How to write a winning scholarship application

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- Description of scholarships
- Process
- Tips

N.B. Post-doc applications are now submitted directly to NSERC
• The two main scholarships that you should be applying for (for graduate school) are **NSERC** and **OGS**
  – OGSs are not tenable outside Ontario
  – NSERC CGSs (and Vanier) are not tenable outside Canada; PGS is, provided you received one degree in Canada
  – NSERCs (except Vanier) are restricted to Canadian citizens and permanent residents
  – OGSs are open to visa students, but the odds are long
  – You should have at least an A- average
• Why should you apply?
  – You get more money (see Financial Support for 2012-13)
  – Your supervisor will have more money to spend on you
  – It looks good on your CV: *Holding major awards is an important part of an academic career*
  – In certain fields, NSERC award-holders can apply for additional $5,000 - $6,000 supplements
NSERC

• NSERC offers two main kinds of scholarships: M and D
  – Top PGS applicants get a CGS
• You can hold an M for only 1 year, and a D for 2-3 years, but 4 years total support (M + D)
  – Must be in first 5 years of grad school
• You can hold an M during an M.Sc., in the first two years of a direct-entry Ph.D, or in the first year of a regular Ph.D.

http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/informationfor/students/money/support/federal/nserc.htm
• The criteria for M and D are different:
  – For M, 50% weight is placed on academic excellence and 30% on research ability or potential
  – For D, those weightings are reversed
    • Without publications, a CGS-D is difficult (they also help with PGS-D), depending on field
  – The other 20% is on communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities
• Students eligible for both M and D (normally 1\textsuperscript{st} year grad students) need to decide which award they will apply for ahead of time, you can get advice from us
• **Vanier** (doctoral) scholarships
  – Worth $50,000; tenable only at the nominating University
  – Open to visa students
  – For domestic students, you cannot apply if currently holding a PGS-D or CGS-D
  – Cannot apply after your second year of Ph.D. (third year for direct entry)
  – The department can nominate at most two candidates
  – U of T can nominate only 19 candidates
OGS:

• offers only one kind of scholarship
• It only lasts for one year
• You can win it up to 4 times
• Need to be in your first 2 years of the MSc or your first 5 years of the PhD
• Your total scholarship funding between NSERC and OGS cannot exceed 4 years
Process:

• For both NSERC and OGS, you submit your application to the Graduate Office
  • Oct. 9 for NSERC
  • Oct. 1 for Vanier
  • OGS process is changing this year, deadline
    TBA

• NSERC applications done online; Vanier you prepare your application online, then print it out and give us a hard copy; OGS TBA
  • We eventually need original, official transcripts
• For OGS your referees need to complete their reference form, print it out, sign it, and give it to us.

• For NSERC your referees complete their reference letter online.
• For NSERC the Department makes a preliminary ranking of the applicants, within a quota.
• This year, for the first time, OGS will be adjudicated internally at UofT.
• For NSERC, the University re-ranks within subject areas, and has a limited quota that it can send to NSERC
  – Physics is not equivalent to physics!
• About half the NSERC applications get forwarded to Ottawa, and about 2/3 of those get funded
  – For D awards, publications make a difference!
• The OGS success rate is similar, ~1/3
• Hints on choosing referees
  – The more they know you, the better
    • So if you are a new graduate student here, you probably need to use referees from elsewhere
  – To be of value, they need to be able to add to what is already evident from your file
    • Ideally, at least one should be able to speak to your research ability or potential
    • At least one should be able to speak to your communications/interpersonal/leadership skills
  – A government or industry scientist is good, so long as they interact a lot with students
Tips on preparing your application:

– Follow instructions
– Proofread carefully
– Make sure your application is complete
– Read the criteria carefully, and make sure you address them explicitly
– Write your prose (e.g. research proposal) in language readable by non-specialists, and get someone else to comment on it
– If you have a supervisor, get them to help you (it’s in their own best interests!)
• More Hints

– research proposal is important: it should sound professional
  • not too many details, keep jargon to a minimum, but use enough that it sounds like you know what you are doing

– State what is important about the problem, and what is special in your plan of attack, how any past experience relates to it

– Like many grant applications, it isn’t really a promise that you will work on a particular problem in a particular way, more a demonstration that you have good ideas and can express them well

– Get help from supervisors (or potential supervisors)
• More hints
  – For Academic Background, include only your science and engineering background
    • List all your awards (dig deep!)
  – For Work Experience, include all science and engineering experience (especially summer or winter research)
  – also any other experience that demonstrates communications/ interpersonal/leadership skills
    • Volunteer activities, membership on committees, student associations, etc.; also T.A. experience!
  – The 20% weighting on Communications etc. may be the difference between success and failure, do not ignore this.
• Evidence of research potential, in order of importance (aside from referee’s letters):
  – Publications in top journals
  – Publications in smaller national journals
  – Conference proceedings
  – Presentations at conferences or workshops
  – B.Sc. thesis
  – Other publications (e.g. stamp collecting)
  – Your name on an abstract or poster
  – Skill set: lab tools and techniques, programming, Matlab, etc.
• More hints

- In Applicant’s statement (Research experience, Relevant Activities, Special Circumstances):
  - Minimize jargon, but sound professional
  - Be as positive as you can without actually lying
  - Research rarely turns out as expected: don’t say “unfortunately we did not reach our original objective, and instead had to settle for …”; just pretend you were aiming at what you got
  - If the project isn’t finished, describe the progress made, and pretend that you are on track (break the project into parts, and say what has been accomplished so far)
  - Publications are better than no publications, but if you haven’t got papers, convey the complexity of what you are doing, progress made, and the potential payoff
• Red flags:
  – Referees do not emphasize strengths and achievements in specific ways
  – Extended periods of research with no output (best to explain, also referees should explain: perhaps in your field there is always a long period of training before publications appear)
  – Grades have slumped (best to explain)
  – Research output has slumped (if applicable); again, best to explain
  – Lack of information on interpersonal/leadership abilities

• Committees will notice, so you must explain.
Good luck!