

Tips for Effective Scholarship Applications

Find out the application deadline and give yourself plenty of time to complete the application. Deadlines are firm. External granting agencies have specific program guidelines. Please consult the agency's web site for full information. If you are not sure if you are eligible, you can contact the funding agency or e-mail inquiries to grad-awards@sfu.ca for assistance.

Pay attention to details. Before you begin, read the application form and all instructions carefully and take them seriously. Follow the rules pertaining to font size, line spacing, margins, page limits, etc. Failure to do so may disqualify your application from the competition. Pages that exceed the specified limit will automatically be discarded without your knowledge.

Write your proposal with the specific funding source in mind (e.g., University-funded, provincial or federal agency).

Spend time on the application. Did you read the terms of award thoroughly? Do you meet the eligibility criteria? Did you proofread it? Has it been signed by all parties? Have you submitted it by the departmental deadline?

Ask your academic supervisor and peers to critically review your proposal. Give it to someone outside your specialty area. If it doesn't make sense to them, it won't make sense to the reviewers or adjudicators either.

Package the application material well so that it is easy to read and follow. Do not submit hand-written applications — these will be removed from the competition. Application forms can be filled in on-line and then printed to obtain required signatures, attach transcripts, reference letters.

Ensure that your application is complete. Incomplete applications will be removed from the competition by the University or the funding agency. Use a checklist to ensure that all supporting documents required such as free-form text pages, transcripts, letters of reference, etc.) are included in your application package by the competition deadline.

Visual appearance is important. Use short sentences when possible. Break up the text with paragraphs. Use bolded headings and underline where appropriate. Avoid jargon and technical language. Use 'lay' language whenever possible. Be succinct. More is not necessarily better.

Define acronyms and abbreviations the first time they are used. Avoid using colours since your application will have to be photocopied for reviewers.

For most fields of research, there should be one overriding great idea, or hypothesis and an outline of the specific objectives that will be used to address it.

Writing must be clear and concise. Remember that the reviewers and adjudication committee members may not have a specialized knowledge of your research area. Your application should convey the answers to the following questions: What specific issue will the research address? Why is this issue important? What is already known about the issue? How is your approach innovative? How will it advance knowledge in the field? Why are you particularly qualified to carry out the research?

KEEP TRYING! Don't get discouraged. Writing a winning scholarship application takes practice just like everything else.

THE REVIEW/ADJUDICATION PROCESS

Your application will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. Academic performance

Undergraduate and graduate transcripts (if applicable) will be assessed. Reviewers look for steady improvement or consistency. For external scholarships, a minimum grade point average of an A- or 3.67/4.33 in each of the last two years is normally required. Research or professional experience in your field of study may offset this requirement.

2. Research ability, achievements and activities

Reviewers will assess your publication record, presentations, research prizes and awards. Your achievements will be evaluated relative to expectations for someone at your stage of training.

3. Leadership and communication skills

Your personal strengths will be assessed based on letters or reports provided by your referees. A good referee has known you for at least two years and can provide concrete examples of your strengths and personal attributes.

4. Consider the following factors when approaching faculty members to write letters of reference

Has this faculty member taught and advised many students? Does the faculty member know you well and your area of research? Is he/she able to respond fairly, enthusiastically, and with knowledge of you and of your research? Use someone who is not stingy with their praise of you and of your potential. Check with your referees at least a week before the deadline to ensure that your reference letter/report has not been forgotten. Qualities that should be emphasized in your letters of reference include: research ability or potential, leadership and interpersonal abilities, critical thinking, independence, perseverance, originality, interest in discovery, and organizational skills.