

For many people, an NIH fellowship proposal is the first grant application they submit, and it can often feel like a daunting and overwhelming process. This resource is intended to provide a big-picture overview of applying for an NIH fellowship to help demystify the process and get you started on your application. ([See full NIH instructions](#))

General considerations

- Be sure to read through the [Notice of Funding Opportunities \(NOFO\)](#) and determine which training grant is most appropriate for you, which NIH institute/center your work is most relevant to, and whether any [Notices of Special Interest \(NOSI\)](#) are applicable to your project. Do your best to align your research goals with those of the specific funding opportunity or institute/center you are targeting.
- Start early and set small deadlines for yourself to stay on track. The SERCC has a [timetable tool](#) that you can use to help plan your schedule. Starting early will also give you more time to get feedback from your mentors, colleagues, and others, which is an important part of the process.
- For each section of your application be sure to convey unique information rather than simply reiterating what is in another section. However, each section should complement the others and paint one cohesive picture. This requires that you spend some time thinking about how each section of your application works together, including the sections written by other people.
- A unique aspect of fellowship applications is that the funders are not only supporting the proposed research, they first and foremost fund you as a trainee. As such, you should put a lot of time and energy into conveying how this fellowship will advance your ability to achieve your career goals. It might be helpful to look at examples of fellowship applications, which may be obtained from the [UI Research Development Office \(RDO\)](#), [Open Grants](#), or other graduate students.

Contact your departmental administrator

There are a few ways to submit a grant to the NIH. At the University of Iowa, fellowship applications are submitted to the NIH through the research administration tool, Cayuse, in collaboration with your academic department and the Division of Sponsored Programs (DSP). DSP is the office that will ultimately submit the application for you.

- Check with your faculty mentor about the process for submitting grant applications in your academic department.
- In many departments, there will be a departmental administrator or a research administrator who will contact DSP to initiate the application on your behalf. This person will also route your application to DSP for submission.
- Have your application completed and submitted to DSP at least five business days prior to the NIH deadline so that DSP has time to review it, consult you about any issues related to compliance with funding agency requirements, and submit it before the deadline. Remember, the earlier you submit to DSP, the more time they will have to thoroughly review your application.

Responding to questions on an NIH grant application

The NIH fellowship application includes several questions about yourself and your proposed research. If you don't know how to answer a question, don't hesitate to reach out to your sponsor(s) or departmental administrator.

Below is a description of some of the more complicated questions on fellowship applications. Depending on the type of research you do, you may not be able to answer all of these questions quickly, so make sure to leave plenty of time to provide a thoughtful response.

- Are human subjects involved?
 - [This NIH decision tool](#) can be used to determine whether the proposed research is considered human subjects research or is exempt.
 - If the proposed research involves human subjects and is not exempt, the applicant must provide information regarding the [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#) status of the proposed work, which must be pending or approved at the time of the application submission.
 - The applicant must also complete a series of additional documents detailing the planned procedures for recruiting and testing human subjects.
 - Of note, independent clinical trials are not eligible for fellowship funding; however, applicants are allowed to propose research projects that are part of ongoing clinical trials, which must be described in the fellowship application.
- Are vertebrate animals used?
 - If vertebrate animals will be used at any point at any site for the proposed research, the applicant must provide information regarding the [Institutional Animal Use and Care Committee \(IACUC\)](#) status of the proposed work, which must be pending or approved at the time of the application submission.
 - The applicant must also complete the "Vertebrate Animals" attachment, detailing exactly how the animals will be used and how ethical principles will be upheld.
- What is in the budget?
 - In many cases, the departmental administrator will complete this section for you.
 - For fellowship applications, the budget section is relatively straightforward. If the applicant must complete it themselves, they will mainly focus on reporting costs related to the applicant's training (e.g., tuition, stipend, etc.).

Application documents

The rest of the application is largely composed of different sections that you and/or other people on your team will write. Some of these comprise standard information about resources and the environment at the University of Iowa that can be adapted from grants that your mentor has submitted or boilerplate text, which you can find on the [SERCC website](#) or ask for from your departmental administrator. Other sections are specific to you and your project. Below is a list of these documents and a brief description of what each one covers. Page limits are listed in parentheses. If no page limit is listed, the length of that section is not restricted.

- Cover Letter: Includes administrative information listed in instructions, including a list of the applicant's referees. Not evaluated with the rest of the application.
- Project Summary/Abstract (30 lines or less): Brief description of the proposed research that should stand on its own, apart from the rest of the application. If the award is funded, this section is made public.
- Project Narrative (3 sentences or less): Short description of the public health relevance of the proposed research. If the award is funded, this section is made public.
- Bibliography and Works Cited: List of references to the previous work you cite in your application.
- Facilities and Other Resources: Description of the scientific environment in which you will complete the proposed work and the resources available to enable you to meet your research and training goals.
- Equipment: List of the equipment available to conduct the proposed studies in the fellowship application.
- Biographical Sketch (Biosketch; 5 pages): A tailored version of your CV that conveys your qualifications for completing the fellowship. Unlike a typical CV, a biosketch includes a personal statement and contributions sections that show how your past experience has prepared you for the proposed research and training. A separate Biosketch must be completed by the applicant and each of the senior/key personnel and significant contributors. The SERCC has a [template](#) for this section.
- Goals, Preparedness, and Potential (3 pages): Description of the applicant's qualifications for the proposed training, goals, and potential for a productive career in biomedical research.
- Training Activities and Timeline (3 pages): Overview of each training activity and when it will be completed. This should also include a description of 1) how each activity will help the applicant achieve the goals outlined in the "Goals, Preparedness, and Potential" section and 2) utilize the resources described in the "Facilities and Other Resources" section.
- Research Training Project: Divided into two sections (described below). The SERCC has a [template](#) for this section.
 - Specific Aims (1 page): Summary of the background and scientific context for the proposed research, describe broad goals and specific aims of the research, and discuss the expected outcomes and broader impact of the work.
 - Strategy (6 pages): Justification for the proposed work and description of the strategies and methods, including support for feasibility of the study and contingency plans in case things don't go as expected.
- Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research (1 page): Description of the training the applicant has received and will receive in responsible conduct of research. Because this is something that is typically integrated into the graduate curriculum, departments will likely have templates and/or examples available.

- Sponsor(s) Commitment (6 pages): Document that is completed by the applicant's sponsor and any co-sponsors. It should describe how the sponsor(s) will support the applicant throughout the fellowship. It is helpful for the applicant to provide the sponsor(s) with the "Goals, Preparedness, and Potential," "Training Activities and Timeline," and "Research Training Project" sections so that the sponsor(s) may specifically comment on the training and research goals the applicant has written about.
- Letters of Support from Collaborators, Contributors, and Consultants (6 pages total): Letters that are completed by individuals who will provide the applicant with additional training and should detail their anticipated role in the proposed work.

It might seem daunting, but by planning ahead and reaching out to others for help and advice, you can submit a strong application. Best of luck with your submission!