

**PEER REVIEW CONFIDENTIALITY GUIDANCE**

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Reviewers and individuals with material under review are responsible for adhering to the standards and requirements for peer review. Maintaining and upholding the integrity, confidentiality, and security of the peer review process for grants and manuscripts is essential to:

- Allow for the candid exchange of scientific opinions and evaluations
- Maintain researchers' unique and novel ideas, methods, approaches, interpretations, arguments and information
- Protect trade secrets, commercial or financial information, and information that is privileged or confidential
- Ensure public trust

The NIH, NSF and other federal sponsors, as well as most non-federal sponsors, require peer reviewers to maintain strict confidentiality. Similarly, most journals also require peer reviewers to maintain strict confidentiality. While some journals do have a process for reviewers to designate or include other individuals to assist in the review, this is considered part of the peer review process and confidentiality requirements would apply to those individuals just as they do to the primary reviewer.

Confidentiality standards in peer review prohibit reviewers from:

- Participating in peer review without fully disclosing all actual or apparent conflicts of interest related to the materials under review.
- Sharing applications, proposals, peer review meeting materials, or unpublished manuscripts with anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process. This includes the reviewer's graduate or other students, post-doctoral or research associates, lab members, and colleagues.
- Disclosing, in any manner, information about deliberations, discussions, evaluations, or documents to anyone not designated to participate in the peer review process. This includes the reviewer's graduate or other students, post-doctoral or research associates, lab members, and colleagues.
- Having anyone other than themselves write the review or critique.
- Granting access to any secure computer system to anyone who has not been officially designated to participate in the peer review process.
- Using information contained in an application, proposal, or unpublished manuscript for his/her personal benefit or making such information available for the personal benefit of any other individuals or organizations.

Individuals with an application, proposal or paper submitted for review should not contact reviewers or review panel members. There should never be any attempt to influence a reviewer or the outcome of a review. Any actions, interactions, or contact that could be perceived as attempts to influence a reviewer should be avoided. Additionally,

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materials related to the review should only be provided to reviewers through the defined review process or approved communication channels.

Violation of confidentiality in the peer review process has consequences. Depending on the specific circumstances and sponsor or journal, such steps may include but not be limited to:

- Requiring the reviewer or individual with material under review and their institution to provide a written documentation of the occurrence, why the reviewer did not understand the peer review requirements, and what steps will be taken to prevent further occurrences.
- Terminating a reviewer's service.
- Withdrawing or deferring a submitted application, proposal, or paper.
- Terminating grant, contract, or other funding support.
- NIH, NSF or other federal specific responses such as referral for investigation, pursuit of suspension or debarment, or pursuit of criminal charges.

Ensuring peer review integrity, confidentiality, and security is in the interest of everyone in the scientific research community. It is a shared responsibility of investigators, reviewers, chairs, sponsors, and institutional officials to create a culture and expectation for the standards and requirement of the peer review process.

### INFORMATION LINKS

- [Maintaining Security and Confidentiality in NIH Peer Review: Rules, Responsibilities and Possible NOT-OD-22-044](#)
- [CSR Integrity Training module](#)
- [NSF Merit Review](#)