

Standards for a High-Quality Individual Review Form (IRF)

The comments from your IRF will serve as the documentation of your assessment, serve as the basis of the panel discussion, and are provided to the applicant as feedback from the peer review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and other requirements. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between your Ratings and comments are extremely important. As such, they must be appropriate, useful, and clearly correspond with criterion from the Program Design and Past Performance sections that External Reviewers were asked to assess. Provided below is guidance on *writing meaningful comments*; as well as some example *sentence starters* to start you in the right direction with constructing helpful comments.

Writing Meaningful Comments

- **Limit your assessment to information that was found in the reviewed application.** Do not include information from outside sources or the applicant's known reputation; or compare the application to another applicant, etc.
- **Present comments that discuss the application's quality by comparing the application content to the standards (Selection Criteria).** Not from the panel's/Reviewer's perspective, or general suggestions for enhancement.
- **Present evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application.** Tell what you thought about the proposal. Give your assessment of what is strong or weak about the application, as it relates to the criterion/standards, how well did the information that the applicant included respond to the requirements? Do not simply re-state information or statistics provided in the application as a strength or weakness (e.g., "50% of the children in City X are reading below grade level"); instead, evaluate the information provided (e.g., "The applicant provided clear and specific data to support the need to improve literacy in City X.")
- **Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately.** Avoid making suggestions for improvement and resist the urge to tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Rather, phrase what was lacking and how this deficiency affected the proposal.
- **Do not use inflammatory or inappropriate statements.** Exercise care in how you articulate your assessment. Do not ask questions in your comments; avoid harsh tones, or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the "grant writer" for the application, etc.
i.e.: Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the Criteria?
The training plan was virtually non-existent.
The applicant never clearly stated who the target population was!
The grant writer was creative and a good writer, but there was little substance to the proposal.
- **Write complete sentences, with correct grammar and spelling.** Use spell check, and reread the assessment after you have completed it to ensure that it is clear and well written. You may be asked to re-write any comments that have spelling or grammatical errors. Despite using bullets, sentences should be complete; at the other side of the spectrum, avoid run-on sentences and limit sentence to a clear single idea, or two.
- **Only use comments to address the AmeriCorps Selection Criteria that are part of the external review process;** do not comment on aspects of the proposal that are not within the scope of external review (such as the budget and performance measures).
- **Limit comments to the most significant strengths and weaknesses of the application only.** A strength becomes significant when it shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of, and the ability to address, a key issue in program implementation or management. A weakness becomes significant when a criterion is not addressed at all, or is addressed poorly causing concern about the applicant's ability to

successfully implement the proposed project. Do not focus on generating a particular number of comments, or on providing a comment for every aspect of a particular criterion. The quality of the comments provided is much more important than the quantity.

- **Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses identified do not contradict each other.** If the applicant's response to a particular Criterion has both strengths and weaknesses that you would like to comment on, please enter two separate comments that clearly identify and distinguish between the strong and weak aspects of the response.
- **Align the selected Rating with the comments provided for each section.** If your Rating indicates that the applicant did not meet the standard for that Criterion, your comments should address the significant weakness(es) identified. If the selected Rating indicates that the applicant exceeded the standard, your comments should reflect the significant strength(s).

Characteristics of High-Quality Comments

1. Comments are focused on significant strengths and weaknesses that have an impact on the selected Rating.
2. The difference is clear between comments based on fact and those based on professional judgment (both are helpful, but the distinction is necessary).
3. Comments include evidence or an evaluation, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.
4. Comments are directly relevant to the AmeriCorps Selection Criteria.
5. Comments are written in complete sentences with no spelling or grammatical errors.
6. Comments should focus on a single point or idea.

Examples of High-Quality Comments:

- The applicant presents a compelling case for the benefits of one-on-one and small group tutoring to increase academic success among low performing, rural poverty-level students.
- The applicant's past performance demonstrates success in small group tutoring within its first year, with marked academic improvement from pre/post test scores, in addition to retention of 92% of its students in the program.

Characteristics of Low-Quality Comments

1. There is no relevant information to connect the statement to a particular application. The comment is generic and can be read to apply to any application. (i.e. "the need is well supported and articulated" vs. "the need for health services in Austin was well-supported with relevant statistics".)
2. Comment includes a large portion of information that was copied directly from the application.
3. There is no relevant information to indicate overall quality of the section.
4. The sentence is long and confusing, so that the assessment is altogether unclear.
5. There is no reference provided to substantiate what was strong/weak, or how it was good/bad.
6. Comments are ambiguous and not clearly related to the Selection Criteria or standards. (Incl. run-on sentences)
7. Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (e.g., commenting that the program has received more than its fair share of funding).
8. Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements, otherwise inappropriate or unprofessional.
9. Comments include identifying information about the reviewer or panel.

Examples of Low-Quality Comments:

- The applicant's proposed intervention is not very cost effective.
- Solid evidence is provided by the applicant to support the intervention.
- 20% of the population is below the poverty level.
- The program could be improved and reach more students if they extended the tutoring through grade 8.
- The program provides member training. Such as a 3-day pre-service orientation, 2-day Placement site orientation, and training in specific intervention strategies.

Recommended Descriptors for Program Applications

Top/High Quality

clear	compelling	comprehensive	demonstrates	detailed
distinct	effective	highly	high quality	persuasive
solid	sound	superior	well-aligned	well-described
well-documented	well-supported	worthy		

Adequate/Average Quality

acceptable	addressed	described	likely	presented
provided	reasonable	responded	satisfactory	substantiated
sufficient	suitable	supported		

Lower Quality

absent	brief/cursory	immaterial	inconclusive	ineffective
insufficient	lacking	limited	not present	unclear
unconvincing	unsubstantiated	unsupported	weak	

Structure and framework for Comments

- “The applicant” / evaluative descriptor / criterion reference / detail.
 - o Example: The applicant / clearly demonstrates / the need for small group tutoring / in rural areas based on their performance measures and past performance results.
- Detail / criterion reference / description.
 - o Example: The 2007 study / of efficacy of tutoring / did not match what the member activities targeted.
- Criterion reference / description / detail.
 - o Example: The potential impact of the program on the community / is well-supported / in the AIMSweb Benchmark Testing and the Xavier Institute study.

Sentence Starters

The sentence starters below may be useful in forming constructive review comments in the IRFs. Keep in mind that the Sentence Starters are not exclusive statements, and that CNCS is neither prescribing them nor limiting you to their use. The purpose is to provide you with resources to help you succeed in your review.

Sentence Starters for Strengths:

- Strong [comprehensive] data/evidence is provided to support...[description of needed intervention]
- The applicant presents a clear/feasible/compelling/well-designed/logical...[description of intervention and/or outcomes]
- The proposed...[intervention] is/are likely to be successful/effective in...[description of problem that the intervention will solve]
- The applicant's past performance demonstrates success in...[description of support intervention]

Sentence Starters for Weaknesses:

- The applicant presents [limited] information about...[description of intervention and/or outcomes]
- The application does not sufficiently address...[description of problem the intervention will solve]
- The proposed activities do not...[explanation of how the activities do not support or align with the proposed intervention]
- The applicant does not demonstrate successful past performance in...[description of support intervention]
- It is unclear whether the program/members will...[description of the impact of the program]
- The absence of information on... [intervention] makes it difficult to assess the impact of the program in ...[description of problem that the intervention will solve]
- Insufficient data/evidence is presented to support...[description of needed intervention]