...but the need was not substantiated because...
6. The applicant presents a clear and feasible/an ambiguous...

Anticipated outcome(s)

1. The applicant has a realistic plan for building the capacity/does not present a plan of the organization and the community to sustain the proposed service activities after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
2. The absence of information on... makes it difficult to assess the impact of the program in ...
3. The potential impact of the program on the community is well-demonstrated in the inclusive...
4. The applicant presents a plan to sustain the proposed service activities in the community after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
5. This applicant supported the claim that they are likely to be successful through...
6. The activities proposed reflect a comprehensive model that...
7. Though the applicant has an innovative approach to...they are lacking...
8. The applicant meets minimal standards in their response, as it was lacking...

Solution(s) that will be carried out by ...

1. The plan supports/does not appear to support the program objectives because...
2. The applicant proposes a program that seems to be a sustainable endeavor as evidenced by...
3. The applicant presents a satisfactory approach to enhance the capacity of key local organizations to ... These partnerships include the following ... who will be involved in the following ways/roles...
4. The applicant has a realistic plan for building the capacity/does not present a plan to build the capacity of other organizations...
5. The applicant has built/does not make the case to have built partnerships with the community groups and residents who will be essential to the success of the applicant activities. For example...The applicant details a rigorous process for subgrantee selection, including ...
6. The applicant provides a clear detailed plan for providing technical assistance to subgrantees as evidenced by ...

7. The applicant demonstrates strong internal capacity to provide oversight based on their track record of
8. The applicant has developed a strong partnership with ...clearly demonstrated with ...
9. The applicant does not clearly detail or outline the extent to which ... as evidenced by ...
10. Although the applicant states they plan to support and monitor their subgrantees ...
11. Although the applicant identifies goals/issue areas/outcomes, they do not explain...

DESCRIPTORS FOR ASSESSMENT COMMENTS

Top/Exceeds the Criterion

clear	compelling	comprehensive	demonstrates	detailed
distinct	effective	highly	high quality	persuasive
solid	sound	superior	well-aligned	well-described
well-documented	well-supported	worthy		

Adequate/Meets the Criterion

acceptable	addressed	described	Likely	presented
provided	reasonable	responded	satisfactory	substantiated
sufficient	suitable	supported		

Poor/Does Not Meet the Criterion

absent	brief/cursory	immaterial	inconclusive	ineffective
insufficient	lacking	limited	not present	Unclear
unconvincing	unsubstantiated	unsupported	Weak	