How to write a winning scholarship application

Stephen Julian

Associate Chair, Graduate Studies

Department of Physics

- 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 1st 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!