# SBIR Proposal Writing Basics: Doubling The Chances of Success of Your NSF Phase I Proposal

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Some of you undoubtedly submitted an SBIR/STTR Phase I proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for their mid June 2017 deadline. While you wait patiently for a response from NSF and its reviewers, you might want to consider submitting a version of your NSF proposal to another agency for consideration under its SBIR/STTR programs.

“Whoa!”, you say, “I don’t think you can submit the same proposal to a second SBIR/STTR agency. I think there are people serving time in prison for doing that.” Well, not exactly true: there are folks who are in prison (or otherwise have been penalized) for accepting duplicative SBIR/STTR awards when they submitted similar/identical proposals to two or more agencies. It is fine to send the same/similar proposals to multiple agencies, you simply must (a) disclose that you are doing so and (b) if multiple agencies want to fund your proposal (a rare but nice problem to have), you can’t accept multiple pots of money to do one set of research. But given these modest limitations, why would you not send a version of a proposal you wrote for one agency to another SBIR/STTR agency, when this would give you twice as many chances of getting someone to fund your project?

Let’s use the example of submitting your NSF Phase I proposal to the NIH SBIR Grant program. This would be most appropriate if your NSF proposal was submitted under the “Smart Health” or “Biomedical” topics, but might be relevant to other topics if your proposal can be spun as applicable to human health.

So, can you just cut and paste your NSF Phase I proposal into the NIH format? Not exactly. Surprise, surprise: NIH uses a different electronic submission system (grants.gov) than does NSF (FastLane), and the NIH format and page limits are entirely different than NSF’s. Here some of the important differences you will need to address if you want to send your NSF proposal to NIH:

* NIH will require you to be registered on grants.gov and eRACommons. The other registrations required by NIH are the same as the ones you had to do for NSF (SAM, sbir.gov, etc.).
* NIH will want you to omit about 90% of the commercialization discussion that you put in your NSF Phase I proposal. NIH only allows 7 pages for the technical proposal (Specific Aims and Research Strategy sections), and within those 7 pages asks you to address commercialization twice—you can only put in a couple of paragraphs on commercialization in the NIH proposal, versus the 5+ pages you included in your NSF proposal
* NSF limited you to 2-page bio sketches, versus NIH allows you to go up to 5 pages for each key person’s bio

The good news is that the innovation and technical discussion sections of your NSF Phase I proposal will likely serve as a very nice start to your prep of the NIH Aims and Research Strategies sections. They won’t be a simple cut and paste, but they should already address many of the kinds of technical issues that NIH reviewers expect to read about in these key sections of your Phase I proposal.

Finally, assuming you decide to submit a version of your NSF proposal to NIH, how do you disclose (per our discussion above) that you are doing this? NIH does not have a section of the Aims or Research Strategy where you do this (in contrast, Dept. of Defense has a specific section for this in Volume 2 of your proposal—titled “Prior, Current or Pending Support for Similar Proposals or Awards”). Instead, you are expected to check the appropriate box in section 5 of the SBIR/STTR Information Form, attach a summary of “Other Support” to the bottom of the Senior/Key Persons Profile Forms for the PI and other leaders of the project, and then be prepared to update or expand upon this topic after the reviewers have given your proposal a fundable score as part of NIH’s “Just in Time” policy.

If your NSF proposal doesn’t readily lend itself to NIH’s interest in “human health,” then consider sending a version of it to another agency that might have a more relevant topic. That might be USDA, which has broad topics related to farming, ranching, forestry and living in rural communities/small towns, or DOD or NASA that are so large that one of their narrow, specific topics might just fit the innovation you proposed to NSF. Consider using the topic search engine at [www.sbir.gov](http://www.sbir.gov) to identify these other opportunities for your NSF proposal. Don’t force the fit, and always customize the proposal to meet the agency’s instructions and priorities.