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## CAREER FOCUS

# Demystifying Award Applications

An award nomination or application should tell a clear and compelling story.

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**A**ny person's career can benefit from receiving an award, but the value early in one's career development can be especially profound—like a stamp of approval branded across an otherwise unfledged resume.

Whether you are nominating someone else or applying for yourself, it is crucial to assemble a package that tells a coherent story to the judges. An award committee needs a reason to choose the winner, so give them that ammunition—motivate them to advocate for you or the candidate you're championing.

### The devil's in the details

Your award material will be read by people who are probably smart, busy and evaluating many other packages. Don't assume that they are intimately familiar with you, your work, or perhaps even your field. Choosing which details to include when crafting award material is a tricky balancing act, and there are two common pitfalls: people either overwhelm the committee with so many details that the arguments are difficult to follow, or they don't explain the relevance of the issues outlined.

The submitter should think carefully about what he or she wants to tell the reviewers and then frame it as a compelling, readily understandable story. A reviewer should be able to explain your award package in a few sentences. Anything complicated by too many details will not make it easy for the reviewer to make a convincing argument on your behalf.

### “What?” and “so what?”

Years ago, I was speaking with Djan Khoe of Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands, about someone we wanted to nominate for an award. This person had done superb work but was relatively unrecognized. “A winner can’t just be excellent,” Khoe told me. “In order to be recognized, a winner needs to have a specific ‘baby’ for which they are known and can call their own.”

So, what has the candidate accomplished? If the answer is long-winded, then you have a problem. A person’s achievements resonate better when accompanied by just a few convincing specifics: Kenichi Iga, inventor of the vertical-cavity surface-emitting laser (VCSEL), or Ursula Keller, inventor of the semiconductor saturable absorber mirror (SESAM).

Of course, creating a story about an early-career researcher can be quite difficult. Arpad Bergh, one of the founders of OIDA and longtime technical member of the Bell System, told me that engineers are very good at telling “What?” but not so good at telling “So what?” With this in mind, when describing any particular achievement in award material, I try to answer three questions:

#### 1. What did the person accomplish?

State this in specific, straightforward terms without obscuring the accomplishment with too many details. Keep jargon to a minimum.

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#### 2. How did it compare to previous work?

This is relatively easy to answer since published work should have addressed this in the technical paper. For example, “as compared to previous approaches, this achieved better performance in terms of X.”

#### 3. What was the impact?

This is the hard one and the crux of the story you’re telling. Remember that impact can be broadly defined; it encompasses anything of importance (or potential importance) that will distinguish this candidate from others. Some examples include: used in a commercial product, highly cited paper, other researchers followed this approach, underpins industry practice, received paper award, and potential to improve performance in future applications for metric X.

Remember that certain awards are for specific categories, so the impact statement should align with the specific nature of an award—for example, stick to impact on quantum optics if it’s a quantum optics award.

### Play to win

Once you’ve crafted a compelling story, there are a few other points to keep in mind:

#### Don’t hesitate to nominate.

As written in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)*, “your friend’s honor should be as precious to you as your own.” Look for ways to help others,

especially early in their career. Also, many organizations are seeking to increase the diversity of their award recipients—a possible opportunity to highlight a deserving candidate.

#### “Relevance” of details.

Important distinguishing details are often not explained in award applicants’ resumes. Provide context when listing honors or previous awards, and supply details on impact factor and acceptance selectivity for published papers. Add a line beneath any award or activity to explain what it means. It’s likely that your reviewer has never heard of a specific award before.

#### Don’t be bashful.

We are often our own worst critics. Awards exist for a reason, and you or your nominee may very well be the most deserving. If an award has a looming deadline, don’t be bashful about applying or asking your supporters for recommendation letters.

#### Choose letter writers wisely.

Perhaps the most difficult issue in creating an award package is choosing which people to ask to write recommendation letters. It is valuable to have a notable person, but it is more important that the person be enthusiastic about the candidate.

#### If at first you don’t succeed...

If the candidate does not receive the award, don’t surrender. Many people—including many I have nominated—received awards after multiple attempts. If you had confidence going into the process, then try again and improve the package. Like anything in life, you have to play to win. **OPN**

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