

Instructions for Assigning Scores and Comments – Museums for America

Summary

- You will access the applications assigned to you by clicking on a link provided to you in an email message from your IMLS primary contact.
- You will enter your scores and comments through the IMLS Online Reviewer System.
- Museums for America (MFA) field review uses a 7-point scale for each of three sections of the application narrative: Project Justification, Project Work Plan, and Project Results.
- Scores are in whole numbers only. Fractions, ranges, decimals, and zeroes are not allowed.
- You must write a constructive and substantive comment of between 30 and 2000 characters in length for each section of the application narrative.
- All three sections of the narrative have equal weight and are equally important in identifying the overall strengths and weaknesses of an application.
- Address your comments to the applicant, not to IMLS or to panel reviewers.
- Each comment should reflect the numeric score you provide for the corresponding section of the narrative.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Verify Access to Applications

Use the link provided to you in an email message from your IMLS primary contact to access the applications assigned to you. Make sure you see all the applications referenced in the email, and then save each to your computer in a secure place that is not accessible to others. Call or email your IMLS primary contact immediately if any applications are missing or if you cannot open them.

Confidentiality in IMLS Peer Review: The information contained in grant applications is strictly confidential. Do not discuss or reveal names, institutions' project activities, or any other information contained in the applications.

2. Verify Access to IMLS Online Reviewer System

Use the following link to verify that you have access to the IMLS Online Reviewer System:

<https://e-services.ims.gov/grantapps/reviewers.aspx>

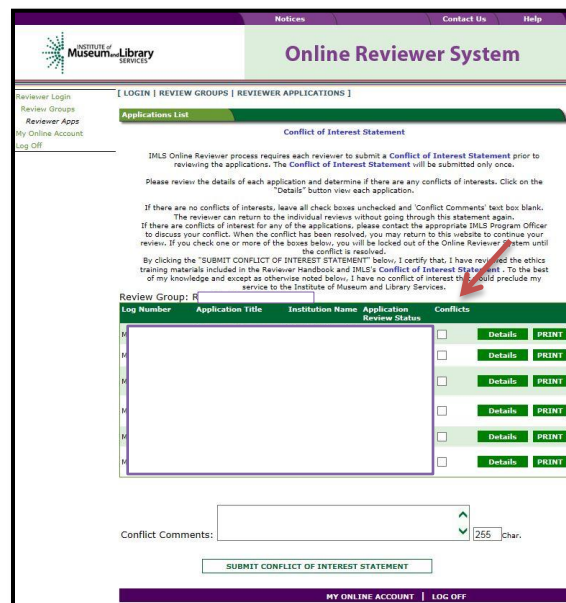
To login, enter the email address you have on file with IMLS, and use the default password: **password**. An **E-Review Security Screen** will appear. Read this page and click **OK**. Next, create a user account and establish your own password.

3. Assess Potential Conflicts of Interest

After you have created a new password, click **REVIEW GROUPS**, and your review assignment will appear. To access the list of applications assigned to you, click **VIEW**.

Read through your list of applications again to see if there are any potential conflicts of interest. Please see [“Complying with Ethical Obligations and Avoiding Conflicts of Interest.”](#)

CAUTION: Depending on your computer’s operating system and/or the browser you use, you *may* see a screen with a column labeled “Conflicts” with a checkable box by each application. **Do not check any of these boxes** as doing so will disable access to the system and make it impossible for others in your review group to do their work. Instead, call or email your IMLS primary contact immediately if you have a conflict, or what may appear to be a conflict.



If you have no conflicts of interest with any of the applicants on the list, click **SUBMIT CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT** at the bottom of page.

4. Read Applications

Revisit the MFA Notice of Funding Opportunities at http://www.imls.gov/applicants/mfa_nofa_2015.aspx. Then read the applications, keeping in mind the review criteria for each section of the narrative. You will not need to reference each bullet point in your comments, but these questions should guide your thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of each application. You can also access these [review criteria as a separate document](#) to keep handy as you read your applications.

To evaluate the **Project Justification**, consider the following:

- Is the project clearly explained?
- *For Learning Experiences and Collections Stewardship:* Is the need, problem, or challenge to be addressed clearly identified and supported by relevant evidence?

- *For Community Anchors:* Is the community need, problem, or challenge to be addressed clearly identified and supported by relevant evidence?
- *For Collections Stewardship:* Is the project's high-priority status adequately documented?
- *For Collections Stewardship:* Are the collections and/or records that are the focus of the project and their current condition described and quantified in sufficient detail?
- Are the people who will benefit from the project clearly identified?
- Have appropriate stakeholders and/or those who will benefit from the project been involved in project planning?
- Are the performance goals and intended results well formulated and achievable? Are the ways in which this project advances the institution's strategic plan specific, actionable, and measurable?
- Does the project align with the selected MFA project category: Learning Experiences, Community Anchors, or Collections Stewardship?

To evaluate the **Project Work Plan**, consider the following:

- Are the proposed activities informed by appropriate theory and practice?
- Do the identified staff, partners, consultants, and service providers possess the experience and skills necessary to complete the work successfully?
- Is the schedule of work realistic and achievable?
- Are the time, personnel, and financial resources identified appropriate for the scope and scale of the project?
- Does the institution provide evidence of its capacity to carry out the project activities and meet the cost-share requirement? (Note that cost share is not permitted in proposals submitted at the \$5,000-\$25,000 funding level.)
- Is the proposed evaluation methodology appropriate for project activities? Will it result in valid, reliable, and generalizable findings?
- Is a clear methodology described for tracking the project's progress and adjusting course when necessary?
- Is there an effective plan for communicating results and/or sharing discoveries?

To evaluate the **Project Results**, consider the following:

- Are the project's intended results and performance indicators clearly articulated, appropriate and realistic?
- *For Collections Stewardship:* Will the care, condition and/or management of the museum collections improve as a result of this project?
- Is the plan to effect meaningful change in knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes solidly grounded and appropriately structured?
- Will the tangible products be useful?
- Is there a reasonable and practical plan for sustaining the benefits of the project beyond the conclusion of this grant?

5. Draft Comments

You must write a constructive and substantive comment for each section of the narrative for each application you review. All three sections of the narrative have equal weight and are equally important in identifying the overall strengths and weaknesses of an application.

To organize notes for writing your comments, you may wish to use the "[Field Review Notes Template](#)." Those reviewing applications requesting between \$5,000 and \$25,000 in IMLS funds (application log numbers begin with MA-11, MA-21, or MA-31) should use the "[Field Review Notes Template for MFA \\$5,000-\\$25,000 Funding Level](#)."

Think about the review criteria for each section of the application narrative as listed above, and be sure to consider all the required components of the application as well as relevant Supporting Documents as resources for your assessment. Draft your comments using a word-processing program for later copying and pasting into the IMLS Online Reviewer System. Remember that each comment must be between 30 and 2000 characters long.

When drafting your comments ...

- use your professional knowledge and experience to assess the information objectively.
- judge the application on its own merits, and do not base your evaluation on any prior knowledge of an institution.
- if you question the accuracy of any information, call us—not the applicant—to discuss it.

Effective comments ...	Poor comments...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are presented in a constructive manner. • are concise, specific, and easy to read and understand. • reflect the resources of the institution. • are specific to the individual application. • reflect the numeric score assigned. • reflect the application's strengths and identify areas for improvement. • are directed to applicants—not IMLS or panel reviewers—for their use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • simply summarize or paraphrase the applicant's own words. • make derogatory remarks. • penalize an applicant because you feel the institution does not need the money. • offer or ask for irrelevant or extraneous information. • make vague or overly general statements. • question an applicant's honesty or integrity.

Make sure your comments justify the scores you provide. A highly complementary comment does not “remove the sting” of a low score, and a negative comment does not “even out” a high one. Comments and scores must complement each other and make sense as a whole.

Below are some examples of **effective** field reviewer comments:

Project Justification	
<p>“You clearly identify the project beneficiaries and have done a good job of working with the community to identify strategic goals for the future. The project identifies strong ties to the strategic plans/goals of both the museum and the neighborhood/district. The proposal does a good job of discussing how a diverse team of community members and museum staff has worked together to create a strong project. Your intended results are well reasoned, well formulated, and achievable. The proposed project is an excellent fit for an MFA Community Anchors grant.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is substantive, addresses the review criteria, and employs a positive tone.</i></p>
<p>“Your museum is making good strides in professionalizing and developing your Strategic Plan. The project outlined fits the collections stewardship criteria and is necessary for you to move forward. I started to read the application with great support but slowly came to wonder if there was a clear sense of direction and execution. For example, I am not clear about the role of the costume curator since she was not mentioned in the narrative and her resume was missing from the application.”</p>	<p><i>Comment correlates with the score of 3 and makes implementable suggestions for improving the project.</i></p>
Project Work Plan	
<p>“Your work plan is clear and outlines many of the details lacking in the project justification. Your consultants are well qualified to guide museum staff in writing the general conservation survey and designing your long-term preservation plan.</p> <p>“You might consider replacing the term ‘housekeeping’ with ‘collections maintenance.’ There are tremendous new resources available through the American Institute for Conservation’s new Collections Care Network, designed to be used by collection management teams and other non-conservators.”</p>	<p><i>Comment provides a constructive assessment of the application and suggestions likely to benefit the applicant.</i></p>
Project Work Plan	
<p>“Your proposal shows that your staff has done a good job of working with the community on past projects and has an excellent relationship with your neighbors and relevant community partners. The proposed project makes good use of a community advisory committee and of using evaluations at various points throughout the run of the project.</p> <p>“Your schedule of work shows a well-thought-out list of activities suitable to the challenges identified. Your timeframe, personnel, and budget resources are appropriate for the scope and scale of the project, and you adequately discuss how you will meet the cost-sharing requirement. Today, many museums are looking for ways to increase their community engagement and boost the economics of their region. I would have liked to have seen some information on how you could/will share your results or discoveries at the end of the project. This project could serve as an excellent case study for others to emulate, and you might think about ways to share your results with your colleagues across the country—e.g. an article in a professional journal, a session at a regional or national conference, a webinar.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is evaluative, addresses the review criteria, and makes implementable suggestions in a positive tone.</i></p>

<p>“Although the plan to purchase additional licenses and catalog should be straightforward, your proposal shows some inconsistencies. The effort to catalog 6,000 objects in three years does not double the count of the existing 12,000 record in a total of 40,000 objects. You involve photography and request equipment, but you did not submit a digital stewardship supplementary information form . Several staff members possess the ability to work on the project and are part time; yet, your intent is to hire a temporary part-time project collections manager. You should explain why.</p> <p>“Consider simplifying and streamlining the project so it can be supported by a small staff with dedicated volunteers and interns. If your goal is to catalog, then make a first pass over ALL 40,000 objects. Determine which fields are crucial to manage the collections off site and assist with exhibitions and deaccession review. It is crucial to have a defined scope that is achievable, so that later the staff can add the layers of additional information such as condition, photography, and provenance. Your project as formatted involves too many steps in work flow and is not likely to achieve results that will make a difference. At the end of the project, the collection remains partially catalogued.”</p>	<p><i>Comment correlates with score of 2 and makes specific implementable suggestions for improving the project.</i></p>
<p>Project Results</p>	
<p>“The project to acquire intellectual control over the collection is sound stewardship and a necessary step before expansion. The goal to make the collections public is outside this scope, but will inform the extent of cataloging and quality of the record with image file. Your collections team should review their strategy and focus on the desired outcome of the project to strengthen the application. For example, the staff is currently cataloguing the objects on hard copy, then entering the information into the object document file and digital record. Why not enter information directly into the collections database? I understand the grant request is for laptops, licenses, and hotspot access, but utilizing the existing tools now and understanding the impact will strengthen the request and provide a better measurement of success. Your current measurement of success is counted as numbers, when in fact the digital record with image provides a level of quality and improved accessibility.”</p>	<p><i>Comment addresses questions from the review criteria.</i></p>

In contrast, below are some examples of **poor** field reviewer comments:

<p>Project Justification</p>	
<p>“The project is justified; there is a clear need to catalogue and document this material. This collection is an important part of the permanent collection at the museum.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is not relevant to MFA program goals.</i></p>
<p>“The museum will hire a temporary curator to develop and fabricate an exhibition to coincide with their town’s bicentennial. They will exhibit materials from their archives and private collections from community stakeholders. The project will be two years in length.”</p>	<p><i>Comment paraphrases the applicant’s own words.</i></p>
<p>Project Work Plan</p>	
<p>“The work plan would be improved by putting in more time onsite.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is very brief and has little value to the applicant.</i></p>

<p>“There are some concerns in the way of materials and supplies. The use of oak shelving and related furniture and materials that were mentioned in the itemized list in the proposal, although aesthetically pleasing, have problems, as oak off-gases acids, which therefore does not make it the most suitable material for archives, for both presentation and storage. More suitable would be powder-coated stainless steel shelving, stainless steel flat files, and industry-approved laminates for the furniture, such as tables. In the proposal, there was no mention of digitizing some of the archival materials. Is this planned at all for some of the more rare and one-of-a-kind materials in the collection? Perhaps the proposal could be adjusted to consider or include this aspect, as scanners have become more affordable.”</p>	<p><i>Comment does not reflect the score of 7.</i></p>
<p>“The design of the exhibition is boring and not even remotely relevant to the museum’s mission. The staff is woefully unprepared and will fail in the execution of this project. Targeting federal funds to this museum is a mistake.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is derogatory and does not provide useful feedback.</i></p>
<p>Project Results</p>	
<p>“Strong results with very sustainable benefits.”</p>	<p><i>Comment is very brief and has little worth or value to the applicant.</i></p>

The chart below summarizes the most frequently asked questions from MFA field reviewers:

Should I consider ...?	Yes	No
Whether a project meets the high level goals of the institution’s strategic plan	X	
An institution’s financial or staffing needs		X
Whether the project is well planned and the organization has the appropriate resources to complete the project	X	
Whether the applicant has included the information necessary for an adequate evaluation of its merits	X	
Whether a project is new or a resubmission		X
The size or age of the organization		X
An institution’s indirect cost rate		X

6. Assign Scores

Assign a preliminary score to each of the three sections of the application narrative: Project Justification, Project Work Plan, and Project Results. Use a scale of 1 to 7, as described below. Use only whole numbers; do not use fractions, ranges, decimals, or zeroes.

SCORE DEFINITIONS	
7 – Exceptional	The applicant’s response is exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses in its support of the proposed project.
6 – Excellent	The applicant’s response is very strong with no more than one minor weakness in its support of the proposed project
5 – Very Good	The applicant’s response is strong with only a few minor weaknesses in its support for the proposed project.
4 – Good	The applicant’s response is adequate but with numerous minor weaknesses in its support for the proposed project.
3 – Some Merit	The applicant’s response may have some strengths but has at least one moderate weakness in its support for the proposed project.
2 – Poor	The applicant’s response is deficient and has at least one major weakness in its support of the proposed project.
1 – Inadequate/Insufficient	The applicant’s response is either inadequate or insufficient to evaluate fully and/or has numerous major weaknesses in its support of the proposed project.
<i>Minor</i>	<i>An easily addressable weakness that does not substantially lessen the impact of the project</i>
<i>Moderate</i>	<i>A weakness that lessens the impact of the project</i>
<i>Major</i>	<i>A weakness that severely limits the impact of the project</i>

7. Review Your Work

Review your draft comments and preliminary scores. A review with even one missing score or comment cannot be accepted by the IMLS Online Reviewer System. Adjust your scores, if necessary, to reflect more accurately your written evaluation. Scores should support comments, and comments should justify scores.

8. Enter Scores and Comments

Return to the IMLS Online Reviewer System at

<https://e-services.imls.gov/grantapps/reviewers.aspx>

Login with the email address you have on file with IMLS and the password you created in Step 2. Go to your list of assigned applications and click **REVIEW** beside any of them to begin.

Copy and paste your comments into the appropriate blue blocks for each section of the narrative for each application. Choose a numeric score between 1 and 7 from the **SCORE** dropdown menu. Be sure to save each comment by clicking **SAVE** at the bottom of the page before you move on to the next one. Use the controls on the side or top of the screen to navigate between sections.

If you are reviewing applications requesting between \$5,000 and \$25,000 in IMLS funds (application log numbers begin with MA-11, MA-21, or MA-31), you will need to enter additional information into the Application Overview section of the Online Review System. Please add the phrase “I recommend this application for funding” or “I do not recommend this application for funding” in that section. You may add additional text here if you wish.

Once you have completed assigning scores and providing comments for each application assigned to you, we recommend that you print a copy of each completed review to keep for your files. Then click on **I AM READY TO SUBMIT THIS REVIEW TO IMLS** to send all your work to IMLS.

At this point, you will not be able to re-enter the IMLS Online Reviewer System unless you notify your IMLS primary contact.

For all questions about reviewing, either technical or programmatic, please call or email your IMLS primary contact directly.

9. Manage Your Copies

Keep your applications and a copy of each review sheet until **September 30, 2015**, in case there are questions from IMLS staff. Continue to maintain confidentiality of all applications that you review by keeping electronic and paper copies in a secure place. After September 30, 2015, destroy the applications and the review sheets.