Writing a Successful Application for NIH Intramural Research Training Programs
Advice from the NIH Office of Intramural Training & Education (OITE)

Basic Principles

Before you begin assembling your application:

- Read the eligibility criteria carefully; don’t waste time preparing applications to programs for which you will not be considered.
- Read all the FAQs.
- Follow all links on the OITE website; the links contain useful information.
- Visit the OITE training programs page, which provides information on the different programs, an “Eligibility Wizard”, and tips on how to apply successfully to NIH programs.
- Visit our YouTube channel for videos about some NIH programs.
- Read and follow all directions on the application.

Timing:

- For the Postbac IRTA program, you are encouraged to apply six to nine months before you wish to begin training at the NIH.
- For SIP, note the application deadline. Never submit your application at the last minute:
  - Acceptances are made on a rolling basis. Our data indicates that applicants who submit their materials during the first 2 weeks are almost 3 times as likely to find a position as those who submit during the 2 weeks just before the deadline.
  - The sooner your application is in the database, the better your chances of being selected for a position.
  - Many investigators start searching for summer interns well before the application deadline.
  - Technical issues happen. The application platform receives the highest traffic the day of the application deadline. If the traffic gets too high, it can cause the site to crash and prevent you from completing your application.

Ensure that everything you submit is grammatically perfect, clearly expressed, and neatly organized. This is absolutely essential!
• Editing and polishing your application is important, and it takes time.
• Write a draft, edit it carefully, re-read your draft, and ask someone whose judgment you trust to read it and make suggestions for improvement.
• For security reasons, our web-based applications accept only plain text inputs. The only tools you will have for formatting will be capital letters, spaces, hard returns, and characters on the keyboard such as “-” or “**”. Bold, italics, tabs, Greek letters, and other fancy formatting will be stripped away or replaced by other characters.
• Compose and polish sections for an electronic application in a Word document (or, to see how it will translate to our system, a plain text editor such as Notepad or TextEdit); when they are perfect, paste them into the application.

Tailor the elements of your application to the program for which you are applying to increase your chance of being accepted.

• Your resume is a marketing tool used for a specific position. Many people have more than one résumé depending on the types of positions they are seeking.
• Your cover letter is often the first document an employer sees. It serves not only as an introduction to your resume or CV but to you, your thought process, and your writing style. Take advantage of this opportunity to expand upon your qualifications.

Search for and contact investigators whose work interests you.

• You can greatly increase your chances of being selected by contacting principal investigators (PIs) directly. Applications are placed in an application database. Investigators have access to the database and can search it using almost any application field.
• Before contacting PIs, do your research. Learn about what they study. When you write your initial email, reference their work and why it interests you.
• Your initial email should be succinct. Introduce yourself and say what program you have applied through. Express your interest in the work and mention any experience you have. Be specific about what you can contribute to the research. Attach your CV or resume to your initial email.
• Be aware that many PIs will not respond to your email.
  o PIs receive hundreds of emails daily making it easy for one to be lost.
  o Emails from non-NIH addresses may not receive as much attention.
  o Security filters from either your email or NIH’s may block your email from getting into the PIs inbox
  o The PI may not respond if the answer is no. Reasons for an instant no are they do not have the funds, there are no open positions in the lab, they already accepted another applicant, or they are just not interested.
If you do not get a response, you can do the following:

- Follow-up again after two weeks. If they do not reply to the follow-up, assume they are not interested.
- Reach out to other individuals in the lab. They may be less busy, and they can act as an advocate on your behalf.
- Search for and contact other possible PIs
- Visit our website for tips on how to choose a PI

Make certain that all information you submit is accurate. Supplying fraudulent information will eliminate you from consideration for a program.

Components of an NIH Application:

- Contact information
- Cover letter
- Resume or CV
- Letters of recommendation
- Transcript or list of courses and grades

Individual investigators who review your application are trying to find the individual(s) who will fit most comfortably into their programs or research groups and make the most significant contributions to ongoing projects. All PIs have their own criteria that they value. Generally, they are looking for individuals who speak and write well; have some prior successful research experience; think about science in a mature way; approach problems creatively; take the initiative and are self-motivated; and work well in teams.

Your job is to use each element or your application to demonstrate the skills, aptitudes, interests, and experiences that would make you an outstanding choice.

**Contact Information:** Provide email and mailing addresses and a phone number so that program staff can contact you. Make sure your email address and phone messages are professional. Surprisingly, many applicants provide contact information that is unprofessional. Do you really want the individuals who will be evaluating your application to think of you as “yuppieguppie07” or “DrHoney”? Do you want an investigator who is calling to offer you a position to hear a message designed to amuse your friends? Also consider carefully what you post on social media. You do not want to post items that reflect unprofessional or questionable behavior. This program is very competitive. You want to give yourself the best chance possible to succeed.
Also, be sure to list an email account to which you will have access. If you are graduating, your school may close your school email account, or you may not regularly monitor that account.

**Your Cover Letter:** Your cover letter is your opportunity to “speak” persuasively to those who read your application.

- Scientists are busy people. Keep your cover letter brief, focused, and succinct; it should be no longer than two pages. Say what is important, but nothing more.
- Tailor your cover letter to the application you are submitting. Why do you want to participate in this specific program? How do your skills and experiences make you the perfect match for the program? Show that you have done your homework.
- Do not present material that is included in your resume except perhaps to highlight your major accomplishments.
- Describe realistic expectations for the training experience you are seeking.
- Pay particular attention to how you describe your research interests. NIH investigators select their own trainees. It is likely that many of them will search the application database for individuals with shared interests. If you are willing to work on several areas, it might be useful to mention them all specifically to increase your chances of a “match.”
- Investigators may filter the database using specific topics, experiments, research type, degrees, institution, GPA, or the names of other researchers. Make sure to include these important words to increase your chance of showing up in their search.
- Be specific. Remember that examples, stories, and details are likely to stick with the reader. It is better to provide an example that illustrates your ability to work in a team than to state that you are a team player. Show don’t tell.
- Comment on your long-term educational and scientific goals and how the program might help you in meeting them.
- Your personal statement for graduate or medical school is not a cover letter.
- Visit the OITE’s [Cover Letter Guide](#) to see more tips and some examples.

**Your Resume or CV:** This document should be a concise (no more than two-pages at this stage in your career) summary of your educational and professional history.

In the United States, a resume is a snapshot of what you have to offer an organization or company; in contrast, a CV is a document that details your entire academic and work history. Use a CV when applying to faculty and/or research-intensive positions, and for fellowships, grants, or awards. Use a resume for everything else, unless specifically noted. You can learn more about the differences [here](#).
• A general format includes:
  o Contact information
  o Education: Include degree, field of study, institution, and date for each
degree completed (Note: You can remove your high school after your
sophomore year of college.)
  o Professional/work experience
    • For each, specify the dates, location, and supervisor
    • List the skills you acquired during scientific training
      experiences. and any mentoring or supervising you were
      asked to provide.
    • Include volunteer experiences if they are relevant.
  o Honors and awards
  o Community service/leadership experience
  o Publications and presentations
• Use formatting or spacing on the page to make your resume/CV is easy
to read. The reader should be able to find important information quickly. The
document should not have such a small font and dense presentation of the
information that the reader must work hard to read it. Try putting an extra hard
return between sections.
• Be judicious about what information you include. As you get older, childhood
accomplishments will become less important. In general, once you have
completed college, mention high school accomplishments only if they
demonstrated a particularly important facet of your personality.
• You do not have to include every section listed in your resume. However, your
contact information, education, and research experiences are a must.
• Refrain from including “Objectives.” If your goal or objective is simply to
obtain a spot in a training program, that fact is already apparent from your
submission of an application.
• Visit our website and OITE’s Resume and CV Guide to see more tips and some
examples.
• Visit our YouTube channel to watch a video about writing resumes, CVs, and
cover letters

**Letters of Recommendation:** Individuals who are evaluating applicants to a
research training program are trying to identify those individuals who are most likely
to complete the program successfully and who look as if they will make the greatest
contributions. Letters of recommendation can provide insights into your prior
successes and comments on your potential future contributions.

• If you are applying to a scientific program, the best references will come from
scientists. NOTE: this means that meeting and cultivating potential references
is something you should always be doing.
  • Individuals who have worked with you in a research setting are excellent
    choices for references.
  • Senior scientists will be more credible than graduate students.
• A recommendation from someone who knows you personally will carry greater weight than one from a faculty member who can comment only on your performance on tests.
• Science faculty will be preferable to faculty in the humanities who will be preferable to your minister or rabbi.
• **Never** ask a family member to write a letter on your behalf.
• When you ask an individual to serve as a reference, also ask him/her if the letter will be supportive or positive. This is somewhat embarrassing, but it is far better than having a negative letter submitted.
• Provide your references with a current copy of your resume/CV; a description of the program(s) you are applying to; and suggestions of areas you would like them to address in their letters.
• The medical school recommendations that are on file at your school will probably not address the issues that are important to a biomedical research training program, e.g., your technical skills, your ability to trouble-shoot experiments in the lab. Ask for a second set of letters.
• Visit OITE’s [Career Blog](#) for tips about how to ask for letters of recommendations.

**Lists of Courses and Grades:** At this time in your life, it is probably sensible to order several transcripts from each institution you have attended, especially those at which you have completed degrees. You will not be asked for a transcript when you apply for an NIH intramural research program. However, if you are selected for a position, you will be required to provide an official transcript to the Institute in which you will work.

You will be asked to submit a list of courses and grades. This is a chance to demonstrate your ability to organize information and follow directions.

• Think carefully about how you will organize and format the information to make it easy for the reader to follow.
• Check to see that your organization has been retained during the submission process and fix any glitches.
• Submit grades for all courses completed. Scientists must write well; Earning good grades in English can be as important as in chemistry.
• List the courses in which you are currently enrolled and update your application as you complete additional courses.
• If you have just moved to a new education level, e.g., if you are a freshman in college, include information on your high school grades in this section.
To Reiterate:

Start early.
Follow directions.
Tailor your application to the program to which you are applying.
Edit, revise, proofread, and ask friends to proofread your application.

A word of caution: Your public profiles on the internet (Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.) can and will be used by potential employers. This includes investigators in the Intramural Research Program of the NIH. Be judicious about what you display. Once something is on the internet, it never really goes away. Google yourself and change or delete any material that makes you look unprofessional. You will want to do this BEFORE you submit your applications!

GOOD LUCK!