

Writing Guide  
for  
NSERC Grant Applications

Prepared for UNB by

**The WordCompany**

Fredericton • Ottawa

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**Appendices A to D – Examples of summaries of successful applications**  
*Help me, I don’t understand!* by Francis Lionnet, NSERC

## Introduction

By preparing a grant proposal, you are entering a competition. Competitions, by their nature, result in winners and losers. In NSERC competitions, there is a cut-off point for successful proposals. The way the grant application is prepared can be the deciding factor for any applications close to that cut-off point. It is most unfortunate when good science is rejected because it is poorly presented. The objective of the following information is to get your grant proposal in as good a condition as possible in order to win this competition. That is good for you, your research, UNB and New Brunswick. Don't forget, it's also good for NSERC, and what's good for NSERC is good for Canada's research community.

## First Steps

Beginning an NSERC grant application can be overwhelming, especially for a first-time applicant. For one thing, most people underestimate how much time the process will require. So take a deep breath and dive in. Remember, there is plenty of support for you as you proceed.

Here are a few tips that may be useful in the early stages:

- Start early and allow lots of time to work on and review your application. A common comment is, "I didn't realize this would take as much time as it did."
- Make sure your project fits with NSERC requirements.
- Have a clear, concise and testable hypothesis.
- It may help to review successful proposals to see how they were put together.
- Start looking for potential reviewers.

## The Application Form

This may seem daunting at first glance, but once you get going, it isn't so bad. Here are a few important things to remember about the application form:

- Read the general instructions CAREFULLY and follow them EXACTLY.
- Make your application pleasant to read. Use required type size, font and spacing.
- Do not use more than the maximum number of pages.
- Do not use fewer than the maximum number of pages.
- Make sure your application is complete before submission (UNB Research Services will help).
- Do not send any information that is not requested (i.e. attachments, background material, extra resumes, etc.).
- Make sure your proposal is given to the Office of Research Services in enough time for them to check it over. Their deadline is the latest date on which you should turn it in. Submitting it before their deadline would be ideal.

## The Written Words

Good science deserves to be presented well. A well-written proposal is clear, concise and as brief as possible while still being complete. At The Word Company, we have worked on many NSERC grant applications. Given the opportunity, we will review your work and consider all of the points below.

### *From the Reviewer's Viewpoint*

Many proposal reviewers have this task piled on top of their normal duties. Reviews are often done on nights, over weekends or even under more rushed circumstances. That means that long applications may be reviewed in bits and pieces, so each individual component must be prepared accordingly. Every section must stand alone, with its own beginning, middle and end. It is helpful if each paragraph does the same. It also means that anything that detracts from a clean, easily read proposal will work against you.

### *Keep Your Audience in Mind*

Every good performer or presenter has to know their audience. You should know yours, too. It is a good idea to prepare your application thinking that whoever reviews it will have a background in your specific field, but is unlikely to be an expert or have the depth of knowledge that you have. This will help you prepare an application that speaks clearly and understandably to the reviewer. Your job is to make your application so compelling that your reviewer gets excited about your application and passes that excitement along.

### *NSERC Needs*

You've heard this part before, but it bears repeating. You need to convince the selection committee that:

- your research program promises a notable advancement or innovation in the discipline, or results in important advancements in a broad range of applications;
- you have identified well-formulated short- and long-term goals;
- attaining these goals would be a significant contribution to the discipline; and
- you have a good chance of attaining the goals with the resources available.

Applications are judged according to the following criteria:

- scientific or engineering excellence of the researcher(s);
- merit of the proposal;
- contribution to the training of highly qualified personnel; and
- need for funds.

There are a number of ways you can make your application as appealing as possible, which in turn can enhance your chances of obtaining a return on the investment in time you make in putting your proposal together. A well-written application stands a much better chance of finding favour with reviewers.

## Some Writing Tips

There are plenty of writing “how-to” books on the market. If you have the time to read one or more, great. However, with teaching and research loads, that much time may not be available to you. The following are a handful of writing tips The Word Company has assembled based on the work we have done for researchers at UNB. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it does address some of the more commonly encountered writing issues.

### *Use Plain English*

Avoid abbreviations, acronyms and jargon that the non-expert may not understand. If there are everyday English terms that can be used, use them. Of course, there are times when scientific terms are the only terms; you can’t say “electrophoresis” many other ways.

Any abbreviations you use should be defined by writing out the words in full beside the bracketed abbreviation the first time. Example: “*The Atlantic Salmon Federation (ASF)* is a major contributor to this project.” If you haven’t used a particular abbreviation for a while, it’s a good idea to redefine it when you use it later in the text. If you don’t use that term again at all, then don’t distract your reader by giving it an abbreviation in the first place.

### *Be Brief*

Often, fewer words are better. Your text is easier to read, and you don’t have to worry about running out of space on your application.

Try to avoid wordy expressions. For example, “now” is preferable to “at this point in time.” Use “hastily” instead of “in a hasty manner,” and “although” instead of “in spite of the fact that.” The object is to keep unnecessary words out of your work.

*Too wordy: During the period of time covering the past six years, the previously named applicant has researched a great deal in this specific field of study, and has gained a lot of knowledge in it. (34 words)*

*Concise and clear: Dr. Smith has six years of relevant research experience in this field. (12 words)*

Also, terms such as *who is*, *which was*, and the like are often superfluous.

*Awkward: He is a man who is a very hard worker.*

*Better: He is a very hard worker.*

*Awkward: His brother, who is a member of the same club, ...*

*Better: His brother, a member of the same club, ...*

### *Use Short Sentences*

Think “one thought – one sentence.” Try to avoid linking thoughts by using “and” in a long sentence.

*Awkward: Lab assistants removed the fish from their storage containers using the newly constructed equipment and treated each of them with the solution and released them into the larger pens.*

*Better: Lab assistants removed the fish from their storage containers using the newly constructed equipment. They treated each fish with the solution and released all of them into the larger pens.*

Each sentence should be 20 words or less.

***Hint: Try reading your work aloud. If you have to take a breath, the sentence is probably too long. This also helps uncover other errors.***

*Make one point in each paragraph*

Think “one idea – one paragraph.” A good paragraph conveys a single idea. It starts with a topic sentence and has supporting sentences that follow. Try to avoid putting too much information in a single paragraph.

*Include transitions*

Just as experiments have a flow of procedures, your text should flow naturally from one paragraph to the next. Your writing should be as logical as your experiment.

***Spell-checking and Proofreading***

Do yourself a favour (not a “favor”) – make sure you use the proper dictionary with your spell-checking software. You are applying to a Canadian research organization; use Canadian English.

You should proofread your work carefully. Remember, spell checkers do not pick up a wrong word that is spelled correctly. Are you a “specialty in soft-shell clams,” or a “specialist in soft-shell clams” – there is a difference. Just leave one letter out of the word “public” and the whole meaning of the word changes, even though it is still a properly spelled word. Such oversights can be embarrassing.

Your proofreading should turn up any other errors, such as spacing and grammar. These distract the reader and can cast unfair doubt on the abilities of the researcher.

***Make Your Pages Visually Attractive***

Small diagrams, tables and other visual variations — provided they are clear, concise and well-designed — offer relief for a reviewer poring over many pages of text. A table may be an effective way to express several similar ideas for which there are common headings. Tables are particularly effective where numbers abound. Bullets can also draw the eye and clarify a list, but they work best on shorter lists. If the sequence of a list is important, then the items should be numbered rather than bulleted.

***Engage the Reader with Active Language***

Keep things moving, be personal and speak directly to the reader.

*Passive language: As the application is prepared, some thought should be given to the needs of the audience.*

*Active language: Remember your audience as you prepare your application.*

### ***Parenthetical Expressions***

If application writers were paid by the bracket, some researchers would be millionaires. In applications reviewed by The Word Company, the most commonly overused form is the parenthetical expression. Use parenthetical expressions sparingly, if at all. In most cases, the parentheses can be replaced by commas or simply eliminated.

*Awkward: These three countries, (Canada, Mexico and the United States) often collaborate on research in this area (soft-shell clam migration) during the summer months (from June to August).*

*Better: Canada, Mexico and the United states often collaborate on soft-shell clam migration research from June to August.*

### ***Numbers***

In general, single-digit numbers (zero through nine) are spelled out, while numbers with two or more digits are expressed with figures. There are a few exceptions to this rule:

- Use figures when a unit of measurement follows (e.g. 125 kHz)
- Use figures when there are numbers of two or more digits in the same sentence (e.g. “In 8 of 25 samples tested ...”)
- Use figures in a formula or when mathematical operations are implied (e.g. a 3x3 matrix)
- Always spell out a number at the beginning of a sentence. *Note: This can look awkward. Sometimes it’s better to rewrite the sentence to avoid starting with a number.*

### ***Colloquial Expressions***

These should be avoided as well. Instead of using the informal noun *write-up*, try *report* or *document*. Rather than *hook up* the equipment, *connect* or *install* the equipment.

### ***Punctuation***

Punctuation can change the intended meaning of a sentence.

For example, a class of men and women was once asked to punctuate the following sentence:

*A woman without her man is nothing*

The men wrote: *A woman, without her man, is nothing.*

The women wrote: *A woman: without her, man is nothing.*

Be careful with punctuation.

### ***The Summary***

The summary is an important part of the application. Take some time and care with it. It is a short story with a beginning, middle and end. It should introduce the reader to the science involved, briefly describe how the research is intended to be conducted, and finish with the benefit the research will provide. It should be written in plain language and should make sense to experts and generalists. The summary sets the tone for the reviewer. It may be the only section read by some reviewers, so it is worth the extra time and care. Although it is the first part of the application, it should be among the last things written.

### ***An Important Element of the Summary***

Important goals for NSERC include enhancing Canada’s innovation culture and telling Canadians that the tax dollars they invest in research are reaping benefits. That’s why NSERC has a media relations department whose job is to find interesting research stories that they can

send to the media. Often these media relations professionals only review the summary. Make their job easier. Ensure that your summary is written clearly and easy to understand. Your research is important and interesting to you, so chances are it will be interesting to many others as well. Describe your research in ways that would excite a layperson. Remember, media attention focused on your research could result in wider understanding and appreciation of your work. This could translate into more funding, not only from NSERC but from other sources as well. The attached article, *Help me – I Don't Understand* by Francis Lionnet of NSERC, explains why the summary is so important. *Appendices A to D are examples of summaries of successful applications.*

## Common Errors

By new applicants:

1. The proposal is unrealistically ambitious. There are no clearly defined priorities, and there is no sense of what can realistically be accomplished during the term of the grant.
2. The literature and background reviews provided are not essential to the proposal.
3. There are no pilot study results or other preliminary data.
4. The time listed for research is less than 50% of the total project time. (For new applicants, closer to 75% is better.)
5. The budget is unrealistic.

By established applicants:

1. The application is fragmented and disjointed, often the result of being prepared by a number of junior colleagues.
2. Relying too much on the researcher's reputation or track record. This is no longer sufficient for serious proposals.
3. The proposal is too cautious and doesn't venture into unexplored areas.

## Where The Word Company fits with your project

The Word Company specializes in writing services. For three years, we have been providing the Office of Research Services (ORS) with these services for applications to such agencies as the Atlantic Innovation Fund, the Canadian Foundation for Innovation and, of course, NSERC.

Through the ORS, we provide one-on-one assistance to you in the final stages of preparing your application. The process we follow is to obtain your entire application in advance of the submission deadline.

1. We review the material carefully to ensure that all the required components are there.
2. We read the application, making sure that the material is presented as clearly and concisely as possible.
3. We link the various components. For example, if the text talks about the need for two lab assistants, we look to the budget to see two lab assistants in the numbers, and check the budget justification to ensure that the need for two lab assistants is addressed. If we find a gap in the information, we bring it to your attention.
4. If there are errors in syntax or grammar, we correct them.
5. We will reword sentences to make them active.
6. We will often make two or more short sentences out of one long sentence.



7. We correct punctuation.
8. In areas where we have made major adjustments, we bring that part of the text to your attention to make sure we haven't misinterpreted the information.
9. If there are areas where the wording suggests more than one interpretation, we mark the text and return it for further input from you.
10. We review the summary carefully, keeping our eye out for interesting story ideas for the media.

We work with the material you provide. We cannot comment on the science involved. However, if we can't understand what you are trying to say, at least at a grammatical level, it is unlikely that that reviewer will understand it either. We work with you and for you. We make it our responsibility to make sure your great science sounds great in the application.

For material that we will work on, such as the main body of your application, we need to work from digital files such as MS Word or WordPerfect documents. These can be e-mailed, edited and returned electronically. If there are other documents we need for information but not to work on, they can be sent by hard-copy mail or fax.

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