Tips for successful grant and fellowship applications, NSERC or otherwise

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Purpose of this presentation

• To provide NSERC-specific tips for successful fellowship and grant applications

• To provide general tips, relevant to ALL fields and disciplines:
  • What makes an application effective?
  • What goes on during adjudication?
  • Common pitfalls and blunders, and how to avoid them
How can I help you?

• $10+ million in external research funds since starting at UW in July 2008

• Largest NSERC Discovery Grant in UW history

• Research group students and trainees have collectively earned:

  • 18 scholarships and fellowships, institutional to international, excluding NSERC USRA

  • Includes 1 NSERC VF PDF, 1 Vanier, and multiple CGS/PGS-D, CGS/PGS-M

• Majority of wins at larger institutions than UW

• Service on NSERC grants review panels

• Service on UW student awards committees

“I can help you hit the bullseye!”
NSERC-specific criteria

- The tips and guidelines provided for the SSHRC-specific application generally hold also for NSERC (and CIHR)
- Adjudication criteria are a bit different
  - CGS-M:
    - **Academic excellence (50%)**: academic record, scholarships, program type, course load, relative standing, etc.
    - **Research potential (30%)**: Relevance, significance, originality, feasibility, quality of research proposed or undertaken
    - **Personal characteristics and interpersonal skills (20%)**: Work and leadership experience, project management, communications skills, outreach, etc.
NSERC-specific criteria: Doctoral

- Adjudication weighting for doctoral-level fellowships more towards research:

  - PGS-D/CGS-D:
    - **Academic excellence (30%)**: academic record, scholarships, program type, course load, relative standing, etc.
    - **Research potential (50%)**: Relevance, significance, originality, feasibility, quality of research proposed or undertaken
    - **Personal characteristics and interpersonal skills (20%)**: Work and leadership experience, project management, communications skills, outreach, etc.

- Vanier: Last criterium replaced with **leadership**
NSERC: make-or-break points

• The make-or-break criterium is often *Personal characteristics and interpersonal skills* and *Leadership*, even though it’s weighted the least!

  • Many applicants have excellent academic records
  • Research potential is also often quite high
  • So how well you succeed in “soft” skills and leadership is often critical!

• This is especially important for Vanier, as strong and demonstrated leadership separates successful applicants from the pack.
How do I develop leadership skills?

• Get involved!
  • Mentor and teach
  • Supervise and get involved in committees and self-governance roles of organizations
  • Manage projects
  • Provide outreach (institutional, community, scientific community, etc.)

• These are necessary **BUT NOT SUFFICIENT** for success
  • You must still also be academically excellent and do outstanding research
  • Do it because you want to, not just to get your ticket punched
What happens when your application is reviewed?

• Typically several levels of adjudication
  • Institutional: very common for screening
  • Granting organization selection committee
• Reviewers are almost always volunteers
  • No compensation for review time
• Interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary committees very common
  • Conflicts of interest often remove people who know the most about your subject from reviewing your application
• Many applications to review
  • Reviewers looking to KNOCK YOU OUT, not keep you in!

So you MUST tailor your application to the review process!
Write for the specialist AND a general audience!

• Write your application for BOTH the specialist, and for a non-specialist
  • You must have the technical and field-specific rigor to pass muster…
  • …but someone who’s not an expert needs to know:
    • What are you doing?
    • Why is it important?
    • How are you doing this?
    • What’s the impact?
• If you don’t do this, your application will likely not succeed
• True for BOTH institutional AND granting organization review!
How do I satisfy writing for both a specialist and a non-specialist reader?

• Writing for both a specialist and a non-specialist simultaneously is VERY DIFFICULT, especially for a short proposal (e.g., most fellowship applications)

• Some tips to help:
  • Write in plain English whenever possible
  • Avoid jargon and acronyms
  • Be organized in your writing
  • Get to the point
  • Use the summary section to provide a clear, brief capsule
  • Have your proposal read by someone both IN your field, and someone not
Other useful grantsmanship tips

• State your hypothesis and objectives early on
  • Answer the question: “What are you doing, and why is it significant?”

• Keep introductory remarks pertinent but brief
  • Answer the question: “Why should I care?”

• Work out AND justify your logistics train
  • Answer the question: “Can the applicant do this?”

• Have a short closing statement
  • Answer the question: “What is the impact of my work?”
A few obvious and not-so-obvious tips

• Follow the directions
  • Font, size, margins are all important

• Be mindful of available space!
  • But use ALL available space
  • Avoid widow lines (that have only a few words in them)

• Proofread and find ways to poke holes in your own application

• Have someone review it, both in and out of your field

• Avoid bullsh*t
  • It’s ridiculously easy to spot
  • Your application will wind up in the round filing cabinet

• Give yourself enough time!