

Responding to peer review

(this document is based on an original MRC article prepared by Rachel Prosser)

The GACD funding call process allows applicants invited a second stage application to include a brief response to peer review comments as a part of their application. The aim of this response is to clarify any changes made following peer review comments, and to allow applicants an opportunity to justify these changes (or in some cases, why changes have not been made). The following are guidelines on how to tackle this occasionally challenging task.

Be positive

Researchers devote their time and effort to reviewing proposals- without them we could not run funding calls. Remember that reviewers may have multiple proposals to evaluate and limited time, so the tone of your response is important - responding politely to feedback provided is critical.

Consider your audience

Think about who will be reading your response. This is likely to be a researcher like yourself, with many other commitments to attend to. Your response needs to be clearly written and justified and presented in an easy-to-follow order.

Be clear

Aim to address comments clearly and individually: reviews will be labelled 1-3; use those numbers to help the panel members navigate to the reviewer comment you're responding to. Sometimes, there may be a common issue; if so, you can address a set of comments from different reviewers together in one response.

Keep your cool

Don't dismiss a reviewer's comment as uninformed or irrelevant. Instead, provide an explanation to reassure the panel that you've considered their comment.

Don't ignore questions

If you don't think you can address a specific comment, it's better to provide an explanation as to why you can't address it than to ignore it completely.

Be honest

Be open and honest about the limitations that may have been highlighted by reviewers; consider what changes you could make to strengthen your proposal.

Back up your claims

If you have new data that will allow you to respond to a comment, show the panel that you do- include it in the proposal and indicate where it can be found in the response.

Be concise

Only include relevant information that adds value to your argument and clearly addresses the points made by the reviewer. Remember, the panel already has your proposal and peer review comments so avoid duplicating these unnecessarily.

Explain it differently

If a concern is raised by more than one reviewer, it may be that your proposal could be presented more clearly. Consider explaining things in a different way in your response. You may wish to group responses if there are several on the same topic; for example, the critique might converge on experimental design or methodology.

Last but not least...

Remember that you can make changes to your research proposal; the response is an opportunity to highlight those and justify how they address peer review comments, not an extra page of your proposal.