Subject: SERCC Newsletter
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From: Scientific Editing and Research Communication Core
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IOWA | Carver College of Medicine

Scientific Editing and Research Communication Core

Insider Tips for Writing a Successful Fellowship Application

Writing a fellowship application can be a daunting task because the focus is not solely on the science—the training potential and the plans for training are also strong score drivers. However, preparing an application provides a great opportunity

for you and your mentor to formally design a training program tailored to your career goals, and for you to practice the art of writing persuasively about your science. Here we provide some tips based on discussions with faculty members who have served on NIH fellowship study sections and/or as mentors for fellowship applicants, and with students who have submitted these applications. Although the focus is on NIH grants, much of the information applies broadly to fellowships awarded by other funders.

* Notes about NIH terminology:

- “Sponsor” refers to the primary mentor/research advisor.
- An applicant may have a secondary mentor, referred to as the "Co-Sponsor" (or "Co-Mentor"), with whom they are also expected to meet frequently.
- NIH instructions and review criteria use “Sponsor(s)” and “Mentor(s)” interchangeably.

General tips for the application

- Ensure that the writing is understandable on a first read; the English should be crisp, making it easy to visualize the concepts.
- Seek out and incorporate feedback on the clarity of the documents and how effectively your ideas are communicated.
- Ensure that your Research Project Specific Aims page is logical, well organized, and clear to a broad audience.
- Ensure that your career goals and how the project will help you grow are conveyed clearly.
- Avoid descriptions that are generic; the need, goals, approach, and expected outcomes of the project must be specific to convey its significance.
- Demonstrate that you and your mentor(s) communicate well; make sure that the descriptions of your research and training are well coordinated.
- For interdisciplinary projects, consider including a co-mentor with expertise that is complementary to that of your mentor and relevant to the proposed training.
- For projects with mentors and co-mentors, encourage them to coordinate their descriptions for the mentoring plan so that the cohesiveness of the plan is clear.
- Repetition across documents is desirable because consistency is critical. Examples of sets of documents that may be repetitive include:
    - the applicant’s descriptions of their activities, their biosketch, and the mentor(s) statements (for full document names, see[1]); and
    - the Research Project Specific Aims page and the Scientific Foundation and Rationale section of the Research Training Project Strategy[1].

Considerations for sections focused on the research plan

- Consider including a schematic figure that outlines the goals of the project (i.e., a graphical abstract for the proposal) in the Research Training Project Strategy document.
- Customize the proposed research to the types of approaches and concepts that you need to learn in order to meet your career goals.
- Explain how each set of experiments will help fulfill your training goals.
- Include preliminary data that support the premise and feasibility of the proposed research.
    - One or two figures can be sufficient.
    - Because this is a training grant application, the data can be from someone else in the lab. Just be sure to attribute it appropriately.
- For each aim, include alternative hypotheses and alternative approaches (though not more than one or two each), to show that you are prepared to pivot if necessary.

Considerations for sections focused on the training plan

- Customize the training activities to meet your training objectives.
- Describe how the training plan will help you gain knowledge and skills that will help you achieve your career goals (avoid referring to these as gaps).
- Include all aspects of training needed to become a well-rounded scientist, e.g., develop the ability to**:**
    - formulate a testable hypothesis;
    - conceptualize and design appropriate experiments based on the literature;
    - establish technical skills (find your strengths and build on them);
    - develop skills in critical thinking and data interpretation; and
    - communicate scientific ideas and findings effectively in writing and oral presentations (the ability to answer questions on your feet is important).
- Ensure that your career goals reflect what you are passionate about doing in the future.
    - If you have a clear sense of your goals, be specific in describing them.
    - It you do not have a clear sense of your goals, keep your descriptions more general (this is acceptable and common).
    - If you are an MD-PhD student, you do not need to know what your clinical specialty will be; in this case, lay out a plan for figuring this out (e.g., identify clinicians to help you explore possibilities).

Strategies for preparing your submission

- Recognize that your deadline is earlier than the one listed by the funder.
    - You will need to work with your department and the Division of Sponsored Programs (DSP) to submit your application.

    - DSP requires your proposal five or more business days before the funder's deadline.
    - Your department may require your proposal a day or two before the DSP deadline.
- Give yourself time to incorporate feedback.
    - Fellowship proposals are complex and feedback is critical.
    - To allow adequate time to receive and incorporate feedback, integrate grant writing with other activities (e.g., research, courses).
- Plan to spend roughly 100–150 hours preparing your submission.
    - Start months in advance of the deadline.
    - Tackle the writing in small chunks for greater efficiency; long gaps between sessions make it harder to re-engage with the material.
- Set aside time to work on the application regularly (each day or a few times each week) and outside the lab (to reduce distractions).
    - Use checklists that include every section you need to write.
    - Work on the scientific sections first—then take a break and work on the non-scientific sections.

Considerations for resubmission

- Keep in mind that you probably won't have all the same reviewers.
- Use the Introduction document (submitted only with revised applications) to let reviewers know what you have changed.
- Even if your proposal is not funded, preparing an application and revising it to incorporate reviewer feedback will help you develop an effective roadmap for your graduate research.

In addition to these tips, we include links (below) to resources on our website that may be useful in preparing your application. Finally, thanks to the many reviewers and student applicants whose ideas contributed to this newsletter!

Best of luck as you prepare your fellowship application,
Chris Blaumueller and the SERCC Team

Resources:

1. SERCC Templates and Embedded Examples. Includes:
    - Research Training Project Specific Aims and Strategy
    - Candidate's Goals, Preparedness, and Potential
    - Training Activities and Timeline
    - Sponsor(s) Commitment
    - NIH Fellowship Review Criteria
2. Grant Writing Resources Specific to Graduate Students. Includes:

    - Overview of Content in an NIH Fellowship Grant Submission
    - UI Research Development Office (RDO) Proposal Library: Graduate Student Proposals (*HawkID required*)
    - UI Graduate Student Professional Development Resources: Sample Fellowship Applications (*HawkID required*)
3. NIH instructions: SF424 Application Package for Fellowship Applications
4. NIH scored review criteria: Changes to the Fellowship Review Criteria (scroll down the page)
5. NIH explanation of recent changes to review criteria: Revisions to the NIH Fellowship Application and Review Process

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Announcements

Open Writing Sessions

The SERCC offers monthly Open Writing Sessions to support CCOM graduate students and postdocs who are writing grant proposals and research articles, as part of a course assignment or for submission. The writing sessions provide a welcoming space and dedicated time for writing. A scientific editor is on hand to answer questions, provide one-on-one consultation, and share scientific writing resources. Participation is on a walk-in basis—no appointment is needed. The last session of the semester will be held on Friday, December 12, 2:00–4:00 p.m., in CMAB 106.

SERCC Scientific Editing Internship

The SERCC is sponsoring an unpaid Scientific Editing Internship for PhD scientists and graduate students. Interns will have the opportunity to receive training in substantive editing from an experienced editor and become familiar with strategies for effective grantsmanship and communication with authors. Applicants should submit a current CV, personal statement, and letter of support from their current advisor or employer. Click on the link above for additional details and a link to the application.

Upcoming Opportunities

Have a question about writing grants or research articles?
Contact us and we will answer it in a future newsletter.

Ask the Editor: SERCC Virtual Office Hours

1st and 3rd Wednesday of every month | next sessions December 3 and 17 | 12:30 p.m.–1:30 p.m. | Zoom
The SERCC is hosting virtual office hours twice a month. If you have a question related to writing a grant, manuscript, or other scientific document, stop by to talk with a scientific editor. We are also happy to answer any questions you have regarding our services. Open to all faculty, staff, fellows, postdocs, and students.
More information | Link to event

NIH: NCI Pathway to Independence Award for Early-Stage Postdoctoral Researchers (K99/R00)
Limited Submission | Internal Deadline December 15
The NIH Pathway to Independence Award (K99/R00) helps outstanding postdoctoral researchers complete mentored training needed to transition to an independent, tenure-track or equivalent faculty positions in a timely manner. NCI accepts K99/R00 applications in all areas of cancer research. Please see specific PARs for detailed program information PAR-23-286, PAR-23-287, and/or PAR-23-288.
Limit: four applications per institution
Sponsor Deadline: February 17, 2026
More information and to apply

Dr. Scholl Foundation Grants 2026
Limited Submission | Internal Deadline December 15
The Dr. Scholl Foundation is dedicated to providing financial assistance to organizations committed to improving our world. Solutions to the problems of today's world still lie in the values of innovation, practicality, hard work and compassion. Applications for grants are considered in the following areas: 1) Education, 2) Social Service, 3) Healthcare, 4) Civic and Cultural, and 5) Environmental.
Limit: one application per institution
Sponsor LOI Deadline: January 31, 2026
Sponsor Deadline for full proposal: March 1, 2026
More information and to apply

Maximizing Pivot to Find Funding and Collaborators
December 16 | 10:00 a.m.–11:00 a.m. | Zoom
January 28 | 1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m. | Zoom
Do you want to minimize your time spent searching for funding opportunities or potential project collaborators? Join us either virtually or in-person to learn how Pivot can save you time and effort in identifying the right funding opportunities for your research, as well as in identifying collaborators with the relevant expertise.
Register here

Organization for Autism Research (OAR) Peer Education Grant
Limited Submission | Internal deadline December 18, 2025

Children who learn about autism develop better, more inclusive relationships with their autistic peers. OAR is committed to increasing autism acceptance through the Peer Education Grant by delivering *Kit for Kids* materials and funds to support relevant educational activities.
Limit: one application per institution
Sponsor Deadline for full proposal: January 12, 2026
More information and to apply

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