Guiding your Outside Reader

Translating specialized, highly technical knowledge for others—be they grant reviewers or journal editors—isn’t easy. As we write, our own knowledge melds in our minds with the words we put on the page, so that what looks straightforward to us can be confusing and unfocused to the readers the paper needs to reach—and persuade of its importance or fundability.

It is essential, therefore, to invite a fresh pair of eyes to our writing. Ideally, early *and* late in the drafting process. Here are some questions you may want to pose to your outside readers in order to most productively use their perspective to sharpen your paper’s clarity and improve its flow—as you seek to maximize its competitiveness and showcase your contributions in the most positive light.

Ask your readers to pay attention to the following as they read. Ask them to note in the text (1) where any missing information was important to have had, (2) where exactly they got lost or confused, and (this is doubly helpful) (3) what they were confused about.

Sometimes they won’t know. But the more specific information you can get about where or why they got lost, and where they wondered “why am I reading this?”, the better you will know what went wrong and how to fix it. Make sure they know that you want their honest, pinpointed feedback.

Context and rationale: Why is this work important?

* Is the **real-world problem** addressed by this research clearly articulated and described at the outset? In conversational, accessible terms? (If not, do you gain this knowledge later on? If so, please note the places downstream where it appears.)
* Is the **technical problem** (or the more specific problem) set out clearly at the outset?
* Is the **specific need**—the major research need at this time—described at the outset?

Overall flow

* Do the major sections follow logically from the major need articulated at the outset? Do sub-sections also follow logically, and conspicuously support, the section’s main point?
* Please turn on a little mental meter that beeps if you feel confusion. Rather than exert energy trying to figure out what a sentence/paragraph/graphic is attempting to say, please make a note in the text explaining, as clearly as you can, why you feel muddled. If you can’t articulate your confusion, please leave a note saying, “you lost me here,” and move on.

Micro-clarity: Sentences and words

* Do paragraphs clearly announce the direction they will take? (I.e., is this information sitting at the end of the first (or possibly the second) sentence?) If not, please flag the text mid-paragraph that announced the paragraph’s central point.
* Please note any undefined words or terms that you think could cause problems for some readers.