

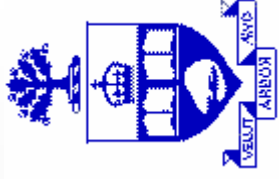
# Tips for Success: NSERC from an Applicant's Perspective

Christopher Collins  
NSERC Undergraduate, PGS A, and  
PGS B Scholarship Recipient

Disclaimer: Tips provided herein are for peer-support only. I am not an expert. When in doubt, refer to the NSERC Application guidelines or the School of Graduate Studies.

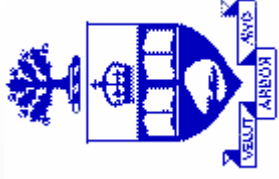
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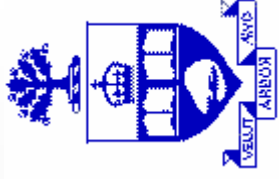
# Start Early

- As everyone will tell you, start early!
- Especially important if you want good references.
- Apply for everything you can: NSERC, OGS, and NSERC Supplements. Don't assume you are "not good enough" for NSERC, and only apply for OGS.



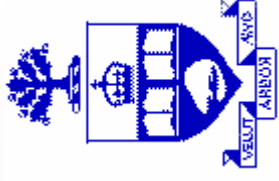
# Choose Your References

- Consider very carefully who you will ask for a reference letter – diversity is an advantage and will help avoid duplication
  - your supervisor
  - a course instructor you know well
  - your dept. chair if you know them well
  - a researcher from outside U of T with whom you have collaborated
  - an employer familiar with your research abilities
- Ask “can you write me a **good** reference?”



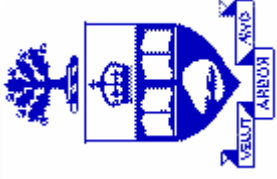
# Help Them (but not too much)

- Provide your references with a c.v. or (even better) a draft of the rest of your application package and a c.v.
- Follow up with the reference after a week or two to make sure they didn't forget you!
- Make sure they know they can contact you for more information
- Do NOT provide a draft letter for them! When I sat on a judging panel for an internal award, a candidate had 2 identical references!
- Consider encouraging them to point out one minor “weakness”, something they can say they know you are working to improve. Completely glowing letters are rarely believable.



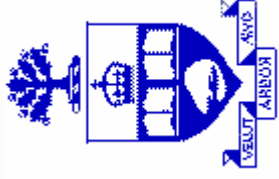
# Application Layout

- Communication skills count in the final evaluation: the appearance of your application is a good indicator of your communication skill
- Don't use fancy fonts! Don't disobey font size requirements – you might fit more info on the page, but the judges will not read it.
- Do not exceed allotted space for each section
- Maximize space – fill every space on the page, but avoid clutter. Use headings, indentation, etc.



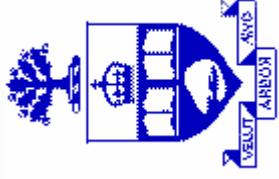
# Proofreading

- **Proof-read your entire application**
  - Start with each section individually and wait a while before going to the next section. Pay attention to how the section content fits the heading.
  - Re-read the sections consecutively.
    - Delete any repetition.
    - Make sure you haven't forgotten anything
    - Check for consistent writing style
- **Ask others (at least 3) to proof-read for you:**
  - Your supervisor
  - Your references
  - Your friends, your Mom, your friend in the English dept.



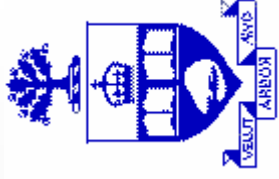
# Academic Excellence

- List all previous scholarships, fellowships, etc.
- Don't assume anything is “too small” to include, unless you are constrained by space.
- Make sure to include \$ amounts, and the jurisdiction (institutional, provincial, national) of the competition. Use a table.
- Highlight previous NSERC support (for example, a summer research scholarship during your undergrad)



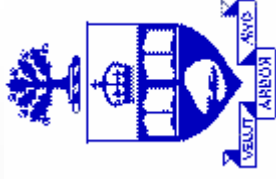
# Research Proposal

- Contextualize your research: Why is it important to your field? to the community?
- Find a balance:
  - Do not over-generalize (i.e. “I will work towards a cure for cancer”)
  - Do not over-complicate (i.e. too much jargon)
  - Pretend you are writing for a high-level general science journal



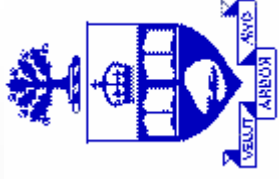
# Demonstrate your Ability

- List all publications – be sure to consistently use a standard reference format
- If you list is too short, include invited lectures you gave, especially significant projects (i.e. a literature review), internal reports, etc.
- Organize the section clearly using the lettering provided in the application package
- If some difficulty (such as an illness) has hampered your ability to publish, say so in the “special circumstances” section of the personal statement. Offer to provide documentation.



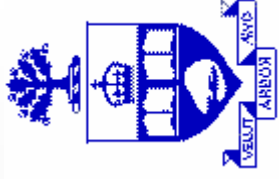
# Example

- Use the lettering of sections, as provided on the application package – notice I had no “(b)”
- (a) Articles Published in Refereed Journals
  - [1] Collins, C.; Tobin, J.; Shvedov D., Palepu, R.; Tremaine, P. R. (2000) Thermodynamic properties of aqueous diethanolamine (DEA), N,N-dimethylethanolamine (DMEA), and their chloride salts: Apparent molar properties at elevated temperatures and pressures. *Canadian Journal of Chemistry* **78**: 151-165. (undergraduate summer work)
- (c) Other refereed contributions
  - [2] Collins, C. Stability Constants for Glycine Under Hydrothermal Conditions Using Colorimetric Indicators. Honours Dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2001.
  - [3] Collins, C. Thermodynamic properties of aqueous diethanolamine (DEA), N,N-dimethylethanolamine (DMEA), and their chloride salts. Poster, Atlantic Student Chemistry Conference, UPEI, 1998.
- (f) Contributions Resulting from Participation in Industrially Relevant Research Activities
  - [4] Collins, C. and White, B. MOTSIM Geometry Editor (software). Marineering Limited, 2001.
  - [5] Collins, C. Recent Improvements to Automated Speech Recognition Using Prosodic Features, literature review, University of Toronto, 2002.
  - [6] Collins, C. Oil Sand Consolidation (internal report). Alberta Research Council, 1998.



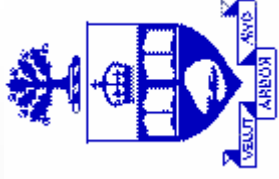
# Don't Be Too Modest!

- When explaining your “Most Significant Contributions” in Section 3, be sure to be clear, truthful, and above all, thorough.
- You have many years of University experience, so tell the judges about it! Consider carefully (perhaps get a second opinion) before leaving anything out.
- Carefully select three specific contributions and explain them using examples, importance to the advancement of the field, etc.
- Include full description of your responsibilities in any project where you worked with others – i.e. were you involved in project planning? Supervising undergraduates? Were you directly writing any co-authored works? How did your work contribute to a large multi-year project, etc.



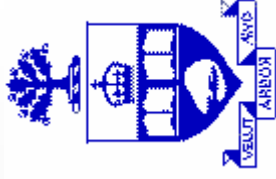
# Don't Be Too Modest! (II)

- Reiterate if your research was supported by a granting agency:
  - “As an NSERC PGS A scholar at the University of Toronto, I have begun a research program in Computational Linguistics”
  - “During my tenure as an NSERC scholar at the Alberta Research Council, I was placed in a position of high independence, early in my undergraduate career.”



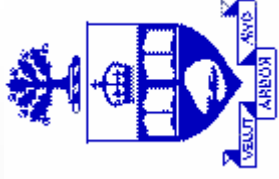
# Personal Statement

- Be interesting! All sections are a chance to show your communication skills – you must engage the interest of the reader at all times.
- Remember the “don’t be too modest” slogan, but be careful here – don’t include minor or one-time-only activities as they look like “padding” .
- Get several people who know you well to read your statement.



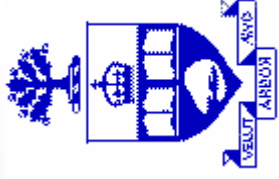
# Relevant Activities

- This section often doesn't get enough attention!
- Highlight volunteering, elected positions, etc. Don't go back too far – start with your undergraduate degree.
- Indicate a timeline to avoid the appearance of “padding”:
  - “After just two months of serving on the Council of the Graduate Students’ Union, I was elected the 2002-2003 President.”
  - “Since moving to Toronto in August 2001, I have volunteered for two hours each week with the LGBT Peer Support phone line.”
  - “For the fall 2001 term, I participated in twice weekly meetings of the steering committee for conference X, hosted by my department.”
- NOT: “I attended the walkathon in 1999 for cause X.” or “I was captain of my grade 10 hockey team.”



# Relevant Activities (II)

- Use only activities which support the criteria of the award: communication skills, creativity, leadership.
- If you cannot fill this section with relevant volunteer or elected activities, use employment or leisure activities:
  - Working as a TA
  - Working in your department as a host for visiting lecturers
  - Mentoring new students
  - Working in a customer-service position like retail or restaurant
  - Participating in clubs or organizations, orchestras, etc.
- **Indicate your position, the time commitment involved, and why you think your participation is relevant to this application.**
- Don't underestimate this section – it can set you apart from all the other academically outstanding applications. It can make you the “well-rounded” candidate who gets noticed.



# Proofreading (revisited)

- Do not do what I am doing now – presenting something which no one else has reviewed!
- Grammar, spelling, and formatting problems can destroy your application.
- Ask at least three people to read the entire package.
  - One of these should be familiar with your work (i.e. your supervisor).
  - One of these should be a scientist completely unfamiliar with your work.
  - Ask around – are there professors in your department who have previously sat on scholarship judging panels?
  - Ask a non-scientist who knows you well. I ask my mother. They may not understand the scientific content, but this helps highlight particularly unclear sections which colleagues may not catch. In addition, they will likely pay more attention to the personal statement and details of overall appearance, spelling, cohesion.