Advice from NSERC Review Committee Members

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Notification of Intent (Form 180)

Committee choice
Check the fields’ description for each committee to avoid a wrong choice.

- All committee chairs meet in November to decide on cases where there is not a clear option.
- Program officers could re-direct your file before November if the mistake is evident.
- You will be informed of the Committee you were assigned to.

External Referees
This form helps the program officer to identify names of possible reviewers for your proposal. If it is too short or too vague, you will not get the best reviewers.

The researcher has to provide a list of potential referees:
- When suggesting names, try not to choose the top experts in the field because they could be too busy to review the grant.
- Don’t mention every expert you know, NSERC is only going to choose one from your list.
- NSERC has very clear conflict of interest policies (check website).
- If possible, contact directly or indirectly each name on your proposed list ahead of time to get their commitment to review your grant. If NSERC receives no responses from your list, it is a bad indicator for the committee.
- Try to position yourself so that experts in your field (potential future referees) will recognize your name and know what you do: present at conferences, volunteer in associations, committees or events, invite good people at events that you will attend, be active.

Interdisciplinary
NSERC doesn’t really favour interdisciplinary and each committee has its own “culture”.

Work on this form
Don’t underestimate the work required to write this form. Get comments from colleagues before sending it.

Form 100 - CV

Presentation
- Fill in all the pages (6) at your disposal using easy to read spacing and font type.
- Check spelling.
- Avoid miss-classifications.
- Include page numbers in papers.
- Number your references for a clearer picture.
- Follow the guidelines.
Contributions (This section should be used to show the impact of your work.)
- You must have at least one publication in the research area proposed (old paper or forthcoming article)
- If you are changing to a new field, try to show your merit and expertise to embark in this initiative.
- Give information (venue, citation index, etc) that could help the reader determine the importance of your publications and conference presentations.

Most significant contribution
This section is very important and should highlight your best contributions to the field (ideas, publications, themes), refereed or not.
- Don’t cut and paste from other sections in the proposal.
- Google Scholar and the Citation Index are regularly used by committees as tools to rate professor’s contributions.

Highly Qualified Personnel - HQP (The applicant’s training experience is very important for the evaluation of the file.)
- Forms with numerous names withheld need to be avoided: Make your students sign the forms.
- The Committee wants to know where your students went after working for you: academia, industry, government.
- Publish with your students and mention it.
- If NSERC funded a post-doctoral student, talk about all the research achievement of this person: publications (even if your name is not on it), patents (especially while in university), software, etc.
- Information on HQPs should be consistent throughout the application (summary and details for the past six years).
- If the student received a scholarship, this gives you more points.

Overall
The CV measures your excellence on research (mostly through publications) and on the supervision of students (different levels of HQP, where did they go after).
- Less weight is given to honours and awards, committee work, editorial boards or other elements of the CV, although these do help to define the researcher’s scope of experience.

Special circumstances
Mention any special circumstance that affected your research productivity (maternity leave, serious illness, heavy administrative duties, serious personal problem, etc.).

Form 101 - Proposal

Presentation
Take care of the organization of the proposal, its aesthetic appeal, use figures if necessary and use the available space wisely.
- Avoid having to go back in the application looking for previous explanations: “walk the reader through the proposal” AND avoid jargon.

The problem
It needs to be important, the project needs to make a difference and the impact of the research needs to be clearly stated in the proposal.
- Preference is given to innovative approaches, novel directions and research with the most potential impact.
- In defining the problem, try to convey where is the field, what are the big issues surrounding the discipline, what other researchers are doing, what’s different in your program.
Summary
This part of the application is critical because several reviewers in the panel will only read this part before the evaluation sessions (especially if they are not among the assigned readers).

- This section has to reflect in one page the content of a full proposal.
- It is the first thing reviewers read about your proposal. It needs to awake the interest of the reader.
- Try to highlight the impact of your work in the field, in other fields and for society.

Research plan
It should be mapped in terms of PhDs or Master’s student’s work.

- Choose an appropriate number: not too many and not too few, to guarantee the feasibility of your program
- Has to show a long term vision: “aim to solve….”
- The relationship with other grants should be clear especially when you receive extensive funding from other sources.

Timeline
Include a sequence of the activities to be developed (chart suggested). This also helps the applicant to visualize the researcher’s workload.

Response to previous evaluations
Be conciliatory, constructive and show appreciation for the comments received.

Budget
Each item should be well justified and be consistent with the scope of the project.

- There is no page limit so take some time and explain every item.
- Research Grants & Ethics can give you a report on previous expenses for NSERC grants to help identify “safe” ranges.
- If you know that money has been reallocated to your committee, indicate it in the budget. Otherwise, they will not give you money from those funds.

For Research Tools & Instruments (RTI) applications
Give three levels of equipment configuration. Make the case for the need of the equipment and explain the benefit for a group of users.

Common mistakes
- Lack of clarity in the research plan.
- Poor connection between the research proposed and its relevance in the field.
- Vague description of the projects proposed.
- Unreasonable budget.
- Lack of graduate supervision plans (serious issue).
- Lack of indication of student’s work/contributions: students not involved in aspects of the project.
- Insufficient details for the committee to determine the feasibility of the project.
- Understating achievements or proposing too conservative a research plan: it may limit the award.
- Lack of references to key works of other researchers.

General

Readers
Two “readers” are normally assigned within the committees according to their expertise in the field of the proposal.
Calibration
Committees are trying to calibrate their evaluation criteria before the members start evaluating proposals. Some NSERC committees actually train their new members by examining a good proposal versus a bad one.

Evaluation criteria
- Excellence of researcher (most important)
- Excellence of research (most important)
- HQP
- Need

Approval
NSERC has elevated its standards of approval. Committees review the three forms of an application.

- This can be problematic for faculty in the middle of their career.
- Your need to demonstrate visibility and impact of your research as well as the importance for Canada (real life applications).
- If you appear in two projects with the same colleague(s), clearly establish your role in both initiatives. The committee will most likely choose the clearest proposal.

NSERC wants to fund innovation not necessarily through Discovery Grants. Funding new applicants is also a continuing priority.

- For new applicants, the quality of the proposal is key since past HQP training may not be there yet.
- First time funding and average grants have been going down in several committees.

Curriculum vitae (Without a good CV, there is no grant.)
- The cure is to publish more and in better journals.
- If you know that a publication has not yet been accepted, confirm with the editor before submitting so you have the latest information on your proposal.
- For NSERC, the most important CV sections are research output (first) and HQP.
- A weak CV can be helped by teaming up with individuals possessing stronger CVs.
- New scholar: the role of these co-applicants should be clearly established in the proposal and the reader should not think that this is just a name addition.
- Regular scholar: the best CV should dictate who should be the principal investigator (PI).

Before submitting
Use your faculty’s internal committee to review your proposal to avoid making big errors, especially for new applicants.

- Follow the guidelines.
- Verify that you fall into the scope of the committee.
- Remember that you must write for two audiences:
  - NSERC committee: broad audience, all have the same weight. Don’t lose the reader with too much detail.
  - External reviewers: provide enough detail to enable a feasibility assessment.