

Australian Biochemist Students' Page

How to Write a 'Winning' Fellowship Application

Julie Mercer, Research Grants Manager, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute for Medical Research

This article is aimed at people seeking postdoctoral fellowships, although much of the article is also applicable for other fellowship and even grant applications.

1. Do your homework

First of all, work out what the next step in your career is going to be and then seek advice from your supervisor, postdocs in your lab and others about how to take that step. Timing is fairly critical, as there is only one round of applications each year, and usually, that funding will begin the following year. If you want funding to start in 2012, you will generally need to apply in 2011, so decide early which fellowships you will apply for. Also, you will need to know where you want to go and have a general idea of the project you will be working on, as that is a critical part of the application. This means you need to start thinking about what you want to do well beforehand and not wait until you have submitted your PhD before beginning to think about the rest of your life!

Get all the details about the fellowship months before the due date and find out your institution's internal closing date. Make sure you have all the documentation you need, in particular, the relevant policy and instructions. Talk to the relevant person in the Grants Office, so they are aware that you will be applying, as they may have further information you will need.

Read the selection criteria – think hard about how you meet or don't meet these. Also, look at the breakdown of how applications are assessed (if available). If possible, talk to people who have successfully applied for the same award previously, and ask if they would mind letting you have a look at their application. (Generally, people are fairly happy to let you see their old applications once they have been successful.) If this is an application to work in a new lab, ask your new boss for assistance with writing about the work you are proposing to do. Often they will provide an excerpt from a recent grant application or an abstract to help you get a feel for what to write.

Most applications (except the ARC) require that you nominate referees, and in most cases, you are required to ask these people to directly submit a report to the funding agency, or you need to collect the report to submit with your application. The selection of referees is one of the **most important** stages of your application. You need to think very carefully and consult your supervisor about who you should ask to be a referee. Two of the most important criteria are that they will write constructively about you and your project, and that they will submit their report on time. As a junior researcher, it is very hard to know who will meet these criteria, so ask for advice (discreetly, of course) from senior people in your area and from your Grants Office. Keep in mind that you will need to provide these referees with a copy of your application (it can be a draft) and a copy of the selection criteria and associated information, so that they know what type of comments are required of them. Allow plenty of time to

get your draft to them well before the closing date. It is extremely bad form (no matter how well you know them) to call someone a few days before the closing date and ask for a reference.

2. Collect your data

The Track Record is generally the most critical aspect of any fellowship application. This doesn't just mean how many first author papers you have had, but whether you are capable of thinking independently, have a commitment to scientific research and whether you have the potential to be a future leader in medical research. (This is particularly important for NHMRC applications.) I suggest you make a list of all the things about you that you think are worth highlighting and that will support your application and help you to stand out from all the other applicants.

Begin with publications, and for those where you are a middle author, write down the contribution you made, so you can highlight your contribution. As an example, one of our PhD students who was applying for a CJ Martin Fellowship didn't have a first author paper, but was middle author on a couple, one of which featured the figure she had contributed on the front page of that issue of *Immunity*. She wrote:

"My critical involvement in these projects is emphasised by the fact that my figure was selected as the cover design of the issue of Immunity in which our article appears."

If publication of any of your work has been delayed because it is the subject of a patent or commercial agreements, say so.

List any prizes you have won for academic achievement and any other awards you have won for your research work or for general leadership. You can highlight your commitment to research by including any summer research projects or UROP placements you have done, any teaching, such as demonstrating, and any committees you have served on. Any leadership positions you have held should also be included.

3. Putting it together

For any application, you must use the correct form and follow precisely the formatting guidelines given. Word, character and page limits must be strictly adhered to. Many funding bodies will immediately rule ineligible an application with incorrect formatting. Try to use formatting to break up the page a bit – there is nothing worse as a reviewer to receive allowed number of pages filled edge to edge with non-stop writing – a bit of white on the page is a good look!

Most application forms have a number of sections that you need to complete carefully. Often the questions asked seem redundant – work out which aspects of your career to date that you listed above are most relevant to which box, then construct your responses so that you say everything about yourself that you want or need to.

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Beware of making sweeping statements – it is OK to say “I am the best PhD student ever at my institute” if you have won an award for being exactly that, but if you have not, it is seen as exaggeration by kindly reviewers and offensive bluster by those less kind. Wherever you can, use your accomplishments as evidence of the statements you make about yourself.

Back up any statements with evidence, particularly when discussing the relevance and impact of your work to date, i.e. your publications. You cannot simply say “My work is highly significant.” What makes it significant? Are you the first person to use this technique? Are you addressing an aspect that no one has ever thought of before? What is the burden of the disease you are working on? Further, what is the evidence of this significance? Was it published in a high-impact journal? Did you get invited to speak at an important conference about it? Were you invited to write a review about it? Did you receive multiple requests for your reagents as a result of this publication? Also, how is your work innovative? Do not make statements claiming your work is innovative unless you have evidence to back it up. For example, are you the first person ever to do these experiments? Are you patenting something?

4. The research plan

Depending on the application format, you may have lots of room or very little to discuss your planned research. Regardless, it is important to convey to the assessor a sense of excitement about your work and your future career. The research plan in a fellowship application needs to meet several other criteria. It needs to be clear and follow a logical progression, and the proposed work must be feasible, innovative and have the potential to deliver significant outcomes. Significance and innovation are very important aspects of how ARC and NHMRC applications are judged, so you need to show why your work is significant and provide compelling evidence for the significance of the specified outcomes, which can include the potential to increase knowledge or the application of new ideas, procedures or technologies to

important topics. You need to provide a clear rationale for doing the work, and the feasibility of the research plan is very important.

Different applications might ask for particular formats, but generally you should begin with a brief introduction to the area, then the aims of your study, with a rationale, then describe the methodology and make clear the innovative aspects. Conclude with the expected outcomes (feasibility) and the significance and relevance of the study.

5. Reviewing and submitting the application

You should always walk away from your application for a period of time, then reread it from top to bottom. **Everyone** finds mistakes at this point! Once you are happy with your draft, ensure that it is reviewed by at least two colleagues, which would usually include your current supervisor and the person whose lab you are going to. Make sure that these people critically review it and give you constructive criticism. Getting your application back from someone who says it is “OK” or “Excellent” with no further comment is as useless as the person who says “It’s all rubbish.” Ask around to find out who is a good person to give you some useful feedback.

Once you are happy with your application, or time has run out on you, whichever comes first, do a final spell check, collect all the additional documents, then provide your application to your Grants Office in the format they have requested. It is also worthwhile sending a (very polite) reminder to your referees of the closing date. Check the instructions to see when the outcomes are likely to be announced, put that date in your diary, and try to forget your application until then.

Good luck!

Postscript: The student with the middle author Immunity paper was successful with her CJ Martin application.

*The Students' Page is coordinated by Chaille Webb
chaille.webb@monash.edu*

