



EJAH
BUSINESS CONSULTING & CO LLC

UNSEALED INTELLIGENCE

THE REJECTION AUTOPSY

What Your Declined Applications Are Actually Telling You

A Free Fillable Workbook from EJAH Business Consulting & Co

UNSEALED INTELLIGENCE™ — Funding Clearance, Every Month, No Guesswork.

Introduction

Most funding advice only talks about wins. Nobody publishes a guide built around their rejections — which is exactly why this workbook exists.

A rejection carries more diagnostic information than an approval does. An approval just tells you something worked. A rejection, examined honestly and compared against what did work, can tell you why — if you're willing to actually look at the pattern instead of guessing at it.

The method in this workbook is the same one used to correct real, live assumptions during actual funder screening: an early guess about which category or ask amount “performed better” got directly overturned once real rejection data was compared side-by-side against real approvals. The guess was reasonable. It was also wrong. The data said otherwise, and the data won.

That's the discipline this workbook teaches: don't guess at your own patterns. Compare them.

Part 1: Build Your Comparison Set

Why You Need Both Approvals and Rejections

Looking at rejections alone tells you what failed, but not what's different about what succeeded. Looking at approvals alone tells you what worked, but not what's actually necessary versus incidental. You need both, from the same rough period, to see the real difference.

Gather every application you can from the last 12 to 18 months — funder name, requested amount, category or focus area used, a copy of the actual language submitted if you still have it, and the outcome.

A Real Caution Before You Start

Small sample sizes lie convincingly. If you only have two or three data points in a category, resist the urge to declare a firm pattern from that alone. The goal here is honest pattern-recognition, not premature certainty — a real pattern needs enough data points to actually be one.

Part 2: The Four Variables to Isolate

Most rejections trace back to one or more of these four variables. Isolating which one (or ones) is actually doing the work is the entire point of this exercise.

1. Category or Framing

Did the application use the funder's actual demonstrated giving category, or a category that seemed to fit based on your own mission language? A mismatch here is common and often invisible until you compare it directly against what got approved.

2. Requested Amount

Compare what was asked against what similar approved applications asked for — and against what was actually awarded. A pattern worth watching for: funders that approve regardless of the amount requested, but cap the awarded amount at a consistent ceiling. If that's what your data shows, the lesson isn't "ask for less" — it's that the ask amount may not be driving the decision at all.

3. Facility- or Funder-Specific Factors

Was there an existing relationship? Prior funding from the same source in the same cycle (which can trigger an automatic decline under "no repeat funding within one fiscal year" rules)? Timing relative to a budget cycle? These factors are often invisible in the application itself but can fully explain an outcome that looks like it was about content when it wasn't.

4. Copy Specificity

Generic, reused language — the same paragraph with only the city name swapped — is one of the most common threads running through real rejections. Specific, concrete, locally-grounded language is a common thread running through real approvals. This is usually the variable most within your direct control, which is exactly why it's worth checking first.

Worksheet: Approved vs. Rejected Comparison

List at least three approved and three rejected applications from the same rough period. Be specific and honest — this only works if the entries are real.

Funder	Amount Req.	Category	Outcome	Copy Style	Notes

What Pattern Do You Actually See?

Look across your rows. Is there a variable that consistently differs between your approvals and your rejections? Write it in plain language below.

Part 3: What to Fix First

Once you've found a real pattern, prioritize fixes in this order:

- Fix what's in your control first — usually copy specificity. This is the fastest, cheapest change to make and test.
- Adjust category or framing next, but only where your own comparison data actually supports the change.
- Treat ask-amount patterns carefully — if funders cap awards regardless of request, chasing a specific number may not move your odds at all.
- Log relationship and timing factors as context for future decisions, even if they're not something you can fix retroactively.

Worksheet: Your Fix List

Pattern Observed	Likely Cause	Fix Before Next Application

Closing Thoughts

If you've worked through this honestly, you now have a real, evidence-based read on your own organization's patterns — not a guess, an actual comparison. That's a genuinely useful skill, and it's yours to keep using.

Here's the honest part: doing this consistently, across a growing pipeline, month after month, takes real time and a willingness to look clearly at your own rejections — which is harder than it sounds when you're the one who wrote the applications. Most nonprofit leaders don't have the bandwidth to do this rigorously while also running programs, and most organizations aren't yet ready to justify a \$60,000+ salaried grants manager position to do it full-time.

That's the real gap EJAH exists to fill — not a replacement for understanding your own funding patterns, but a way to have that discipline applied consistently, professionally, and on an ongoing basis, at a fraction of the cost of a full-time hire. If you'd rather hand this off, see our Monthly Prospect Brief, Funding Clearance Report, and Complete Intelligence tiers.

Ready to Hand This Off?

Email ejah@unsealedintelligence.com to get started, or request our Client Readiness Assessment first.

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