

IMPORTANT GUIDE TO BEING AN NEA CHALLENGE AMERICA READER

***(PLEASE REVIEW THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION BEFORE YOU BEGIN
YOUR APPLICATION REVIEW. FEEL FREE TO CONTACT OUR STAFF
WITH QUESTIONS AT ANY TIME.)***

This document includes information that is essential to your role as a Challenge America reader for the National Endowment for the Arts. This includes:

1. Your Role as a Reader
2. Standards of Conduct and Confidential Statement of Affiliations
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Your Role as a Reader

The primary responsibility of a Reader is to review application materials and provide an assessment to the NEA staff. Based on the published review criteria, we ask Readers to give us their best judgment on the applications.

Standards of Conduct

As a Reader, you are a Special Government Employee (SGE), and this affects what you can and cannot do regarding the information you gain from reviewing the applications. You should have read the ***Standards of Conduct*** regulations with the NEA Ethics Training for Special Government Employees in the online REACH system already. This material contains important information about disclosure of finances and affiliations, misuse of your position as a Reader, and issues of confidentiality.

Confidential Statement of Affiliations Form

This form is a requirement as part of your responsibility as a Reader. **“Affiliations”** include any relationships you may have with organizations (including non-arts organizations), whether or not they are part of the applicant pool that you will be reviewing. Affiliations apply to you, your spouse or partner, your dependent children, and other members of your household.

You should have already provided this PDF form through the online REACH system. If you need to make an addition or correction to your Confidential Statement of Affiliations Form, please contact our staff (ChallengeAmerica@arts.gov) immediately.

Conflicts of Interest

The NEA’s legislation requires that all our panels be conflict-free and we follow the same guidelines for Challenge America Readers. **Before you do anything else, *please* read the “Conflict of Interest” information below and review the list of applications assigned to you. If, at any time while you are reviewing the applications, you think you may have a conflict, please contact a staff member *immediately!* This is crucial to the integrity of the review process.**

NOTE: These restrictions apply to any relationships that occur within the 12 months prior to and the 12 months immediately following the reading period.

Don’t assume that there is no possible conflict if you have no direct relationship with the applicant organizations. Applications may involve collaborations or co-productions among several organizations. A relationship with one of the collaborating organizations also is a conflict. Be sure to check this carefully. It is also possible that you are named by an applicant as a possible project participant. If you have not been contacted by the organization but are named in the application, please contact staff immediately so that a determination can be made.

The NEA is concerned not only with actual conflicts of interest, but also with any situations where there is the potential for, or any appearance of, a conflict of interest. Some examples might include:

- Reviewing an application from an organization with which you have any relationship, **whether or not you are compensated**. Serving as a consultant, guest speaker, contractor, advisor/mentor, or unpaid board member all constitute conflicts that would prevent your serving as a Reader.
- Reviewing an application from an organization that has presented you or an institution with which you have a relationship.
- Reviewing an application from an organization with which your spouse, child, other member of your household, parent, or sibling has a relationship. For example, if your child is a student at an applicant organization, you may not serve on the panel reviewing that application.
- Reviewing an application from an organization with which you have (or have had) an adversarial relationship, such as a contract or employment dispute or any other confrontation that may give an applicant a concern about your objectivity.

NOTE: If you currently receive or expect to receive a pension from an organization, please contact the Challenge America staff.

Confidentiality

All of your work relating to application review, both before and after the reading period, should be kept strictly confidential. **Do not** share any application material, including work samples and/or supplementary materials, with anyone, including family members, friends, or colleagues. If you download application/work sample material, please make sure the material is secured. You will also need to delete any application review-related material at the end of the review process (see “What to do with your application materials” below).

Please do not at any time discuss applications with anyone other than NEA staff. If an organization contacts you about its application, refer all questions to NEA staff.

Any feedback given to applicants by NEA staff is generally in summary form, and comments aren't attributed to specific readers.

Guidelines and Review Criteria

Please familiarize yourself with the Guidelines and requirements for Challenge America (which can be found here: <https://arts.gov/grants-organizations/challenge-america/grant-program-description>) before beginning your review of the applications. All applications must be evaluated according to the Review Criteria listed in the Guidelines. **Artistic excellence** and **artistic merit** are the two primary criteria specified by Congress in our authorizing legislation; there are several elements under each.

Artistic excellence of the project includes

- Quality of the artists, arts organizations, works of art, or technical services that the project will involve, as appropriate.

Artistic merit includes a range of factors that go beyond the technical proficiency or standards of a work. This includes:

- Potential of the project to reach underserved populations – those whose opportunities to experience the arts are limited by geography, ethnicity, economics, or disability.
- Appropriateness of the proposed performance measurements.
- Potential to make quality arts or cultural resources more widely available.
- Appropriateness of the project to the organization’s mission, audience, community, and/or constituency.
- Ability to carry out the project based on such factors as the appropriateness of the budget, the quality and clarity of the project goals and design, the resources involved, and the qualifications of the project’s personnel.

Online Tools

Readers will be reviewing applications *and* work samples online. You will enter all your scores and comments in the NEA-GO system at <http://nea.cloud.culturegrants.org/>.

A video orientation is also available to you (<https://www.arts.gov/grants/challenge-america-reader-tools>). It is important that you view this orientation video *before* you begin your review. This orientation also includes a brief tutorial to help walk you through the process of using the NEA-GO system.

Frequently Asked Questions

During the Reading Period:

Q: An application hasn't given me enough information to make an informed judgment. May I call the applicant or get further information from the web?

A: NO. Please do not contact any applicants. The applicant is responsible for making the case and for including all relevant materials within the application packet, and must provide the information within the application space limitations. You should judge the organization's application only based on the information and materials submitted as part of the application. If a website or a link is included in the application/work sample material, you may refer to it. **If the organization does not provide additional links, please avoid doing additional online searches to find more information about the applicant or project.**

Q: If I have questions during my review, may I contact the Challenge America staff?

A: YES. If you have questions about the process or specific questions of fact regarding the applicant or project, you may ask the staff. They cannot, however, give you any personal opinions about the organization or the application.

Q: I am not clear about certain aspects of an application. May I ask the staff for their opinions about the project?

A: NO. The staff can only provide answers to questions of fact (e.g., Has this organization already hired a new Executive Director?).

Q: I have a colleague who is familiar with this organization and whose opinion I trust. May I contact him about this project/organization?

A: NO. The list of applicants, all information in the applications, any work samples, and supplemental materials are all strictly confidential. You should not share or discuss anything related to applications with anyone outside the panel or NEA staff.

Q: Are all the applications in the NEA-GO system eligible for funding in Challenge America?

A: YES. All the applicant *organizations* in this pool are eligible in that they meet the basic eligibility criteria. However, it is up to the readers to evaluate the *projects* against the review criteria and the guidelines.

Q: If I have problems using NEA-GO, whom should I contact?

A: Please contact the Challenge America staff (ChallengeAmerica@arts.gov).

Q: Will I be able to change the scores and comments that I make in the NEA-GO system?

A: YES. You will be able to adjust your scores and comments at any time during the review period – until the deadline. At that point, the system will be closed to you.

Q: May I publicly announce my service as a reader?

A: Please do not make this information public until awards have been announced. This helps avoid the possibility of applicants contacting you directly.

Q: I have friends who recently saw a production by an applicant organization and shared their views with me. May I include this information in my comments?

A: NO. That would be considered hearsay and should not be a part of your assessment. If you have factual information or firsthand experience, however, you may certainly share that.

After the Reading Period:

Q: What should I do if I am approached by someone from an applicant organization who asks me about the review of her application?

A: Please refer all questions to NEA staff. We will be happy to provide the applicant with a summary of the review.

Q: I found excellent material in several applications that I would love to use. May I?

A: You should not use information that has not been made available to the general public for your own (or anyone else's) private gain or interest. If, however, material is available to the general public and you can obtain copies elsewhere, you may certainly consider it.

Q: May I call the applicant and discuss this material or their project?

A: NO. Any discussion of a project or application-related material would be a breach of the confidential review process.

Q: Are there other government ethics restrictions regarding my reader service?

A: **YES.** You may not use your reader service for private gain, for the endorsement of any product, service, or enterprise, or for the private gain of friends, relatives, or persons with whom you are affiliated. You must not use or permit the use of your reader status in any manner that could reasonably be construed to imply that the NEA or the Federal government sanctions or endorses your personal (non-panel) activities. When teaching, speaking, or writing in a personal capacity only list your reader service as one of several biographical details.

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR APPLICATION MATERIALS

We ask that, on or shortly after November 1, 2017, you delete any downloaded application materials and destroy any material you may have printed out. Please keep the materials until this date for reference in case NEA staff needs to contact you regarding any of the applications you reviewed.