

TRANSCRIPTION

Tips on applying for an NSERC scholarship or fellowship

Voice-over: When you apply for a scholarship or fellowship from NSERC, your application needs to stand out against a group of high-calibre competitors.

Meeting the appropriate standards of excellence goes beyond the merit of the research proposal alone. Members of the committees that evaluate applications are looking for exciting ideas presented in a creative way. They expect to see well-prepared and communicated proposals that captivate their attention. They are looking for accomplished, well-rounded candidates.

This video provides practical tips from selection committee members on how to make your best case for financial support.

Adam Sarty: What we're trying to do is evaluate from the paper that we get who the person is, who is applying for the scholarship and what they bring to the table that makes them better than all of the other candidates that they're up against from across Canada. So then we're looking for what else do they have? Do they have any experience with research, whether that's in a research class or a summer research position or a cooperative placement. Do they have leadership abilities? Have they worked with their student organization, you know, their own chemistry or physics society, the student government? Have they done volunteer activities bringing their science into the community? We're really trying to get a handle on the whole picture.

Catherine Mounier: We need details, and especially details that provide a general idea of who you are and show that you are an excellent student. I think that's what's essential.

Voice-over: The experts agree that there are a number of ways you can make your application stand out from the pack. It begins with expressing your passion and showing the impact of the work you propose to do.

Angela Demke-Brown: It's important for the students to prepare the application thinking about how they feel about the research and why they're excited about it, why this is an important problem that's worth them putting their time and energy into. And if you are excited about it yourself and you try to get that across in the application, that goes a long way. Because if, if the person writing the application doesn't seem to be excited about the problem, it's really hard for me to get excited about the idea of supporting that application.

Catherine Mounier: Show clearly that you have a thorough knowledge and deep understanding of your field. Have your previous supervisor read your application, if you want. It's a great way of providing an appropriate description of the project.

Russell Boyd: So an opening sentence that grabs the reader's attention and then leads into what they really would like to do. Even though they may not solve any of the world's big global challenges but at least show they're aware of them and show that they can see where their research may ultimately play a role in dealing with some of the challenges of the day.

Adrien Côté: You don't want your previous thesis research to be a copy of what you're going to put into your proposed research. So forward looking things in your proposed research, really illustrating your creativity, highlighting what your strategy is to get the work done that you want to do, what the impact of what you're going to do, how it's going to impact essentially not only your, your colleagues in your research lab but also perhaps Canada or the world.

Voice-over: When you describe your accomplishments, it's important to make sure that reviewers are aware of your academic achievements and the contributions you have made to advancing science.

Jérôme Genest: In the free form section following the description of the contributions, we're looking for the impact that applicants have had in their fields. This involves everything that can show that the work has been used. It can be citations. It can be someone who uses the work in real life - anything that shows that the work is important and has had an impact.

Adrien Côté: Communicate how you've been successful in the past with your research. So including not only what you've achieved, but also any roadblocks that you had to move through, any hurdles you had to overcome. Did you have to find any equipment to make your research work? Tell me a story about yourself and, and how you've really grown as a researcher and as a person that, that wants to receive this investment.

Russell Boyd: It's very good if the student has won awards for those oral presentations. The student must make sure that they point that out. I've seen examples where the student neglects to tell us that they've won an award, but fortunately, they get a letter from someone who says look, at the regional conference in whatever the discipline was, this student won first or second place for their oral contribution. Things like that are really important.

Adrien Côté: Elaborate on, on what your role was in each of the publications, your three most important publications. Or if you have one publication, one publication, that's fine, but really explain what your role and contribution was. It's not always easy to discern from the author list, if you're not the first author, what your contribution was. And even if you're second or third or even later author, you could have played a key role in that, so explain what that is.

Voice-over: Members of the Selection Committees also look for attributes beyond your research abilities. It's important to point out your strengths in other areas, such as community participation and communication.

Adam Sarty: We're looking to support people that bring the science out of the universities and into the communities and into the industries. We're looking for people who can lead our country forward in science and that's only done if we see that there's evidence that people really want to do that. Are they interested in being involved in their university groups? Are they interested in going into the community and showing their passion for science? Can they communicate with their fellow scientists and their fellow students about what it is they do?

Russell Boyd: So it's the extra things that really count, and particularly communications and leadership. So if they, they need to really be able to show, they can't just say that they were secretary of the whatever society at their university or that they were a social convenor. They need to indicate what they did and activities like that, and showing that they have developed their communication skills, that all goes together with helping them to get a higher score in the competition.

LeeAnn Fishback: It's the chance where you get to free form and free style your application and it's really important to take the time to integrate that information together into a complete package that really reflects who you are. And that includes things like dance classes or music or sports that you may have been part of as well. Volunteer opportunities are a really great chance for the committee to really understand who you are.

Voice-over: Don't underestimate the importance of reference letters and be picky about whom you ask to prepare one on your behalf.

Russell Boyd: Those letters are extremely important because the referee needs to tell us something more than that this student has an excellent academic record. We can see that looking at the transcript. It needs to tell us something about what are their, their potential, either if they're early stage or if they're further along. It needs to really describe what are their accomplishments in research. When they talk about communications, it's not sufficient to say well the student has given several oral talks or has presented several posters. We need to know more about what the student has done.

Jérôme Genest: Reference letters are very important. This may be the most difficult aspect for applicants. What we're looking for in the reference letters is not so much that people say the applicant is the best, most outstanding or smartest student. What we're looking for are facts that support these assertions.

Adam Sarty: It really is okay for the student to sit down with the professor and talk about how important the letter is, and give that professor information about themselves, talk with the professor, come to know the professor more before they have to

write the letter, coach them through what needs to be done for the letter. That's really okay.

Elena Nicoladis: It's also really helpful to see in the letters information about the applicant that we might not get from any of the other materials we have. So particularly about leadership and communication. So one of the things that, one of the, one of the really important qualities that we're looking for in successful applicants are those who are contributing actively to writing, learning how to write, presenting, learning how to present better. And so if those qualities can come across in the letters, that's, that's a particularly good source of that information.

Voice-over: Applicants for postdoctoral fellowships must justify their choice of where they would like to hold their award. This requirement does not apply to applicants for postgraduate scholarships.

Russell Boyd: Well they need to really make the case as to why they would like to go to the particular place. And then it's also very helpful if they've indicated they've been communicating with the individual. So contact with the supervisor showing that they've really thought this through and that they also ideally would have some indication they've been accepted by that group or will be accepted by the group that they want to join. Just to say they want to go somewhere because perhaps it's a famous place or nice place to live, that's not sufficient. They really have to show what is the motivation.

Catherine Mounier: Regarding the justification of your choice of location for your post-doctoral fellowship, I think it's important that it be described properly, and that the application not simply describe, as many do, the facilities around you: the laboratory contains a certain type of equipment and this is what will guide my choice. I think it's important to begin by explaining why you have selected this project, how it will complement your education. Why have you selected this particular supervisor? Are you familiar with your supervisor's bibliography and professional experience?

Voice-over: It's important to pay attention to the overall presentation of your applications. This includes checking for typos, spelling and grammar. It also means working on good organization, tone and word choices.

LeeAnn Fishback: It's really important when you're reading hundreds of applications that each one of them meets the particular guidelines that are laid out by NSERC. Sometimes it can be really annoying and quite distracting if the margins are the wrong size or the font is too small to read. So it is really important that you take time and follow the guidelines to present because that also is a reflection of you as well, that you can follow the guidelines that you've been given in your application.

Jérôme Genest: First and foremost, we're looking for complete, consistent applications. There can't be any information missing in the proposal. For example, in the academic background and professional experience sections, the information has to be

complete. So if there's a year missing, this has to be resolved or explained later in the proposal.

Adrien Côté: A really clear and lucid application is one where they've written in plain language and have clearly identified what are the things they have achieved, what they want to do, communicated their creativity and ideas in a way that a technical person can understand in their field, but isn't necessarily bogged down in jargon and isn't really tied up in really complex sentences.

Catherine Mounier: What I find most important is the quality of the research project's writing. I must find it easy to understand the research project. It has to be well structured, well organized. Also, there can't be any information missing in the application. The dates have to be there. The dates have to be well organized. Every effort should be made to help reviewers really get into the evaluation process and enable them to compare two identical applications.

Jérôme Genest: So, in general, try to fill the available space without making it impossible for us to find the information. You might want leave lines between the paragraphs to make them stand out. We don't want to have a section completely filled with text, without any blank spaces. This is not what we want. So the information has to be there, but it should stand out at a glance too.

Angela Demke-Brown: Each of the individual sections can be quite short, so you want to avoid repeating the same information. In the thesis summary for example, you get to introduce a problem. If that's the same problem you're going to continue working on, you don't need to spend that space re-explaining the same problem.

Voice-over: Remember these final pieces of advice from the experts who will review your application.

LeeAnn Fishback: It's really important when you put your application together to take a step back from it and review it yourself and make sure that it is a reflection of who you are and what you want the committee to think about who you might be in that few pages that you have an opportunity to talk to them.

Jérôme Genest: The thing that applicants forget most often is the references in the research proposal. And that prevents us from determining whether you know your field. Very often people don't separate the various types of contributions or don't separate them properly, which creates more work for the committee and puts you at a disadvantage.

LeeAnn Fishback: And it's really important to go beyond that to get someone else to review your application. Give it to someone maybe in your lab, maybe there's a PhD student or a post-doc student or someone who's at a more advanced level who might already have NSERC funding. And also to go to your supervisors. It's a really great idea to get your references to read it as well. They're the ones who are going to be speaking about your application and if they review it and give you some comments on it, then they

really do know what's in your application and you'll have a better package that way as well.

Catherine Mounier: It's important that you never leave grey zones in your file. Everything must be explained. If there are any delays, any interruptions, any delays in the academic process, any delay in publishing, explain why. There are always good reasons and we are well aware of that. Your reasons may be of a personal or academic nature, such as the publication of a patent, which prevents you from publishing. Really try to provide all the information that we request and use simple, precise sentences.

LeeAnn Fishback: Sometimes I think students underestimate the competition. The competition at NSERC in each subcommittee is pretty fierce and it's really important that you take the time to make your application the best package that you can.

Adrien Côté: Probably the best piece of advice I got when I was writing up my scholarship applications was from my former PhD supervisor. And he said to me, Adrien, approach the application like you're getting an investment and not an award. It's not the same thing.