

# CHAIR AND CO-CHAIR GUIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEW

American Heart Association





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**As chair or co-chair of a peer review committee, you play a key role in its function and success. The leadership that you provide is essential to ensure that the science reviewed by your peer review committee receives scores that reflect the quality of the application. The peer review committee should operate in a fashion that yields high quality and fair reviews.**

**Your leadership will help to ensure that the American Heart Association (AHA) funds the best science. The guidelines outlined in this document are suggestions that you can incorporate in a way that best fits your own style and the needs of your peer review committee.**

# Basic Committee Recruiting and Membership

## Composition of the Committee

The single most important determinant of a peer review committee's excellence and credibility is its members. Please work with the assigned Program Manager to identify and attract outstanding scientists for your peer review committee. The chair needs to play an active role in identifying the best possible reviewers. It is essential that the reviewers be well respected in the scientific community. This ensures the credibility of the evaluations and makes it easier to recruit other reviewers of comparable reputation.

## Individual reviewer qualifications are as follows:

- Scientific excellence (as demonstrated by current grant and publication record)
- Respect in the scientific community
- Breadth of expertise
- Fairness and evenhandedness in review
- Willingness to do the work required
- Articulate their views succinctly
- Engage in productive exchanges
- Actively participate in the discussion of applications other than those specifically assigned to them
- Demonstrate an ability to work collegially in a group setting

# Reviewer Appointment Types

- Regular Peer Reviewer is appointed for staggered terms of 3-4 years for the appropriate science area and should have had prior peer review experience reviewing extramural grant applications at a regional or national level.
- Ad Hoc Reviewer is appointed to review a specific proposal due to an area of expertise not covered by the committee reviewers. They are to attend the meeting until completing their application review and are not required to stay for the full duration of the meeting.
- Consultant Reviewer is appointed only when an expertise cannot be identified through the recruitment of regular or ad hoc reviewers nor through the brokering process. These individuals should review no more than 3 applications for a review meeting. Since they do not attend the peer review meeting, these applications should be assigned to 3 reviewers, one of whom will act on behalf of the consultant. Once critiques are posted, communication between the assigned reviewer and consultant is encouraged prior to the meeting; these communications should be routed through staff.

# Balance Recruitment

When confirming returning members and recruiting new members, please keep in mind the following guidelines for optimal study group composition:

Scientific Expertise – to represent all the subjects and techniques covered by your committee.

Institutional Representation – no more than two members should be from any one institution.

Industry representatives should also be limited to two members per committee.

Academic Position – strive for 1/3 professors, 1/3 associate professors, and 1/3 assistant professors (or equivalent). While it is important to appoint junior faculty members to review committees so they may gain experience in the peer review process, it is equally important that senior faculty be appointed to each study group to provide experience and guidance in the peer review process.

Current Funding and Recent Publications – this is a requirement for all peer review participants, it is also a measure of a reviewer's involvement in and knowledge of current scientific trends.

Women and Minorities – AHA's Research Committee has encouraged special attention, AHA-wide, to the representation of women and under-represented minorities on all Association research-related committees. Please pay special attention to increasing the number of females and under-represented minorities on your study group.

Committee Size – each peer review committee must have a minimum of 12 members.

AHA Membership – the goal that 65% of committee members be AHA Council members has been set



## Reviewing Peer Reviewer Candidate's Credentials

Prior to a formal invitation to serve on the committee, the new candidate's credentials must be reviewed by the Committee Chair. The staff Program Manager can forward the candidate's biosketch to you for review.

## Recruiting Peer Reviewer Candidates

Prospective reviewers are more likely to commit to committee service when a colleague who already is committing time and effort to peer review asks them to participate.

Your program manager can contact returning members and prospective reviewers. When you and your staff program manager agree it might be helpful, contact a prospective reviewer yourself.



# Prior to Meeting: Leadership Activities

## Application Assignments –

The application assignments will be initially generated and sorted based on Peer Reviewer's application preferences by AHA staff. Confirming application assignments is a major responsibility of the chairperson. The CV's of all reviewers are available in the G@H System, and the system also provides Chairs and Co-chairs access to the reviewer preferences. Based on this information and the abstracts from the applications, you will confirm and/or change the preliminary assignments Grants@Heart system and AHA staff has made.

- Strive to assign 6-7 applications requiring written reviews and approximately three reader assignments per reviewer.
- When you cannot identify appropriate reviewers for an application within your committee, you should enter that application into the brokering process. Another study group may be better suited to provide the needed expertise. The goal is to identify the best reviewers.
- You may receive messages from reviewers who have reservations about their expertise for some of their assigned applications. We would like to address these problems early in the process. Rearranging assignments between reviewers in your study group, with you determining the appropriate exchange, may be appropriate. Alternatively, these applications may need to be brokered. Please notify staff if reassignment is needed.



## Application assignments continued:

In rare cases, key expertise may not be available through the brokering process. In those cases, you may need to identify a consultant reviewer to provide niche expertise. Remember, these individuals cannot review more than 3 applications and do not attend the peer review meeting. Since Consultant reviewers do not attend the peer review meeting, these applications should be assigned to three members, one of whom will act on behalf of the consultant. Communication between the assigned reviewers and consultant once critiques are posted is encouraged prior to the meeting; these communications should be routed through staff

Many chairs find it helps them maintain the proper focus, balance and fairness of discussions if they become familiar with all the applications under review. The assignment process is the best starting point for gathering that knowledge prior to the meeting. To compensate for the time this involves, you may assign fewer applications to yourself. However, it is important that you continue to be an assigned reviewer of proposals, since it enables you to act as a role model for other panel members.

# Mentoring New Reviewers

Mentoring new reviewers, primarily junior faculty on the panel is a major responsibility of the Co-Chairs. You will have G@H access to all those who are participating in peer review for the first time. If a new AHA reviewer has substantial expertise at NIH or other agencies, this mentoring would be less relevant.

You should contact those reviewers soon after applications have been assigned. Make sure they feel that the assigned applications are appropriate for their expertise. Discuss with them the review criteria, how to write a critique, and the need to spread scores. This group of reviewers should feel free to contact you with any questions or concerns. If you don't hear from someone, contact him/her again just prior to the meeting.

# Day of Meeting: Leadership Activities

## Chairing the Meeting

- You are responsible for the flow and focus of the scientific discussion at the meeting. How you chair the meeting will play a very important part in whether the discussion is fair and focused, and the proper scores are assigned.
- You will need to remain attentive throughout the meeting, constantly monitor the quality of the review process, and intervene or facilitate when necessary.
- Here are some suggestions about how to facilitate useful discussions. Staff will provide you with talking points, an “annotated” grade sheet and additional materials to assist you with this part of the meeting.

## Co-Chair Involvement

This would include chairing if one Chair is an assigned reviewer or in conflict and providing feedback and suggestions about reviewers. Even take advantage of alternating leadership on alternating pages of the score sheets. This often gives Chairs a break to evaluate the panel members and the group dynamics.

## Streamlining (Triage) Process

- An application is removed from committee discussion when any assigned reviewers' pre-meeting/posted scores indicate a streamlined review.
- At the peer review meeting, the proposed list of streamlined applications is presented to the committee and reviewed. Any committee member who is not in conflict may request that an application be removed from the streamlined review list and discussed, they should not identify themselves because there are conflicted reviewers during this process.
- During the meeting, Chairs or the assigned reviewers should consider recommending a poor scoring application be added to the streamlined list prior to any discussion. If there is approval by the entire committee, the application will not be discussed. This application will be added to the streamlined list and the committee will move on to the next application.

## Program Criteria

Your CDA program has different peer review criteria, so it's your responsibility to be familiar with the differences and to ensure all are discussed. Staff will have a copy of all the peer review criteria at the meeting and will take the lead in presenting the information to the committee.



## Day of Meeting: Leadership Activities - continued

### Managing the Review Process

1. AHA staff person will announce selection of application for discussion.
2. Chairperson announces the application number, title, applicant name and institution.
3. Members with conflicts of interest will be placed in a telephone sub-conference where they cannot hear discussion.
4. The assigned reviewers are announced and each states their initial **score range**.
5. Reviewer 1 is responsible for **briefly** presenting a summary of the proposal and listing strengths/weaknesses of the application.
6. Reviewer 2 is responsible for providing strengths/weaknesses not presented by Reviewer 1.
7. Reviewer 3 is responsible for providing strengths/weaknesses not presented by Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 2.
8. Full committee discusses the proposal; conflicting opinions are adequately discussed.
9. Reviewer 1, 2, and 3 state their final individual priority scores.
10. Reviewer 3 is responsible for recording strengths/weaknesses presented during the discussion and must submit that as a part of their critique under Summary of Discussion after the meeting has been concluded.
11. Chair prompts all members to enter a numeric score in Grants@Heart.

# Managing Application Discussion Time Duration

Meetings should move at a pace that ensures open and sufficient discussion. Reviews should focus on key issues and on the applications whose fates are least clear.

- **Keep the discussion to 8 to 10 minutes.** Some applications will require more discussion time, so keeping those where the scores are close to a minimum allows all applications to receive the discussion time they need.
- **Discourage panel members from reading reviews in their entirety.** Rather, encourage reviewers to state those issues that most affected their level of enthusiasm. This helps to keep the committee engaged and the discussion focused.
- **Invest time where it is most needed.** Spend the most time on applications where there is greatest disagreement, especially if the application is likely to be in the best 20 – 30% of those reviewed. Less time should be spent on those applications where there is uniform high or low enthusiasm.

## Managing Application Discussion Time Duration - continued

- **Remember that discussion does not always lead to consensus.** It is essential that all major issues are aired and the reasons for differences of opinion are clear to all. However, once this has been accomplished and further progress toward consensus is not being made, you should terminate the discussion, recapitulate the key arguments, have the reviewers state their “post discussion” enthusiasm and then ask panel members to vote as they see fit.
- **Help the panel maintain a balanced discussion.** Reining in wandering discussion. Interrupt if necessary. Don’t allow one person to monopolize the discussion. Create an open atmosphere and encourage reticent reviewers to speak up.
- **Be a guardian of fairness.** Ensure that all voices are heard. Watch for evidence that inappropriate personal interests might influence a reviewer, i.e. (competition, scientific bias, personal antagonism, etc.). If you sense a problem, determine a diplomatic way to handle it, such as inviting the opinion of other members of the committee.
- **Beware of your own biases.** Although you shouldn’t hesitate to state your scientific opinion when appropriate, be cognizant of your role as chair, and don’t champion your favorite areas of science over others.



# Scoring Process

- **Promote consistent scoring.** To maintain fairness and provide the best input to the Research Committees for their funding decisions, the score range used should be broad.
  - The range should be between 1.0 - 4.8, with a goal of 50% of the applications being streamlined.
  - Maintaining a consistent spread from the beginning to the end of the meeting, and from reviewer to reviewer, requires constant vigilance by both the chair and co-chair.
- **It is imperative that the committee use the whole range when scoring applications.** By clustering scores, some of the best science might not receive a percentile rank number that truly reflects their quality in comparison to the entire committee application pool.
- **Set an example.** Set a good example with your own scoring and challenge a reviewer who appears to be causing grade inflation. In addition, remind committee members that if they plan to vote outside the range indicated by the assigned reviewers, that they should make sure to share their opinion with the committee before the members record their scores.

## Scoring Process - continued

- **Ensure that criteria-based scoring is used properly.** During the discussion, each criterion should be explicitly assessed, and the reviewers should state how they affected the overall evaluation. Although it is up to the reviewers to determine the appropriate weight of each criterion in determining the score, serious consideration should be given to each criterion. Be sure that you have a full understanding of the various programs that your committee will be evaluating.
- **Speak up.** Evaluate whether the discussion corresponds to the score indicated by the reviewers. If not, say so; very commonly, other panel members will agree with you even if they don't take the initiative themselves.

# After the Meeting: Leadership Activities

## Post Meeting Involvement

After the meeting, the following tasks will be asked of you:

- Completing a Debrief document sent to you on the evaluation and comments about the committee
- Completing a survey regarding your overall experience
- If a reviewer did not provide critique when they were supposed to and did not respond to requests to provide that, you will be contacted by your program manager to provide a critique in place of that reviewer.

The background is a solid red color. On the left side, there is a white icon of a torch with a flame. The flame is composed of several curved, overlapping shapes. Behind the torch, there are several large, semi-transparent red circles. The background is also filled with a collage of small, semi-transparent photographs of people, mostly in shades of red and white. The text 'QUESTIONS & ANSWERS' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font on the right side of the image.

# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS