

Submittable 

Building a Fair and Efficient Grant Review Process



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Conscientious review matters

Your organization creates an impact that can be felt across the communities you serve and beyond.

Funding deserving nonprofits, families, businesses, and individuals is extremely rewarding and valuable. It's also a lot of hard work. The amount of labor on all sides that goes into any grants cycle is often onerous, and even small inefficiencies and hitches have a ripple effect that can dilute your influence and endanger your mission.

One of the linchpins of the grantmaking cycle is a functional, reliable, and fair review process. It's in this vital step that you select the very best applicants and begin your relationship with your grantees. If your grant review process is wasting energy or arriving at poor decisions, the success of your program is at stake.

A vigorous, fair, and intentional review process for grant applications is therefore essential.

This guide offers seven tips for making sure that your grant proposal assessment is unbiased and productive. And because technology can greatly assist the implementation of these best practices, the second half of this guide is dedicated to seven benefits of an online grants management platform.

7 strategies for a fair and efficient review process



1. Build a detailed rubric

The first step in most smart grant review processes is the creation of a thorough rubric. Rubrics are detailed outlines for how each application will be read and scored. A comprehensive rubric helps reviewers stay consistent, minimizes personal bias, and provides a useful reference.

Most commonly used in the academic sphere, rubrics are also essential for complex evaluation processes of all kinds, including grant review.

If you create a rubric before building your application, it can help ensure all requested information is relevant and necessary. This saves time for applicants as well as your team.

According to Brown University's Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, there are a series of vital steps to creating a successful rubric. Here are six steps they identified, refocused for grant review:

- 1. Define the rubric's purpose.** Consider the components of your application and how each should be assessed. What would an outstanding application include? How detailed do you want to be with scoring? Should each application component receive a distinct score?
- 2. Choose between a holistic and analytic rubric.** In terms of basic distinctions, the holistic rubric is easier to put together but offers less detail than an analytic rubric regarding specific strengths and weaknesses within an application. For example, a holistic rubric might ask reviewers to assign a score of 1-4 for the application as a whole (where a Level 4 application includes great mission alignment, excellent organization history, and an outstanding plan). An analytic rubric would assess those three components using distinct scales and criteria.

Holistic rubric

Score	Description
4	Application is complete and all materials are excellent. Applicant is clearly a great fit for the grant.
3	Application is complete and most materials are above average. Applicant is a potentially good fit for the grant.
2	Application is mostly complete with materials of variable quality. Applicant is an unlikely fit for the grant.
1	Application is incomplete and/or most (if not all) materials are of poor quality. Applicant is a poor fit for the grant.

Analytic Rubric

	Below average 1	Average 2	Above average 3	Excellent 4	Score
Approach	Project plan does not have a reasonable approach or build on relevant work in the community.	Project plan may not be scalable or replicable. It may not build on other relevant work.	Project plan appears reasonable, scalable, replicable, but does not build on other relevant work.	Project plan appears reasonable, scalable, replicable, and builds on other relevant work.	
Innovation	Project plan clearly lacks any innovation or fresh ideas and lacks implementation.	Project plan lacks clear innovation and implementation.	Project plan contains new and exciting ideas, but not a clear line toward implementation.	Project plan contains new and exciting ideas and proposals, with a clear line toward change.	
Alignment of Vision	Project outcomes do not line up with either the grantmaker's mission or community needs.	Project outcomes somewhat line up with both the grantmaker's mission and community needs.	Project outcomes line up well with both the grantmaker's mission and community needs.	Project outcomes line up extremely well with both the grantmaker's mission and community needs.	
Reporting Plan	Reporting plan is not feasible and is not acceptable.	Reporting plan lacks detail or implementation information.	Grantees have a feasible and acceptable reporting plan.	Grantees have an extensive and actionable reporting plan.	

3. Define the rubric criteria. These criteria identify each component for assessment. For grants, common review criteria may include:

- **Approach**
- **Innovation**
- **Justification**
- **Alignment of Vision**
- **Feasibility**
- **Reporting Plan**
- **Sustainability**

4. Design the rating scale. Although this could include letter grades, for application review, numeric scores are likely to be the most useful since they can be summed. Most scales include 3-5 rating levels.

5. Write descriptions for each rating. Clarity and consistency of language here will help accurately guide reviewers. Focus on observations that can be accurately measured and include the degree to which criteria are successfully met.

6. Finalize your rubric. Format your rubric for easy access and reference, assess effectiveness, collect relevant feedback, and revise accordingly.

A strong rubric not only helps guide reviewers—it also offers the opportunity to deeply assess and streamline your application. If part of your application didn't make the rubric, do you really need it to review your candidates?

A couple of additional rubric strategies to employ:

- Assess your rubric carefully for language that could be misinterpreted. It's important to avoid assumptions about reviewers, especially regarding how they will process the criteria, rating scale, and descriptions you provide.
- Steer clear of industry jargon or acronyms. Use plain language and where possible, give examples to solidify what you want to say.
- Determine the relative weight of review criteria. For example, will innovation be more or less important than sustainability? Design your rating scale accordingly.

2. Be transparent with applicants

Anyone who takes the time to apply for your grant wants to submit the best possible application. Unfortunately, every application process is different and prospective applicants may not know what your organization is looking for. Sharing clear information about your assessment criteria and timeline is a huge help to all.

Transparency regarding review affords benefits for everyone involved in your process:

It demonstrates respect for applicants' time. When they can access assessment guidelines, applicants know where to focus and what to prioritize in assembling their application.

It increases the quantity of appropriate applications.

Clarity around expectations and review criteria can help you receive more relevant applications, saving your review team time.

It minimizes questions and doubt. If applicants know when they'll hear from you, they're less likely to reach out and inquire. You're also likely to receive fewer inquiries from uncertain applicants about what to include in their application.

It spotlights your organization's values. Sharing your review process and criteria demonstrates that you care about diligent and fair review. It also demonstrates that you understand the value this information holds for applicants and you're prepared to support them.

Being more transparent about your process sets you apart from other organizations, facilitates trust from potential applicants, and brings clarity to the whole process.

A guide that details each phase of the review and selection process is a great way to keep everyone informed on what happens once an application has been submitted. Just be sure it's easy to access and written in a simple, jargon-free format.

3. Assemble an inclusive review team

The benefits of engaging diverse reviewers can't be overstated. Not only do a wide range of perspectives and experiences serve your organization overall, an inclusive review team also helps to ensure that your selection process is equitable and that accepted applicants and their work better reflect that equity, thereby serving the mission you are likely striving for.

Although it can take time to assess your current resources and practices, conscientiously assemble a team, foster collaboration, and achieve consensus, research shows the outcomes are worth the effort. Among a multitude of benefits, diversity in the workforce helps organizations [grow and sustain innovation](#).

To welcome a diverse review board to your grants process:

Inventory your workplace culture

Begin by assessing how valued diverse viewpoints are among your current team. Daily micro-decisions can be telling. For example, whose opinions are regularly sought out? Who is invited to meetings? Who is included in the organization's target applicant group? Answering these kinds of questions internally will allow you to make adjustments and help ensure all reviewers feel comfortable, included, respected, and valued. If you're bringing in outside reviewers, this will be easier if you've done internal work towards inclusivity first.

Define your goals

Carefully consider what diversity will contribute to your review process. Additional voices and perspectives will likely push at the boundaries of what your organization has done previously. Ensuring that you are ready to embrace these changes is key. It's also important to diversify your review team for more than just optics—establish a goal centered around diverse viewpoints and, ultimately, improved applicant selections.

Do your homework

Posting an open call for reviewers may bring in some diversity, but you'll have better luck reaching out to the reviewers on the platforms where they spend the most time. If someone on staff has connections to a particular group or community, this can be the easiest way to put a call out. Or reach out to other organizations that serve particular communities, and ask them to help you solicit reviewers. Consider creating a press release about openings on your review board opportunity and share it with organizations working in diverse communities.

Communicate clearly

It's important to be up front about the workload for grant application reviewers and what, if any, compensation is available. Be honest about what you can offer when you are soliciting assistance and be cognizant if considering asking for free labor from historically underpaid groups. Even modest compensation is a way to show your reviewers that you value the work they are doing for your organization.

Alternately, get creative about other ways you can provide compensation—you might offer reviewers a discount, service, gift card, or organize a thank you event for them.

Focus on inclusive values

Work to broaden your team authentically. Nothing is more off-putting to a review team member than realizing she is the only woman on the team or the only Black person in the room. Diversity for diversity's sake will leave reviewers feeling tokenized. Ensuring that your review team is truly, broadly diverse will help you make decisions authentically and build diversity into your organization's ethos. Research

also shows that the most significant [attributes of inclusive workplace leaders](#) are humility and empathy.

Diversity isn't just about ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or sexual orientation. True inclusivity also involves a consideration of socioeconomic status and background, education, professional and personal experience, and political ideology, among other things. Other [key strategies for review board diversity](#) include commitment, ongoing analysis and education, and accountability.

Inclusive leaders share six signature traits:

Visible commitment: They articulate authentic commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable, and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority.

Humility: They are modest about capabilities, admit mistakes, and create the space for others to contribute.

Awareness of bias: They show awareness of personal blind spots, as well as flaws in the system, and work hard to ensure a meritocracy.

Curiosity about others: They demonstrate an open mindset and deep curiosity about others, listen without judgment, and seek with empathy to understand those around them.

Cultural intelligence: They are attentive to others' cultures and adapt as required.

Effective collaboration: They empower others, pay attention to diversity of thinking and psychological safety, and focus on team cohesion.

Harvard Business Review

4. Make thoughtful assignments

A review team, as opposed to a single reviewer or two, will ensure a more fair assessment for every applicant. Whether you provide multiple grants or just one annual award, having more than one reader in your review committee is vital to keeping the process fair.

If you're offering a single grant, have two or three readers on each application. If you're running several, you could group reviewers into teams, group applications by category, or rotate reviewers and applications throughout the process.

Effective reading and scoring of applications calls for rigor, undistracted attention, and considerable effort—and reviewers are often tasked with reading hundreds of applications. Increasing the size of your review committee can drastically ease strain for individual reviewers and improve the overall outcome of your process.

Overwhelmed reviewers may give a fair and thorough review to the first handful of applications but will likely review later applications with less diligence if they're fatigued. Avoiding this scenario whenever possible will ensure that no matter where an application falls in the queue, the assessment is equally involved.

Be sure to give reviewers enough time to balance reviewing against other responsibilities so that they have time and energy for stronger, higher quality scoring. Reviewing across days, as opposed to completing all reviews in a single, long session, is more likely to yield a greater uniformity (and fairness) in your results. Encourage reviewers to divide and conquer over time by assigning in batches or rounds, or by establishing multiple deadlines and check-in points along the way.

5. Hide sensitive information

Consider how much of a candidate's information reviewers really need to see.

To minimize the risk of implicit bias or favoritism, pinpoint which elements are absolutely essential for reviewers to make their decision—and which aren't. This way, the risk of “similar to me” bias or other harmful associations are drastically reduced, allowing reviewers to score applicants fairly and based on their relevant merits and suitability to the program.

Your review team will be thoroughly trained on how to review objectively, but because implicit bias is largely unconscious, teams need to have preventative measures in place.

Nationalities, socioeconomic status, or anything else that isn't directly correlated to a student's suitability should be kept hidden from the review team. Even a candidate's name can sway reviewers.

6. Build consensus

While differences of opinion can be uncomfortable, they indicate an engaged grants review process where, ultimately, individuals grow and learn from one another and smarter decisions are made. Not to mention that a truly inclusive review panel may be more likely to disagree because of the unique perspectives and backgrounds each individual brings to the table.

Fostering agreement (rather than deciding for your team) is worth the effort. The following strategies can help:

Lean on the rubric. The more detailed, thorough, and consistent your rubric is, the more useful it becomes in cases of dissension. Guide conversations back to established criteria wherever possible, with the awareness that smart debate may recommend revision to the rubric as you go.

Designate a facilitator. For in-person deliberation, choose a person to actively and conscientiously mediate conversations. Ideally this individual does not have power over the review team members—you can use the same person in every meeting or rotate facilitators. Facilitators should be skilled at keeping any debate open, kind, and safe, while encouraging those who aren't vocal to share their opinions.

Establish thoughtful protocols. All group members should be encouraged to practice active listening, avoid interrupting, and ask questions to aid their understanding. Empower reviewers to resolve their own problems through open conversation about what priorities matter the most to them.

Favor open-ended questions. The best way to understand where team members are coming from and help them understand one another is to use broad questions that allow for a comprehensive response. For example, ask why reviewers favor a certain applicant rather than just collecting a list of names. What ideas do group members have for how to arrive at the best decisions? The questions can be posed at in-person meetings but also digitally.

Allow for time and build trust. Arriving at consensus can take time but the outcomes are worth it. Build time into your process to allow for reviewers to consider one another's view points, talk (or type) openly, and allow for

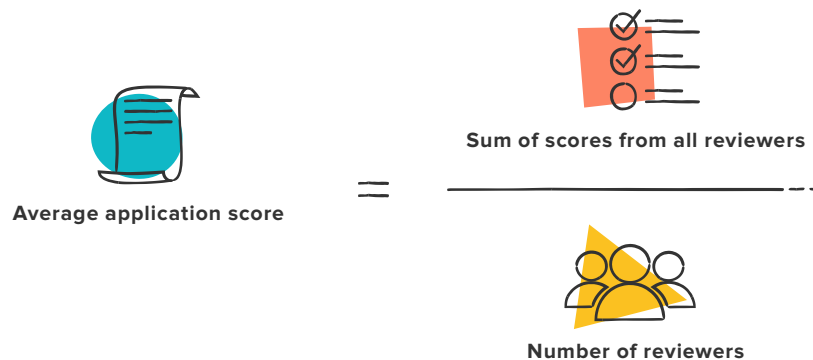
dissension. Fostering a culture within your organization where disagreement is embraced and divergent opinions are encouraged can take time to establish. Make it safe for individuals to be “wrong,” change their mind, fumble, fail, and learn from one another.

7. Use a numerical strategy

There are two main approaches to capturing which applications are top contenders.

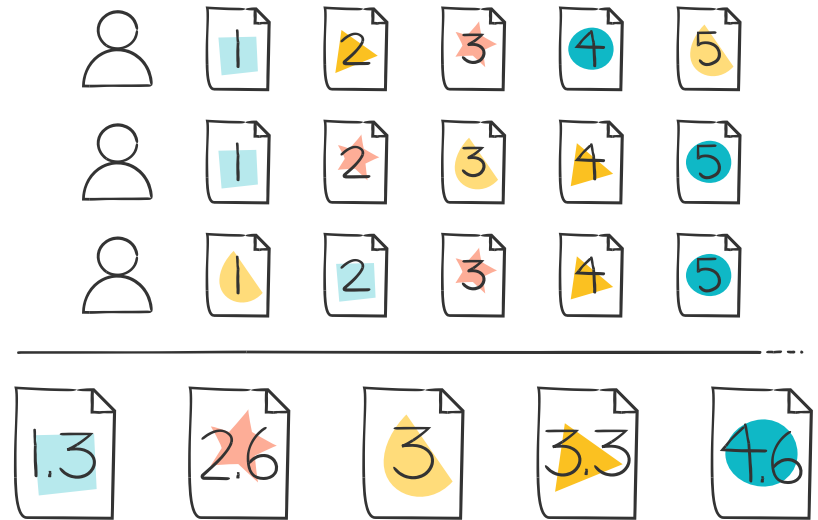
One strategy for scoring applications fairly is through a point system defined by your rubric. This type of averaging system is typically used for standards-based processes, which makes it extremely useful for scoring grant applications.

Calculate an average by adding all scores together and dividing by how many times the application was read. This ensures that each reviewer’s assessment has an equal weight.



A ranking system can be another great collaborative way to select grant winners. Using this strategy, readers

are assigned a set number of applications to read and rank in quality order. Let’s say a reader is reviewing five applications—the best one would score a 1, the next best a 2, and so on, with the least favorite receiving a 5.



In this ranking example, three reviewers rank the same five applications between 1 and 5 (with 1 being highest). After an average is taken, the application represented in light blue, for example, has the highest average ranking across reviewers.

Then, each set of applications is passed on between other readers, who will also rank in order of quality. If reviewers are tasked with a high volume of applications, this method can help alleviate the pressure.

To find the strongest applications, add up the scores among all applications—the ones with the highest scores are ranked highest collectively.

Whether you use averages or ranking, ideally each application gets a once-over from multiple reviewers. This takes the strain off each individual reader, ensures greater impartiality, and simplifies the process of selection. When passing along applications for multiple reviews, keep the previous score or ranking hidden to avoid unconscious bias.

7 benefits to a digital process

A rigorous, equitable, and unbiased application process takes time. From creating a comprehensive rubric and building a top-notch review team to managing decision making and selecting top candidates for your grant, every step requires resources and attention.

For this reason, eliminating manual work and streamlining tedious processes whenever possible is key. Adopting an online review process can serve your applicants and organization in multiple ways.

7 benefits to a digital process

1. **Accessibility and ease of use**
2. **Eligibility and accuracy**
3. **Streamlined review**
4. **Automation for improved focus**
5. **Anonymous review to minimize bias**
6. **A centralized and secure system**
7. **Clear communication and easy feedback**

1. Accessibility and ease of use

Ensuring your application form is accessible and simple for grantees will help you attract a wider applicant pool and drive better outcomes. A quality grant application represents your organization in the best possible light.

Attract applicants with modern forms that are on brand, easy to access, and straightforward to complete.

Especially if your mission involves awareness, education, or helping those in marginalized communities or those with fewer privileges, it's imperative that your form and application process welcome all.

And accessibility and ease of use always go hand-in-hand.

With Submittable's grant management software, you can provide the simplest possible process for applicants, from start to finish—including requesting additional paperwork from applicants within the same platform. Applicants can also automatically provide full information about their nonprofit simply by entering their EIN number a single time via the Charity Check feature.

The image shows a screenshot of a grant application form. At the top, it says "Grant application" followed by social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Email. Below this, there are two input fields for "First name" and "Last name", both marked with an asterisk. Underneath is a larger text area for "Cover letter", also marked with an asterisk. Then there is a question "Have you applied for this grant before?" with radio button options for "Yes" and "No". Below that are two more input fields: "Amount requested" and "Name of Organization", both marked with an asterisk.

Ask for the information you need—no more and no less—with accessible and intuitive grant application forms.

Submittable has also attained Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (or VPAT) documentation, ensuring that your forms are more accessible to a wide range of submitters with disabilities, including blindness and low vision, deafness and hearing loss, learning disabilities, cognitive limitations, limited movement, speech disabilities, and photosensitivity.

2. Eligibility and accuracy

If your grant program attracts a high amount of interest, you're likely to receive unsuitable applications if you haven't incorporated safeguards. A digital application process can help ensure applicant eligibility, while encouraging completion and accuracy.

Eligibility screenings help applicants pre-qualify themselves before even setting foot in the main form, saving ineligible applicants time and heartache.

At the same time, required form fields save administrators from having to track down missing materials. They also help grantees ensure their application is complete while weeding out applicants who fail to provide necessary materials.

Incorporating form logic in a digital process allows administrators to include, for example, a box grant writers must check to continue their application or different application tracks for different applicants. Smart forms that respond to applicant responses save individuals on both sides of the process substantial time and energy.

Lastly, online applications that provide clear guidelines throughout the application process make for better applications, and thus more streamlined review and selection.

3. Streamlined review

When moving grant applications through the review process, choosing to divide and conquer improves efficiency. This entails dividing workload and optimizing workflow.

Submittable makes it easy to distribute assignments to reviewers based on, for example, applicant type or reviewer speciality. Assign automatically, manually, in rounds, or randomize assignments. Making smart assignments helps administrators maximize resources.

Similarly, staged review, or review completed in rounds, can be much more productive than reviewing a single pool in a single overwhelming round. A first pass through applications might include qualification confirmation, while subsequent rounds with fewer, higher-tiered applications may involve more diligent assessment or specialized criteria.

The screenshot displays the Submittable review interface. The top navigation bar includes a back arrow, a forward arrow, a dropdown menu set to "In-Progress", and icons for "Info", "Assign", "Labels", and "More". The main content is split into two columns. The left column shows the application details for "Community Foundation" by Jemma Torres in the "City Grant" category. It includes a question "Have you ever applied for funding with us?" with a "No" response, a question "What program are you interested in?" with a "City" response, a "Reference Letter" section with a status of "Received" and links to "Download Reference Letter" and "Replace Reference Letter", and a "File Upload" section with a file named "JemmaTorresCV.pdf". The right column shows the "Activity" tab, which includes a note input field, a filter menu with options "all", "notes", "assignments", "ratings", and "labels", and a list of activity items: "2 hours ago ADMINS ONLY Tung Pham voted Yes", "3 days ago ASSIGNED TEAM Christine Buchanan said: This has been completed but needs to be reviewed by admins.", "1 week ago Assigned to: Christine Buchanan by Tung Pham", and "1 month ago VIEWABLE BY SUBMITTER Automated submission response sent to Jemma Torres Response: Dear Jemma, Thank you for your interest in City Grant. Please expect to hear back within 60 days."

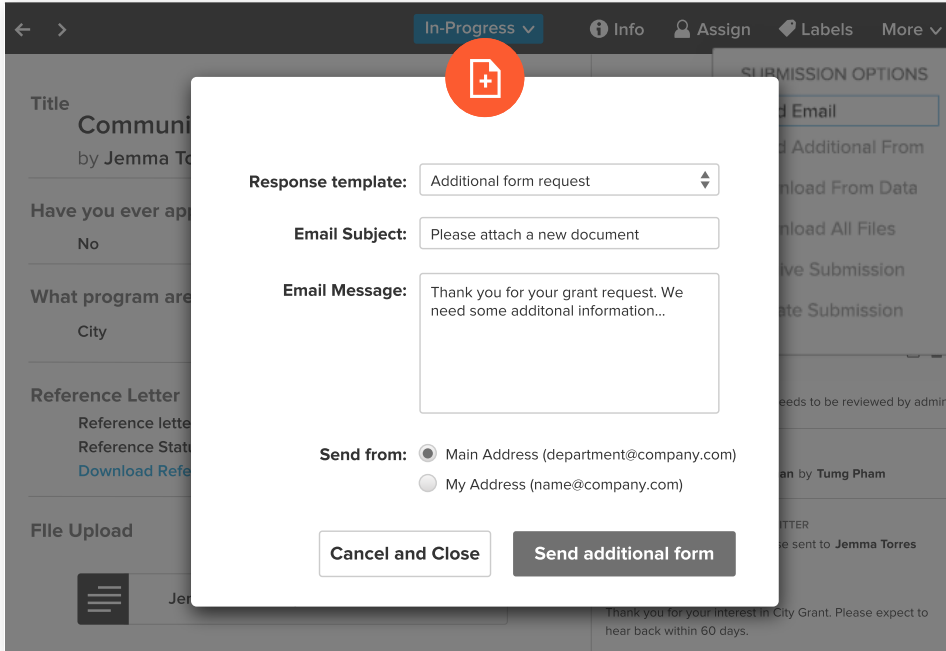
Side-by-side review allows your board to collaborate online together—and literally stay on the same page.

4. Automation for improved focus

Not all manual tasks need to still be done manually. Submittable automates repetitive tasks and streamlines communication, moving important steps out of inboxes and eliminating file cabinets.

Save team resources for diligent assessment of applications—not spreadsheets, data entry, and email. A smart digital grant application process will include features like automatic confirmation for candidates when their application is received, auto-labels that differentiate applications from one another as they come in, and auto-assignments for review teams.

With grant management software, administration and review teams can leave low-effort, high-frequency tasks to the platform and direct more focus on mission and impact.



The screenshot shows a web interface for managing grant applications. A modal window is open, allowing the user to send an email. The modal has a red circle with a plus sign in the top right corner. The form fields are:

- Response template:** A dropdown menu with "Additional form request" selected.
- Email Subject:** A text input field containing "Please attach a new document".
- Email Message:** A text area containing "Thank you for your grant request. We need some additional information...".
- Send from:** Two radio button options: "Main Address (department@company.com)" (selected) and "My Address (name@company.com)".

At the bottom of the modal are two buttons: "Cancel and Close" and "Send additional form".

Utilize Submittable's bulk message template feature to send the same message to everyone (and save your personal inbox).

5. Anonymous review to minimize bias

When you're relying exclusively on in-person regular meetings or training sessions to collaborate and share feedback on applications, unconscious bias can jeopardize your review process.

The reviewer who speaks the loudest or the first, or the reader that feels particularly strongly about a certain application, have the power to sway other reviewers in a way that can't be controlled.

An online process allows administrators to oversee reviewer permission levels and access. It's simple to hide applicant information from reviewers, hide reviewer comments from other reviewers, and keep reviewer scores confidential, viewable to administrators only. This helps prevent reviewers from making decisions influenced by bias related to applicants or informed by fellow team members.

6. A centralized and secure system

When the applications come in, they're likely to include a significant amount of sensitive information and documents, depending on your grant. Using an online system allows you to collect and safely store application and proposal data in addition to all relevant documents in one centralized location—with no email attachments and no downloads.

Administrators and reviewers don't have to worry about the security of a shared file or about misplacing something. Plus, reviewers can see all application materials in one place, side-by-side with their review.

Applicants will also appreciate the ability to access their application from anytime inside their account, as well as track progress online.

7. Clear communication and easy feedback

Your grant review process inevitably involves multiple lines of communication. Administrators communicate with reviewers (and vice versa), reviewers collaborate with each other, and applicants communicate with your institution (and await your response). Furthermore, this communication can begin before proposals are filed and continue well after funds have been awarded.

An online process with messaging and automated emails improves these exchanges and captures a central record of important correspondence—while saving your inbox from the drama.

You can also improve your application and review process by asking the applicant a few straightforward questions about their experience, either as part of your application or through your online platform as an additional form, such as a survey. These could be simple yes/no questions or a detailed and advanced feedback section—the key is to ask targeted questions that will shed light on the applicant's experience.

Communication builds trust, helps avoid mistakes, and makes the grantmaking process easier for everyone. Communication online, through a centralized platform, brings you to an entirely new level.

Make strong choices with a successful process

Launching a grant based on a review process that's fair, rigorous, and efficient relies on intentional planning and thoughtful execution.

Just as your programs are unique, a review process that's both fair and rigorous will look a bit different in every institution. The most important areas to focus on are a strong rubric, transparency, inclusivity, a balanced, numbers-based process, and the evasion of bias.

Grant proposal selection can be both a labor-intensive and delicate task, and the stakes are high. A digital platform like Submittable can make it that much easier to establish or fine-tune your outstanding application and review process, so that both your applicants and your team appreciate the results—and so that the community and the world may benefit from what you accomplish.

Submittable

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Submittable is a cloud-based submission management platform that makes it easy to accept, review, and select any kind of content, no matter where you are. Since 2010, Submittable has helped organizations collect more than 10 million submissions for thousands of customers all over the world.