

Tips for Applying for Grants

**Glenda Hawkins, Master's Student
Family Studies and Gerontology Department**

The purpose of this paper is to share with you some of the experiences I faced and lessons I learned while writing an application for graduate funding. Although I focus mostly on my experience of applying for a grant from the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation (NSHRF), hopefully this essay will give you some tips to assist in writing a good application for any type of grant.

Supervisor Support

One of the first things I want to discuss is supervisor support and the supervisor's role in the application process. Personally, I believe the support from my supervisor was one of the most important reasons for the success of my application. It is really important to first make sure that you have the support of your supervisor. Under NSHRF guidelines, a professor can only support 2 student applications. This may present a challenge in some departments, where the ratio of students to professors is high. Furthermore, in order to make the process efficient and stress free, it is helpful to sit down with your supervisor and clearly outline each of your responsibilities from the beginning, especially if this is your professor's first time going through the process and be sure to provide him or her with a copy of the application, and a detailed description of what is expected of them. You will find that this will minimize some of the frustration that can occur because of different expectations.

Your supervisor will play a major role in the development of your application, not only will they review your proposal and add valuable suggestions to improve it, but in some cases (like NSHRF) they will also have to provide a detailed letter of support. In this letter of support, your supervisor will have to evaluate you based on several criteria, like organization, research abilities, the ability to think critically, etc. and this will be accompanied by a detailed letter justifying their ratings.

Starting Early & Time Lines

Another important tip is to start your application early. There are many good reasons to start your application early, as you will find many obstacles can come in the way. As a student still finishing up course work, making the application deadlines, especially those due the 1st of May, can be a challenge. Many of the papers and examinations for classes are due around the same time, so it can be hard to devote as much time to the application as you should.

Furthermore, if you haven't started your thesis proposal, and especially if you haven't even decided on a thesis topic, 2 weeks before the application is due is not the ideal time to start. Like me you may find that after you start the application, the research topic you have chosen no longer appeals to you. For the past year, I had intended to do a qualitative study, however when it came time to solidify this into an application, I realized that my interests had changed and that I really wanted to conduct research using a quantitative approach. For me the most challenging and time consuming part of the application was trying to develop research questions, and then

figuring out the right methodology and analysis needed to answer those research questions. Spend time to adequately develop this section of the application!

Setting up a time line and sticking to it is essential. Also essential is setting up a time line that fits with your supervisor's schedule. After I had completed a rough draft of my application, my supervisor and I sat down and set up times for meetings in advance. You also need to find out the department chair's schedule, as they will have to sign the final copy of your application. A week before my application was due I found out that both my supervisor and the chair of the department were going to be out of the province 2 days before the application was due. Therefore I had to have my application completed and signed 3 days prior to the funding organizations deadline. Also keep in mind that some funding organizations require you to submit multiple copies of your application and supervisor's CV. For example, under NSHRF guidelines, you have to submit 12 copies of your application, plus 12 copies of your professor's CV. This is a LOT of photocopying that you really don't want to leave to the last day, especially if your supervisor has a long CV!

Application

Applications will vary depending on the funding source. However, some of the information/sections you may need to include in an application are: relevance, training expectations, transcripts, curriculum vitae, research proposal, resources, and assessment forms. To produce an application that is both well written and includes all the essential information will require that you rewrite your application a minimum of 3 to 4 times, at least that's what I did, and this takes time! Bottom line, these scholarships can run upwards of \$17, 000, which is a lot of money and is well worth the time and effort that you put into it if you are successful. Even if you are not successful, it still gives you a really good start on your thesis research.

Prior to filling out an application, I strongly recommend that you review the funding organizations goals and missions, and make sure that your application meets and fits within them. It's helpful to review these again after you have finished the application. The fit of your research project within the goals or criteria of a funding agency may not always be obvious at first. Take the time to try and make it fit, but try not to compromise the research that you want to conduct in the process.

As for the research proposal itself it is usually limited in length, ~1 page for SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) and 3 pages for NSHRF. You will find that this is a very small amount of space to cram in your introduction, a little literature review, your research questions, methodology, relevance and limitations of your project. This is the section that you will probably have to rewrite a few times, until you are able to get all the necessary information into the limited space.

Throughout the application, you need to demonstrate to the reviewers that you have the resources needed to conduct your research. For example, to demonstrate personal resources, you want to list any courses, workshops, research and work experiences that you have which will assist you in conducting your research. In my case, since I was doing a quantitative analysis, I talked about some of the research projects I had worked on, classes I had taken in research methods and statistics and also a workshop I attended on using SPSS for data analysis to show my ability in

conducting research. If you have access to a graduate lab, state that along with any other resources that you have access to, including hardware (like computers, tape recorders, telephones), software (Microsoft office, analysis software like SPSS or NUD*IST) and other resources like transcribers, etc. It is important to list these because you will need to demonstrate that you have the tools and support necessary to complete your thesis research.

Additional Reminders

There are a few additional things that I kept in mind while writing my application:

1. This is a competition, each year more and more students are competing for these scholarships, so you really want to sell your research and yourself. Providing the right balance between promoting yourself but not over doing it is a challenge, but be sure to make it clear through your course work and research experience that you are capable and qualified to carry out the research.
2. Remember to review all of the instructions and follow them – in other words, make sure your using the right line spacing, font size, keeping it within the right number of pages, making sure its organized and the grammar is correct, etc. The idea is to make it easier for those people reviewing the applications.
3. Be careful about making assumptions when writing your application – this was a big thing for me. For example, your reviewers may not necessarily be experts in your area of research, although they are experienced researchers, they may not know the specific content, so demonstrate your awareness of your thesis topic. Again, try not to assume the implications or value of your research is implicit, you want this comes across in not just the relevance section of the application, but throughout your whole proposal.
4. Take advantage of any learning opportunities (conferences, presentation) on how to write grant applications. I was fortunate to attend a conference and a presentation on how to write grant applications, which helped when it came time to write my own application. Also, if there are students in your department who have applied for applications, utilize their experience and knowledge.
5. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. By that I mean check out other funding agencies and apply for other scholarships. You will find that once you have written one application, it can be really just a matter of reworking and rewording it to fit other funding applications.

Conclusion

In conclusion, you ultimately want to demonstrate that you have thought your application through from your research questions, design and analysis, to the tools you need and have at your disposal to do this research. It is easy to compromise your research along the way, by trying to make it fit to the mission or goals of the funding agency, or to fit within larger research projects. However, at the end of the day you are the one who will be conducting the research, so be true to yourselves and your research interests.

Good luck with your applications!