

How to write a competitive MGH ECOR Tosteson & Fund for Medical Discovery proposal

The FMD fellowship process is highly competitive. We average around 70-80 applications for 9 awards. To prepare the best application, it may be helpful to understand that the reviewers consider every part of the application to select the top proposals. Reviewers critically assess the scientific quality of the proposed research plan, the applicant's track record and their trajectory towards independence, and the applicant's environment or lab and the support from their mentor. Below we summarize the guidance we provide for reviewers, and provide some suggestions on how to craft your proposal to allow for the best review.

FACTORS THAT ARE CONSIDERED BY REVIEWERS

Reviewers consider these factors in ranking your application:

Scientific quality of the proposal

- Is the proposal designed to address an important question and have a significant impact?
- Is the proposal well written and clearly organized?
- Is the proposal innovative or has the applicant developed a new system to make discoveries?
- Can the work reasonably be done in a year?
- Are pitfalls and alternative approaches adequately considered?
- Is the preliminary data convincing?

Trajectory

- Do their publications, proposal and the mentor's letter indicate that they are formulating their own research ideas?
- Does the applicant have an appropriate number of publications from their graduate and postdoc years? Are the publications important to the field?
- Is there an indication that the applicant is on a pathway to independence?

Mentorship

- Does the applicant have strong support from their mentor? Is the mentor committed to developing the applicant's independent career?
- Does the mentor provide a comprehensive training plan for the applicant, including opportunities to learn new techniques, present their research data, and interact with other researchers? Does the training plan fit with the applicant's career goals?
- Has the mentor successfully trained other fellows?

INCREASING YOUR COMPETITIVENESS

Here are some suggestions to increase the competitiveness of your proposal:

General suggestions

- Make sure that you are eligible to apply, based on the information provided in the call for applications.
- Consider whether this is the best time for you to submit a proposal. Only one application per year is allowed, so if you will be in a better position in terms of publications or preliminary data in a few months, it is best to wait.
- Please carefully proofread all sections of our proposal. Prepare well in advance and ask your mentor to read the entire proposal. If you need help with grammar, please have a colleague read a final proof.

Research plan:

- Make your proposal understandable to a broad range of scientists. It is rare that more than one reviewer will be expert in your area of research. In the last round we had 12 reviewers from a broad range of departments. The proposal must be written so that it can be understood by investigators from many research fields. Avoid jargon and overuse of acronyms. A well-constructed figure is good, but don't paste in figures without an explanation of what they show and why the data is important.
- You must convince the reviewers that your research is important. The best research has an irreplaceable influence on a field. Tell us what previous findings underlie your work, what the current gap in knowledge or research capability may be, and how the field will be influenced by what you propose to do.
- Why are you the best person to do the research? How are your skills and background best suited to the proposed work? What is your contribution to the preliminary data?
- Do you understand the scope of the work? Can it be done in a year? How will the work be extended in the future? How will it contribute to your future career goals?

Long term career plan:

- Briefly describe your career path so far, and how you see your independent career in the future. How will this award help to make that happen? This is a good place to include information about additional funding opportunities you are applying for (K awards etc) that will support your career development.

Biosketch:

- Your biosketch should be carefully prepared, listing your previous positions, awards and references in chronologic order. The statement section of the biosketch can be used to highlight your unique qualifications for the proposed work or to explain unusual aspects of your career path.

Letters:

- Your supporting letters are extremely important. They should be informative about you as a developing investigator and research colleague, not just about the results of your research. The postdoc and the mentor should discuss these letters well in advance.
- We are now asking the mentor to provide a training plan for each postdoc. This section should explain how the mentor will further the independent career of the postdoc, and how previous postdocs from the lab have moved on in their careers. Please discuss the training plan with your mentor, and make sure a comprehensive plan is included in the final application. For further guidance please look at the instructions on the Call for Applications.
- The second letter should be from your graduate advisor unless this is not possible. If this is lacking, the reason should be explained in your personal statement. Please do not include letters from junior faculty who trained with you, as this suggests that you have not made an impression on more senior faculty. This should be avoided for all types of applications.