

# THE SECRETS OF SUCCES\$FUL GRANT APPLICATIONS



# WHICH FUNDING APPLICATIONS MAKE SSHRC, NSERC OR CIHR STAND UP AND TAKE NOTICE AND WHICH ONES END UP IN THE TRASH? THE PEER REVIEW, CANADA'S REVIEW OF GRADUATE STUDIES, INTERVIEWED GRANTING COUNCIL INSIDERS TO FIND OUT WHAT THEY LOOK FOR WHEN REVIEWING APPLICATIONS FROM GRAD STUDENTS. BY CHRISTINE SISMONDO

WHEN STARTING A GRANT APPLICATION, you may be confronted by an overwhelming desire to go back to bed, assume the fetal position and pull the covers over your head. Grant-writing is high pressure, and for many, that pressure is only increasing. Nowadays, the ability to attract external funding not only pays the bills, it also determines long-term employability.

Granting experts say that feeling overwhelmed is normal, but not inevitable. Although seemingly mysterious, applications succeed or fail for reasons clear to granting council adjudicators. Their eyes, while bleary after reviewing thousands of applications each year, are finely focused on the key characteristics of a winning application. These characteristics are numerous, but centered around three main themes: knowledge of your audience, thorough understanding of the guidelines, and a strategic approach to the process. The specifics of these themes form a checklist that will help you avoid missing any key steps for your next application, which is crucial because one error could cost you thousands of dollars in lost funding.

## APPLY TO THE RIGHT ORGANIZATION

As many students have witnessed first-hand, there are more funding options in recent years, thanks in part to interdisciplinary research opportunities, and also to new masters-level funding through the Canada Graduate Scholarship program. But increased sources of funding can increase confusion. Before anything, make sure you are applying to the right place.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council is clearly the first, and often only, choice for the vast majority researchers in the humanities and social sciences, but even these researchers may not be making the most of their opportunity within the council. The number of applications for the new masters' scholarships, for instance, are not yet close to the level SSHRC would like.

For researchers in other areas, the challenges can be more complex. The Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, SSHRC and Canadian Institutes of Health Research all fund scientific research, making the divisions between the three organizations seem quite blurry.

"This is a big problem, especially for people in the life sciences," says Candice Robinson, team leader in scholarship and fellowships in Physical and Earth Sciences for NSERC. She suggests contacting NSERC with a one-page summary of your proposal to check its suitability for funding. "But, this must be



done a month prior to the deadline and hopefully sooner."

Complicating matters, CIHR has earlier deadlines, and you can miss out on both if you apply late to NSERC and they deem your application more appropriate for CIHR. Best to err on the side of caution and have queries ready six weeks before the earliest potential deadline.

The same can be a problem for some social sciences researchers, notes Adèle Savoie, assistant director of SSHRC fellowships. "In a field like psychology, for example, we sometimes receive research proposals that might be slightly more appropriate for NSERC." You can also contact SSHRC with a rough proposal — again, well in advance — and the organization will give you a definitive answer.

## UNDERSTAND THE APPLICATION FORMS AND MEET ALL OF THE REQUIREMENTS

After sorting out where to apply, grant experts agree that you need a long-term plan, a critical path for the stages of the granting process. To do this, you must thoroughly understand every application requirement.

All experts urge students to take far more caution with application requirements. Dr. Jacob Kraicer, a professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto and an authority on the granting process, found one agency reporting 25 per cent incomplete applications. NSERC even hires a full-time employee for several months each year just to sort out the problems stemming from missing information. Even if it is caught before the deadline, missing information is often a

major strike against you. For this reason, Robinson suggests that your timeline should start the moment the grants are posted.

First, thoroughly familiarize yourself with the application forms and with the instructions for completing them. Then, read them again. This sounds like a no-brainer, but given the number of incomplete applications, clearly no one is above making a mistake, or simply misinterpreting a requirement.

"It's not as though one missed step will necessarily be the disqualifying factor on an application," says Savoie, "but what if that's the one thing that makes a grant ineligible? It takes an awful lot of hard work to complete an application, why risk throwing away all that hard work?"

In extensive writing on what he has coined as "grantsmanship," Kraicer suggests an even more radical timeline for preparing your grant application: an entire year. This puts you two steps ahead of the competition: first, you gain time to think of interesting projects and discuss them with colleagues; second, you can enhance your credibility by submitting articles to peer-reviewed journals or organizing conferences to demonstrate your interest and skill. You cannot improve your track record a week before the deadline but, given a year, you can devote some valuable time to improving that record. Even a paper in the review process will look better than no publications.

It is also important to note that grant applications by new applicants are often criticized for inadequate or narrow literature reviews. Often neglected, a literature review should demonstrate not only awareness of previous and current work in the field, but also your organizational skills and summary techniques. Like your list of publications, a proper literature review signifies academic credibility, credibility that will be diminished if your review looks at all like the work of an undergraduate — a frequent concern in many applications.

"A failure to situate the problem in the context of the current research demonstrates to the committee members that the applicant doesn't know what they're working on," says Savoie. With each section of an application counting toward the total score, a poor literature review can prove fatal.

## KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND WRITE CLEARLY AND CONCISELY

When it comes to the actual style of writing, there is no tried and true formula, but it pays to remember that the originality of your research is second only to your producing a proposal that is a genuine pleasure to read. A fresh approach to the problem is necessary, but making your approach clear and even fun to read may be more important. As Kraicer notes, "good writing will not save bad ideas, but bad writing will kill good ones."

Applicants occasionally forget that actual humans will review their packages, often doing this unpaid work on top of their normal workload. You know what it feels like to read hun-

dreds of articles, so it pays to remember that adjudicators are often as just as tired, so try to make their job enjoyable.

At the very least, try not to annoy your committee members. Oddly, many annoyances are ones you are already familiar with from TA work. Desperate to fit in more information, and daunted by trying to capture a lifetime of academic work in just one page, graduate applicants will often write extra-long paragraphs, change the font size to accommodate more text or add appendices. These are all strictly forbidden. Appendices will be thrown away, while a small font size may be a disqualifying factor, and even if that's not the case, it is sure to put a reviewer in a bad mood.

"We come up with these requirements for a reason, not just because we're bored and like making up rules," says Savoie. "And the reason is the reviewers' workload."

Like any piece of writing, know and consider your audience and, in this case, understand that your audience is multi-disciplinary. At NSERC, for instance, there are two review committees: the first set of reviewers will be as close as possible to your field of expertise, but their shortlist will be presented to a committee that often represents the entire range of disciplines. "Students tend to use a lot of jargon," says NSERC's Robinson. "But very technical wording about a physics experiment may not make any sense to the biologists in the room. Try to word your proposal in plain language."

Many applicants also write an extensive and poetic preamble, leaving them without enough room for their actual research plans. Savoie notes many reviewers find "they had no idea what the research plan was until the last line of the proposal." Remember that most important part of writing is rewriting: getting feedback from mentors familiar with the process, revising, and repeating the process once more. A long-preamble, for instance, is not bad if you use it in a draft to get your thinking clear on the subject, but then cut it from the final package.

If this drafting seems too much effort consider a successful application can be worth five figures, sometimes more. If the proposal consists of 700 words that can mean upwards of \$100 per word, far more than you will be paid in any other context, unless you are Bill Clinton. It is worth agonizing over every single word, and it is pointless to submit an application without that care and effort.

Thinking it is time to buy *Grant Writing for Dummies*? Not a bad idea, though you may not want to prominently display it on your shelf afterwards. There are several good resource books on grant-writing available, as well as online resources, like Kraicer's excellent "The Art of Grantsmanship" ([www.utoronto.ca/cip/sa\\_ArtGt.pdf](http://www.utoronto.ca/cip/sa_ArtGt.pdf)) — for more grant resources, visit [www.thepeerreview.ca](http://www.thepeerreview.ca)).

But once you are committed to the proper style, what do you say? Experts advise that you just ask yourself the simple question: What am I doing? Explain why that is interesting



and the steps you will take to solve the research problem. Next, examine how you will disseminate the research, where you will do the work, and how it is placed in the context of existing studies.

Then – and this is where the grant proposal really turns into an art form – you must convey certain qualities about yourself to the committee, ideally unobtrusively and subtly woven into the body of the proposal. These qualities are your commitment, your authority, and your ability to deliver.

Finally, it should go without saying but, apparently, it can't be emphasized enough: your application should be free of typos, spelling mistakes, and grammatical errors. Robinson points out that these slip-ups don't speak well for your ability to conduct research. With most applications relatively short, you may even want to invest a small amount of money in a proofreader, just to be sure.

Pull style and content together and hopefully you can hit Robinson's ideal: "a well-crafted proposal that makes it very clear to the reviewer that the student spent a lot of time crafting the application and tried to get the most information across in the most elegant manner."

## SECURE THE RIGHT REFERENCES

Your ability to conduct research is proven by your writing, your publications, and your literature summary. Now seal this credibility with the right reference letters. Many applicants try to get letters from the biggest name, or the best rising star within reach, believing that committees will be impressed. Sure, Noam Chomsky's recommendation would be nice, but does he know you well enough? "Big names are not such an important thing," especially at the graduate level, according to Robinson. "The people who know you and your research well and will give you enough time are a better bet."

One of your letters should be from the supervisor most closely involved with your research. References from tenure-stream faculty are preferable, but the professor must be able to

put your research in the context of the body of work, expound on your leadership and research abilities, and speak authoritatively on your track record. Don't try to impress the committee with a dozen glowing letters; instead, follow the guidelines. NSERC, for example, only accepts two letters per application and will disregard any extras.

While reference letters may seem out of your control, Kraicer says to ask your referee what they plan to write – and often, they will give you a candid answer. Another trick is to ask "can you write a strong letter of reference at this time?" Get the answer, then make your choice. Notify referees well in advance, and don't forget to send a thank-you note a few days before the deadline.

## USE ALL THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Finally, remember to take advantage of the numerous grant-application resources in every institution. Aside from departmental mentors, most graduate-studies associations and faculty or grad schools often have advisors. It's important to take advantage of all the resources available, particularly in social sciences and humanities, where more limited funding means a significant number of otherwise acceptable proposals must be rejected. Take any advantage you can get.

## LEARN FROM THE PROCESS

What to do if you are one of those who does not make the cut? Well, growing bitter and giving up is one option but, of course, not the best. You will be making a mistake if you view every successful or failed application as a one-time attempt to obtain funding. Applying for funding is a process – a life-long one.

Examine your feedback, consider what held you back, and plan to improve in those areas. "Ask where you fell down and what you need to do to make next year's application successful," advises Robinson. "For example, you may have fallen short in the area of leadership skills. Before next year's application, look into organizing some conferences. The next year, that will look really great on an application."

Just in time, too, because it's never too soon to start thinking about the next deadline.

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