

Follow Our Tips for Writing a Successful Mentored K Application (adapted from NIAID)

Once you decide a mentored K award is the way to go, you may ask yourself: how do I go about writing an application that will fare favorably with peer reviewers and garner a fundable score?

For starters, go over the following 12 tips, which are based on what NIAID Institute staff have seen and heard.

1. Form a strong mentoring team. Find people who have expertise in your area of research. For multidisciplinary research, make sure your team covers all the scientific bases. Peer reviewers will check to see that your mentors' work and experience are relevant to your project.

2. Pick mentors who are accessible. If any of the people you're thinking of choosing as mentors is away a lot or too busy, move on to someone else. You want someone who will be around to answer your questions and provide guidance—and have the time to meet your needs.

Make it crystal clear in your application that your mentors have enough time to devote to you.

It's fine to have members of your mentoring team who aren't at your institution. However, you need to demonstrate their commitment to supporting you and provide a plan to communicate regularly.

3. Highlight mentor funding. A mentored K award provides partial salary and only modest funds for research supplies. Therefore, ideally, your mentors should be well-funded (preferably by NIH) so that money from the K supplements their research funding.

Point out that your mentors are active, funded investigators to show peer reviewers that they are conducting original research—research that complements yours.

4. Create a solid Research Plan. Don't skimp on the Research Plan thinking that because you're writing a K (not an R01) application reviewers will be lenient. They won't. Ask important research questions, and use the Research Plan as a vehicle to get preliminary data for a future R01.

5. Accentuate activities. Describe how career development or training activities will lead to your independence and state how your future research will be independent from your mentors' work. We strongly recommend that you provide a career development timeline, including plans to apply for subsequent grant support.

6. Get good reference and institutional letters. Since reviewers will scrutinize reference letters, be sure to ask people who are familiar with your qualifications, training, and interests.

You should also get a strong letter from your institution that speaks to its commitment to your development into a productive, independent investigator. Officials must agree to provide adequate time and support to you for the period of the K award.

Provide drafts of letters of support for your referees, along with your biosketch and abstract.

7. Obtain strong mentor statements. Be sure your mentor statements convey your mentors' wholehearted support of you. If you don't think that's important, here's a real-world example:

A mentor whose personal style wasn't effusive wrote a terse letter that reviewers interpreted as lack of interest in the candidate. In fact, the mentor was quite supportive of the applicant and had to change his style when writing the letter for the resubmission.

Each mentor must explain how he or she will contribute to the development of your research career and discuss the research as well as other activities, e.g., seminars and presentations at scientific meetings. Mentor statements from those who aren't at your institution should also describe their commitment to you and how frequently you will communicate.

8. Demonstrate productivity. Reviewers look closely at your productivity, e.g., number of publications, first or last author. If you're lacking in this area, explain your role on other projects.

For example, perhaps you were part of a clinical trial project that doesn't allow papers until the trial ends. Or, maybe you were involved in activities that demonstrate your leadership but don't lend themselves to publications (e.g., helping to set up an HIV research clinic in South Africa).

9. Justify sample size. This is especially if your project is a "spin off" of your mentors'. Explain why you are studying, for instance, 50 samples and why those in particular if they are a subset of a larger study. Get input from a biostatistician if this isn't your strength.

10. Address human subjects. Avoid this common mistake: completing the human subjects research section using the description from a mentor's grant application. That description may not apply to what you'll be doing with your K award.

Example: don't give the impression that you are conducting a phase 3 clinical trial when it's actually your mentors doing so. Make sure to complete the Human Subjects section from the perspective of the specific research you are conducting under the K award, such as using samples from the trial or doing a substudy on subjects from it. Be sure to include letters of permission, e.g., for using samples or conducting a substudy.

11. Get up-to-date on responsible conduct of research. Do you know what your plan for instruction in responsible research conduct (RCR) should cover? Don't rely on samples or information from previous K awardees that might not reflect the latest RCR requirements.

12. Get mentors to review your application. We highly recommend that you have your mentors (especially your primary mentor) give your application an once-over to check for thoroughness, consistency, and effective presentation.

Should reviewers see problems in proposed lab work or other areas, they may regard it as a lack of mentor involvement. You don't want them to think, "If the mentor didn't bother to work with the candidate during the application process, how engaged will he or she be during the award?"

13. Make your pages easy to read. Include figures where possible and leave some "white space" or "breathing room" on the page: left justify, sufficient space between paragraphs, slightly larger margins.

14. Don't use jargon or too many acronyms. There will be three reviewers and only one is likely to have expertise in your subject area.