

FLAGSTAFF SUSTAINABILITY GRANT · REVIEWER TRAINING

Score the project, not the prose

Recognizing and reducing bias when we evaluate community grant applications

Sustainability Commission · September 24, 2026



WHY THIS MATTERS

This program was built for community-led ideas

\$7,500

maximum award per project, for food, energy, transportation, waste, and community health and climate resilience

90+

projects funded to date, from residents, community groups, schools, nonprofits, and local businesses

You

decide who gets funded. Many applicants are first-timers, not professional grant writers.

Our job is to find the best projects, not the best writers.

FIRST, A REFRAME

Bias isn't a character flaw. It's a shortcut every every brain takes.

It's easier to spot in others than in ourselves, so we build habits and panel practices that catch it for us.

Source: [6]

Biases about who is applying

Affinity bias

Favoring applicants who seem like us: same background, circles, or way of talking.

Halo effect

One impressive trait, like a known partner or slick layout, colors how we see everything else.

Reputation and familiarity

Knowing an applicant, good or bad, lets their reputation outweigh what the application says.

Attribution bias

Seeing a community as the cause of its own problems, and so less deserving of support.

Biases about how we read and score

Polish and language bias

Rewarding fluent, jargon-rich writing over plain language, typos, or a second language.

Contrast effect

Scoring an application against the one we just read instead of against the rubric.

Anchoring

Sticking to one corner of the scale, so real differences between projects disappear.

Nitpick drift

Letting a pile of small weaknesses sink a project we actually think is significant.

THE EVIDENCE

These effects show up in real funding decisions

24%

less philanthropic funding goes to organizations led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color than to comparable white-led groups. Limited grant-writing capacity is one driver.

~1/2

In an experiment with 1,200 NIH applications, hiding applicant identity cut the scoring gap between Black and white investigators by about half.

30-SECOND EXERCISE

Which one tells you what will actually happen?

Application A

“Our organization will leverage a multi-stakeholder, asset-based framework to catalyze equitable food-system resilience across underserved Flagstaff neighborhoods.”

Application B

“We want to put 6 garden beds behind our apartments. 14 families here have no yard. Neighbors signed up to water. Extra food goes to the food bank down the street.”

Look for who benefits, who partners, and who volunteers.

YOUR BEST TOOL

The rubric rewards impact, not polish

Rubric criterion	Points
Meets needs and includes voices of those most impacted by environmental harm	0–3
Builds community partnerships	0–2
Facilitates volunteer engagement	0–2
Aligns with a category-specific objective	0–6
Aligns with the Carbon Neutrality Plan	0–4

If a strength doesn't map to a criterion, it shouldn't move the score.

Set yourself up to read fairly

- 01** **Declare conflicts early.** If you know an applicant well, say so before scoring. Disclose using the ‘Conflict of Interest (COI) Form’.

- 02** **Re-read the rubric first.** Know what each point level means before you open application one.

- 03** **Pace yourself.** Score in short sessions with breaks, so application twelve gets the same attention as application one.

Look for the project under the words

- 04** Ignore **spelling, grammar, and formatting** unless the rubric asks for them. Treat Spanish-language applications exactly the same.
 - 05** Score **each criterion on its own**, against the rubric, not against the last application you read.
 - 06** Use the **full point range** and jot one line of evidence for each score.
 - 07** Ask "**could this work if funded?**" Missing detail is a question for staff, not an automatic deduction.
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Catch bias together in discussion

08 **Talk through big score gaps.** When scores are far apart, we will compare the evidence behind each score.

09 **Speak in rubric language.** "Strong partnerships" beats "I just liked it" or "it felt thin."

10 **Be a kind active bystander.** If a comment sounds like bias, respectfully ask which criterion it connects to.

KEEP THIS NEXT TO YOUR SCORESHEET

Four questions before you finalize a score

Would I give the same score if this were polished?
polished?

Which rubric criterion does this point come from?

Am I reacting to who they are, or what they
propose?

Am I comparing to the rubric, or to the last one I
read?

Score the project, not the writing.

Sources

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[4] Royal Geographical Society, "Resources for reviewers"

[5] UKRI / MRC, "Tackling Bias in Peer Review: Guidance for Peer Reviewers" (2022)

[6] UKRI / MRC, "Tackling Bias in Peer Review: Guidance for Board/Panel Members" (2022)

[7] Good Grants, "7 ways to reduce bias in grant funding" (2022)

[8] Stanford Social Innovation Review, "Nonprofits Need Grant Writing Infrastructure" (2026)

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