United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

Applying for EPA grants
Frequently Asked Questions

Application and Submission Process Questions

Who is eligible to apply for a Science to Achieve Results (STAR) grant?
Academic and not-for-profit institutions located in the U.S., and state, local or tribal governments are eligible. Generally, profit-making firms are not eligible to receive grants from EPA under this program but see specifics in the Request for Applications (RFA). Federal agencies and national laboratories funded by federal agencies (Federally-funded Research and Development Centers, FFRDCs) may not apply.

Can someone in EPA or another federal agency participate on a grant-funded research project?
EPA and any other federal employees can participate on grant projects, but only in a limited way. They cannot act as essential members of a research team nor can they direct research, set research objectives, develop budgets or be principal investigators. Federal employees can contribute their knowledge or available data on a subject, and be co-authors of papers ultimately produced, but their involvement cannot be necessary to achieve the overall goals of the research. Under cooperative agreements, federal employees may perform an important part of the research and could receive funding for travel, supplies/miscellaneous and research assistants (who are not federal employees and are hired directly for this activity) but they cannot receive salaries.

Can for-profit firms apply for a grant?
As noted above, profit-making firms are generally not eligible to receive grants from EPA under this program but check for exceptions in the RFA. However, for-profit firms are allowed to participate as long as the participation is clearly in a supporting role. As stated in the Standard Instructions for Submitting a STAR Application:

> "If a sub-agreement, such as a sub-contract, is included in the application, provide a separate budget for the sub-contract in the same format. Include the total amount for the sub-agreement under "Contracts" in the master budget. A project which contains a sub-agreement constituting more than 40% of the total direct cost of the grant will be subject to special review. Additional justification for use of such a sub-contract must be provided, discussing the need for this agreement to accomplish the objectives of the research project."

What is the best way to learn how to apply for a grant?
Information on how to apply for a grant can be found on EPA's Research Grants website.

Would it help to enclose a letter from my congressional representative?
No. All applications are judged solely on their scientific merit, responsiveness, appropriate level of effort, simplicity, clarity, subject matter knowledge and appropriate expertise.

Are applicants required to provide matching funds?
Unless there is a statutory requirement, STAR grants do not have a matching funds requirement.

Are there any other things that could cause my application to be rejected?
To avoid any disqualification of your applications, read the RFA accompanying instructions carefully and follow directions. Give yourself enough lead-time before the RFA closing date so you can review all the forms and ensure everything is in the correct place.

How will I know if my application needs a quality assurance (QA) plan?
References to QA plans can be found in the RFA and on EPA's Research Grants website. Generally, any project that requires data collection or processing, surveys, environmental measurements and/or modeling, or developing an environmental technology (for pollution control or waste management) needs a QA statement.

What if I make a mistake on a form - can I correct it - or will it cause the application to be rejected?
Some mistakes may result in your application being rejected; others will have no effect on the review process or your chance of being funded. If you identify a significant mistake before the closing date, contact the technical expert EPA staff member identified in the RFA. If you have time to resubmit your application within the deadline, you may want to send in a revised, complete application with a clear notation that it is to replace the version with the error. After the deadline for the RFA closes, you will not be able to correct any errors.

What happens if I submit an application late?
It will be returned to you without being reviewed.

What happens to an application after it is submitted?
Applications first go through a rigorous peer view by a panel of external experts in the applicable fields of study. Grant applications that receive high scores from the peer review then undergo an internal programmatic review involving program experts from EPA. Following these reviews, EPA's National Center for Environmental Research Director will determine what applications will be recommended for funding.

Do you reveal the names of the peer reviewers?
To ensure that peer reviewers are able to express their opinions and are not compromised in any way, identities of public reviewers are not shared.

When will I be notified about the status of my application? How can I find out if my application is successful?
An email will be sent to the Principal Investigator (with a copy to the Administrative Contact) to acknowledge receipt of the application and to transmit other important information. Applicants will also be notified if the application has been rejected or when it is approved for funding.

What should I do if my application is declined (rejected)?
All applicants are encourage to examine the comments received from the peer review panel and the suggestions outlined in this document, revise applications accordingly, and resubmit for a future RFA.

What if my application passes peer review and then is declined? What comments do I receive?
If your application is declined for any reason, you will receive comments from the peer review panel. These comments reflect solely on the scientific merit of the application and might be useful for re-submission at EPA or other federal funding opportunities. Internal EPA review addresses only the EPA

program priorities, research program balance or budgetary considerations, and does not reflect on the scientific merit of the application.

Can I find out what applications were funded?
After the applications have been funded, the abstracts will be posted on Research Grants website by year, category and institution.

What happens when NCER decides to fund my application?
If your application is selected for recommendation for funding, a project officer (PO) will contact you with further instructions. The PO will send you the comments from the peer review panel and ask you to respond. He or she will also ask for various certifications from your institution asserting that it and you will adhere to the requirements of a number of relevant federal laws, such as nondiscrimination, lobbying restrictions, human subjects approval, animal welfare, and financial management, and possibly a quality assurance plan. Based on your response to the peer review comments, we might ask you to provide more information including a revised application and an abstract in the EPA Research Grants format. A recommendation for funding file that includes all the required forms and document is then sent to the EPA Grants Administration Division (GAD). GAD performs an administrative review of the funding documents and approves the grant package. When this process is complete, GAD sends an award letter to your institution, with a copy to your project officer, who will contact you, typically by telephone. When you receive this letter and notification, it means your grant is officially funded.

Who receives the grant, the researcher or the institution?
The institution. Note that if the researcher changes institutions and wants to "take" the grant with him or her, he/she must get the agreement of the institution he/she is leaving, and the cooperation of the institution to which he/she is going. The new institution must also be eligible to receive a grant from EPA.

Does NCER have preferences for awarding STAR grants to specific institutions or researchers?
No.

Is there any advice you can give me on how to get an application funded?
In the interest of fairness, project officers (the substance contacts listed in the RFA) cannot give individual advice to potential applicants. If you call the contacts listed in the RFA during the open period, they can only provide you with their opinions regarding whether or not your application is within the scope of the RFA. To ensure there is no conflict of interest, this information will not be shared with the peer review panel. EPA tries to provide all the information that is needed in the RFA itself so that you can make an accurate determination on how responsive your research is to the RFA requirements. In addition, you can investigate our website where all of EPA's existing grant research is posted. By examining the projects on our website, you can determine what is being done in any research area and ensure that your project is unique.

I have an interesting research proposal related to an important environmental issue and need funding. Can I send the proposal to your office? In other words, do you accept "unsolicited" applications for STAR grants?
STAR is a competitive grant program and only awards grants in response to RFAs (i.e., "solicited" research proposals). We do not fund unsolicited applications. For possible options on where to get funding for unsolicited applications, see: http://www.grants.gov/.

Application Quality

What do peer reviewers look for?
In most RFAs, you can find the exact peer review criteria under "Specific Areas of Interest" or "Scope of Research." However, in RFAs sponsored with other organizations, you will need to refer to the specific section that deals with review and evaluations.

What are the common characteristics of a successful application?
Applications should demonstrate the following attributes:

- Scientific merit
- Responsiveness to the RFA
- Appropriate level of effort
- Simplicity (where appropriate)
- Clarity
- Knowledge of the subject
- Appropriate expertise.

Many applications show great promise but fail to score well on one or more of these attributes. See below for further explanation.

Scientific Merit. The originality and creativity of the proposed research, and the appropriateness and adequacy of the research methods, are some of the most important characteristics of an application. Some questions to consider are: Is the research approach practical and technically defensible, and can the project be performed within the proposed time? Will the research contribute to scientific knowledge in the topic area? Will the results be disseminated broadly to enhance scientific and technological understanding? Are there benefits of the proposed activity to society? Is the proposal prepared with supportive information that is self-explanatory or understandable?

Responsiveness. RFAs describe scientific questions and/or subject areas that EPA, and perhaps other federal partners (NSF, DOJ, NIH, NIEHS, USDA, DOE, etc.), have an interest. There is room for interpretation within the general area described in an RFA. However, we do not stretch the definitions of an RFA to accommodate any distantly related research.

Appropriate Level of Effort. The appropriate level of effort, cost and related complexity differ for each RFA and every project. In almost all cases, EPA assigns maximum limits on the amount of funding for an application. Any applications requesting more than the maximum amount identified in the RFA will be returned without review.

Simplicity. Focus your application on a limited number of research objectives that you can adequately and clearly identify to meet the RFA requirements. This is particularly important for smaller grants, i.e., those that range from $50,000 to $300,000 for two- or three-year projects. Page limitations for the research proposal may require you to provide less detail than you would like and, therefore, it is better for you to focus on a small number of well-defined areas than to pursue a scattershot approach that inadequately touches on multiple research objectives.

Clarity. Explicitly state the main hypotheses that you will investigate, the data you will create or use, the analytical tools you will use to investigate these hypotheses or analyze these data, and

the results you expect to achieve. For example, the statement: "we will evaluate the data using the usual statistical methods" is not specific enough for peer reviewers.

Knowledge of Subject Matter. Demonstrate that you know the current literature related to your proposed research area since peer review panelists will be very knowledgeable about your subject and the pertinent literature.

Appropriate Expertise. Gaps in expertise within your research team, especially in multidisciplinary projects, tend to show in peer review

Grant Recipient Expectations and Requirements

What is expected from grantees once they have been awarded a research grant?
Learn more about the reporting expectations in the Terms and Conditions of your grant that accompanies the award letter to your institution.

How much detail is required in the annual report?
Provide enough detail to describe, in terms that are understandable to the educated public, progress toward meeting the application's research objectives or explanations of why the objectives changed. Explain unexpected problems, intended goals/objectives for the following year, and include a (single) budget page that shows how funds are expected to be used in the next year.

How long should an annual report be?
Typically, the report should not exceed five pages but some projects might require more.

How do (web) final report summaries differ from (web) annual report summaries?
Final report summaries for the web are longer (about 3 - 5 pages) and more comprehensive than annual report summaries (1 - 2 pages). In a final report summary, researchers must provide a comprehensive overview of their research objectives and results, as well as publications and presentations, in language that would be understood by the educated public. Researchers should describe conclusions and implications for further research. Researchers are also encouraged to provide website links to their publications or related research efforts.

What grant number should be used on the annual and final reports?
A six-digit number beginning with "R" (R123456) is assigned to every individual grant and should be used in the area called "EPA Grant Number." For center grants, there is a six-digit number starting with "R" and ending with "C" followed by three more numbers (R123456C123).

Who reads the annual and final reports?
These reports are used to assess the performance of both EPA and research institutions. EPA program and regional offices, state/local environmental managers, and other researchers also use these reports to identify pertinent research results.

Are there any other uses for the reports?
EPA uses the annual and final reports to track progress in, and to justify continued grant program support of, a research area; to organize conferences and workshops; to summarize research in certain areas; and to deliver research information to clients. Documenting the achievement of research

objectives is one of the principal ways EPA has to demonstrate useful results and to ensure our continued ability to fund quality research.

What do project officers look for in annual and final reports?
Each project officer performs a substantive review of the content and format of the annual and final reports to determine their conformance with the grant's terms and conditions. Any deficiencies will be brought to the attention of the researcher. The stated objectives and approach in the research application are the reason EPA originally funded the research project and provide the basis against which these reports will be evaluated. Applications will be carefully read for statements such as: "The research will develop . . . ," "The investigators will attempt to . . . " "The results of this project will provide . . . " These statements will be used to evaluate the stated or implied objectives, the actual progress that has occurred, and the reasons provided for any changes. Project officers will ask for explanations of any discrepancies between the application commitments and reported activities and results. It is extremely important that these reports are submitted on time. You will be contacted if reports are late.

What happens if research progress differs from what was expected at the time of application award?
Research is an uncertain process. However, reasons for deviations from the research's original goals, methods or data need to be fully explained. If a researcher foresees a change in the direction of a research project under a STAR grant, the PI should notify his/her project officer immediately by email or phone to discuss it and submit detailed information regarding these changes in the next annual and/or final report.

What actions could a project officer take if a report from a grantee is considered unacceptable?
A project officer will ask a researcher to revise the annual or final report, in either format or substance, and will work with the researcher to resolve any concerns. If a researcher is uncooperative, recalcitrant, or simply not performing, EPA will contact the research institution. In a worst-case scenario, EPA can debar an individual or institution from receiving any additional grants from EPA.

Is it possible to change principal investigators (PIs) on an awarded grant?
Yes, PIs can change, provided the institution provides a good reason and a qualified substitute as new PI. However, this request is subject to the approval of the assigned EPA project officer.

Do I have to finish all my research in the grant period?
While it is good to finish on time, EPA will grant no-cost extensions when needed. A researcher can obtain a one-time, no-cost extension for up to one year by notifying his/her project officer before the expiration of the grant period if the extended project period would be less than five years. This extension cannot change the approved objectives or scope of the project nor can it be used merely to spend unused funds. A second extension is at the EPA project officer's discretion. Third extensions are extremely rare and require extensive justification and approval. There is a regulatory limit of five years to complete a grant. Extending a grant beyond that period requires a compelling reason and special approval from EPA. As noted, we recognize the uncertainties associated with research and try to accommodate any reasonable request.

Will EPA give me supplemental funds to extend my research if needed?
NCER will provide supplemental funding only under exceptional circumstances where there are compelling needs and sound justification. Circumstances that would merit supplemental funding include activities to improve the accuracy of the collected data or add to the anticipated results. Such

supplemental funding awards require a request via a 424 application (Application for Federal Assistance) and an EPA review.