Canada Graduate Scholarship Information Sessions

The Keys to Writing a Strong Research Proposal are:

• to formulate a precise, interesting research question; this may take the form of a hypothesis to be tested against a specific set of criteria or a more open-ended inquiry.

• to establish the relevance and value of the proposed research question in the context of current academic thinking.

• to describe and evaluate the data or source material the research requires.

• to outline a clear and practical methodology which enables the applicant to answer the research question.

• to suggest what one hopes to discover at the end of the research and what new areas it might open up.

• to demonstrate that the research will not take significantly longer than the duration of support.

• to explain why the applicant is qualified and capable of conducting the proposed research

• to set out why the institution and the selected supervisor are appropriate for the research

• to show sensitivity to current [government] objectives in higher education funding, so far as these pertain to the proposed subject area.

• to do the above in a clear, concise and unambiguous manner.
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

General Guidelines

An application for master’s or doctoral funding should be complete, clear, concise, coherent and error-free. It should also demonstrate:

- a strong academic record,
- excellent potential to conduct advanced scholarly research,
- strong communication skills, and
- the ability to successfully complete the graduate program in a timely fashion.

A good letter of appraisal:

- supports the information in the application,
- is enthusiastic,
- focuses on your skills and past achievements,
- stresses strengths and personal attributes, and
- demonstrates why you are of superior caliber and worthy of a prestigious national award.

Important reminders:

- Read the program description and application/eligibility instructions carefully.
- Start your application early.
- Use plain, accessible language.
- Show your application to someone outside your narrow comfort zone to receive feedback.
- Let referees know the deadline well in advance.
- Indicate your proficiency in any language required for your research.
- Ensure your list of publications provides complete bibliographic information.
- Only include research contributions that have been accepted for publication.
- Respect page limits, font size and page margins.
- Ensure that your application is complete and error-free.
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General Guidelines (con’d)

If in doubt, get help from:

- your supervisor and/or graduate coordinator,
- your peers,
- past scholarship recipients,
- the Department Head/Chair, and
- the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

Supervisor Input is Critical in Writing Award-Winning Research Proposals

The more input a potential or current supervisor has in writing the research proposal, the stronger it is likely to be. Academics are familiar with the criteria and standards demanded by research councils and scholarship committees and will have a better idea than students of the criteria, which determine the allocation of resources. Supervisor can also advise on the appropriate sources and methodology for the research proposal; two areas in which long experience in a subject area is particularly valuable. Having said this, it is still perfectly possible for a current or prospective student to write a successful, research award-winning proposal independently.
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The Top Eight Things to Do to Write Great Applications

Don't even think about doing anything else but these things!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applying for a CGS/Grant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Organize an “Internal Review Panel.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Start writing early.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Write daily.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Finish the “Junk” in Month One.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Write well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Write for your audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Write efficiently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Follow the tips for each section.</td>
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Good CGS/grant writing is formulaic, and a learned skill. Some people are naturally better at it, but you can learn to be just as good. So, follow the formula! It’s not magic or inspiration at midnight. Obviously, one can successfully deviate from this formula, but it is a formula that works -- so it’s a great beginning.
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Organize an “Internal Peer Review Panel”

The “internal review” is invaluable for:

- Tremendously improving the presentation and the scientific content of the grant. That this process invariably improves grants is true for even the most hardened veterans of the grants wars.
- Making you finish your grant application long before the deadline. In fact, this is one of the major advantages.

There is no adequate substitute for an “Internal Peer Review Panel,” meeting together with you. Having two or three colleagues independently read your grant application, and then give you feedback on an individual basis, is not nearly as effective as an “Internal Peer Review Panel”. First, they rarely do it as conscientiously as when they are part of an internal review process. Second, and more importantly, a very constructive synergy develops among the reviewers, which invariably improves the quality and richness of the feedback.
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Start Writing Early

Start the preparation for your CGS/grant application at least three months before the deadline, by writing the overall research goal and specific research aims. Why so early? Doing so focuses your reading and thinking, and allows you to plan, seek advice (and collaborations), and identify topics you need to read up on. You can’t do many of these things well in the last weeks before the deadline -- at that late point, you will be concentrating on the writing. It is very likely that your initial specific aims will change as you continue to write, and an early articulation of them forces you to focus and to think clearly.

Suggested CGS/Grant Application Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Task Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 weeks before deadline</td>
<td>Write the overall goal and each specific aim.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Start gathering accompanying documents.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aim to have these in hand four weeks before the deadline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 weeks before deadline</td>
<td>Start writing, a little every day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 weeks before deadline</td>
<td>Give the draft to the “Internal Peer Review Panel.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 weeks before deadline</td>
<td>Meet with the “Internal Peer Review Panel.”</td>
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Write Daily

In preparing a CGS/grant application, it is a good idea to commit to writing part of the application every day. Begin the actual writing at least 6 weeks before the “Internal Peer Review Panel” deadline.

Researchers who write daily, even 30 minutes/day, are much more productive and successful than those who leave it all to a last-minute cataclysmic effort.
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Finish the "Junk" in Month One

All the accompanying documents, such as CV module, transcripts, reference letters, etc. take a lot of time to obtain or complete, and generally much more time than you think (often several weeks). **Get them done early!!!**

Avoid the mistake of requesting a reference letter at the last minute!!!

An effective reference letter could mean the difference between success and failure for a scholarship application to one of the provincial or federal tri-council agencies. A reference letter is used to introduce the applicant and to vouch for the candidate’s integrity, character, and abilities. The members of selection committees need to know as much as possible about an applicant to determine his or her ability to perform adequately. Letters of recommendation provide information from a teacher or research supervisor who has been personally involved with the candidate. This outside source provides a valuable record of the candidate’s previous experience and can testify to his or her skills and abilities. An **effective** reference letter:

- verifies experience,
- confirms competence,
- builds credibility, and
- bolsters confidence in the applicant.
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

Suggestions on seeking reference letters

- Choose who will represent you wisely. No one person can represent you accurately in all areas. Find someone who knows your strengths in the areas you need to satisfy to meet the requirements of a particular funding agency and/or selection board. In this context, it is also important that the person providing the reference letter has a good understanding of your academic history, interests, goals, and direction.

- Schedule a convenient time for you and your sponsor to meet. Review the requirements and expectations of the reference letter. This process helps the person who is writing the letter answer questions, clarify points that may need elaboration, and point out additional information that may be required. Make this process easy by providing all of the information needed so that you can obtain an accurate and positive recommendation.

- When you request a reference letter, communicate your needs in a straightforward way. Explain what you are applying for and ask if the person can provide you with a good recommendation. If someone exhibits any uneasiness about providing you with a strong recommendation, be polite, thank him/her for their time and then look elsewhere. Choose only someone who
  - can provide a well-written letter,
  - knows you well enough to be credible,
  - thinks highly of you and your abilities,
  - holds a respected position,
  - is knowledgeable of and familiar with the selection criteria and their respective weights.

- Keep in mind that the sponsor is doing you a favor and has a busy schedule with other commitments. Make sure you allow enough time so that he or she can provide you with a well-written and effective letter.
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

Tips for Good CGS/Grant Writing – Do’s

Write an application that the reviewers will enjoy reading. Aim for nothing less. Remember, the reviewers are wading through a huge pile of other CGS/grant applications, so make yours clear, thoughtful and interesting. Good writing reflects clear and precise thinking. In fact, writing generally forces clear and precise thinking:

"Writing maketh an exact [woman] man".
-Sir Francis Bacon

Get it down! Don't be a sentence "caresser"

Word processors encourage the endless reworking of a sentence, to get it ‘perfect’. Don't do this. It is a time waster that creates the illusion of effective progress. To generate a well-written CGS/grant application, follow these four steps:

1. Get it down, even rough, ugly, too long and incomplete.
2. Get it right (factually correct, balanced).
3. Get it pretty. Now is the time to do some sentence caressing.
4. Get it out!
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

Tips for Good CGS/Grant Writing – Do’s (con’d)

Good expository writing has two predominant features

1. Begin each paragraph with a great lead sentence. A strong lead sentence is interesting and says what the paragraph is about. It is worth spending time on, even in the first ugly draft, since it defines the rest of the paragraph. One should be able to get the idea of most of a CGS/grant application -- or a paper -- by reading the lead sentences alone.

2. The remainder of the paragraph should elaborate on the topic defined by the lead sentence. The content of the remainder is generally less important than that of the lead sentence. Thus, a good paragraph has an inverted pyramid structure, as shown.

A very common error is to have a rousing concluding sentence that is often, when slightly reworked, a superb lead sentence.

Who is the audience?

What types of reviewers are on the panel? Almost all selection panels are generally very heterogeneous. Therefore, you are usually writing for intelligent scientists who are not expert in your area, except for maybe two to three panelists who will know more. You have to write with simple clarity for the majority, but also convince the two to three experts that you really know your stuff. "Who is my audience?" is the number one issue in scientific writing, just as it is in giving a talk.
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

Tips for Good CGS/Grant Writing – Do’s (con’d)

Give the big picture, don't drown the reviewer in details, and state rationales

Three of the most common weaknesses in grant applications are:

1. Failure to give the big picture (why should the reviewer care?)
2. To drown the reader in details (the reviewer doesn't want to know). Some details may be critical, but the application doesn't need equal detail everywhere. Excessive detail is usually just an inappropriate way by which the applicant is trying to reduce anxiety.
3. Failure to state rationales: why do the research questions need to be addressed.

Use illustrations

Use illustrations, figures and boxed texts to help the reader easily see the big picture. Nothing is more depressing to a reviewer than to see pages of dense text unalleviated by something visual. Illustrations help the reviewer grasp background information, be convinced of the strength of your preliminary data, and acquire a quick overview of your Research Plan.

Use the first or third person

Instead of..."The samples will be analyzed for traces of..."
Use..."I will analyze the samples for traces of..."
Instead of..."This result is an affirmation of Boyd's theory..."
Use..."This result affirms Boyd's theory..."

Note: Never reduce your font below Times 12, or have less than 1" margins.
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Tips for Good CGS/Grant Writing – Do not’s

Writing things that you don’t understand

Never add sentences that you do not fully understand (one of the pitfalls of the copy and paste ability). This is especially true for Latin abbreviations, words with Latin and Greek roots, and foreign terms.

Drowning the reader in acronyms

Granted, science uses a technical terminology that cannot avoid the use of acronyms. However, don’t pepper each and every sentence with them. Try to avoid inventing acronyms and only introduce an acronym, if you have to use it more than two or three times. Make sure, the acronym is defined when using it for the first time. Never use acronyms, which you do not understand.

Using clichés

A cliché is something that has become somewhat of a commonplace. Some terms have become such an attractive concept to use that they appear in nearly every introduction to papers in the area. Often, authors have only scratched at the surface of such an attractive concept, but they still want to sell the product by opening with the magic word. There is just no need for such marketing using a product label that does not cover the content.

Using convoluted language

Using multisyllabic words, complex phrasing, and sentences that go on for days. This is not the way to show that you're smart. Sometimes, I think, there is also the perception that, if you're making your application too clear, if your sentences are too simple, your reviewers (and peers) won't take you seriously or that you have to write the same way as others in your field.
Advice on Applying for Canada Graduate Scholarships

Tips for Good CGS/Grant Writing – Summary

In order to write competitive scholarship applications, you need to have good ideas, be able to define overarching proposal themes that capture what you’re proposing to do and why, be able to figure out what your readers needs to know, and be able to express yourself clearly in plain English while avoiding the pitfalls of scientific writing. Good writers write plainly so that the meaning comes through clearly. Good scientific writing does not draw attention to itself. Instead of “This person has a great vocabulary,” readers should be saying, “That’s a good idea.” Or better (in case of funding applications), “Yes, I understand.”
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The more input a potential or current supervisor has in writing the research proposal, the stronger it is likely to be. Academics are familiar with the criteria and standards demanded by research councils and scholarship committees and will have a better idea than students of the criteria, which determine the allocation of resources. Supervisor can also advise on the appropriate sources and methodology for the research proposal; two areas in which long experience in a subject area is particularly valuable. Having said this, it is still perfectly possible for a current or prospective student to write a successful, research award-winning proposal independently.

Important notes:

- Do not raise false expectations and waste time, if a student doesn’t meet certain eligibility criteria or standards outlined in the program description and application/eligibility instructions. Provide upfront and honest advice.

- Realize that applications are evaluated using a set of criteria. Excelling in only one doesn’t guarantee success. It’s the overall package that makes an application competitive.

- If, in your opinion, there are weaknesses in the application, such as poor grades, lack of work experience, change in programs, gaps, etc., encourage and help the student to explain them.
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The New Future of Teaching: Graduate Student Mentoring

A mentor’s varied roles:

• Disciplinary guide

• Skills development consultant
  ➢ Oral and written communication skills
  ➢ Team-oriented/interdisciplinary skills
  ➢ Leadership skills
  ➢ Grantsmanship skills

• Career consultant
Canada Graduate Scholarship Information Sessions

The New Future of Teaching: Graduate Student Mentoring

There is no doubt about it: quality mentoring greatly enhances graduate student success in many aspects. Studies indicate that graduate students who receive effective mentoring demonstrate greater:

- productivity, in research activity, conference presentations, pre-doctoral publications, instructional development, and grant-writing.
- academic success, in persisting in graduate school, taking a shorter time to earn a degree, and performing better in academic coursework.
- professional success, with greater chances of securing tenure-track positions if seeking employment in academe or career advancement if seeking leadership positions in other educational settings or economic sectors.
Canada Graduate Scholarship Information Sessions

Reference Letters

An effective reference letter:

- verifies experience.
- confirms competence.
- builds credibility.
- bolsters confidence in the applicant.

Does the following letter achieve any of the above?

“A gifted and motivated student. Very hard working and intelligent. Very focused on his/her research project with Dr. X using the Y model. Will eventually be a successful researcher.”
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Reference Letters

Advice for Referees:

• Ask yourself: Are you the right person to write a reference letter? If you are asked to write a letter of reference, you may need to discuss this subject with the requester. Can you honestly write outstanding things about the person who has requested the letter? If not, you should bow out gracefully at the beginning. On the other hand, if you feel you qualify, brainstorm with the requester so you can write what he or she wishes to be said, and be sensitive to his/her deadlines.

• Have the person give you a list of accomplishments, organizations that he/she belongs to, or any other relevant information. It might surprise you to see how much that person has done outside of your personal contact with them. This can also help you get a more accurate picture of the individual. Having the person give you a copy of his/her resume is an easy way to have this information at hand. Keep in mind, however, that you can only vouch for what you know from your own personal experience with the individual, i.e., be prepared to provide concrete examples for attributes you mention in your letter.
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Reference Letters

Letters of recommendation may be written in a classic format that includes an introduction, body, and conclusion. There may also be specific requirements for certain letters that you may need to follow. In most cases, however, any well-organized format will be acceptable.

Look at the following sample format:

Introduction:
• Introduce yourself as the sponsor. State your professional position, how you know the applicant, the length of your relationship, and any other pertinent information to build your credibility as a knowledgeable contributor.
• Provide an overview of your general impressions of the applicant.

Body:
• Cover one exceptional quality of the applicant in each paragraph.
• Use specific examples to show how you observed each quality.
• Address qualities in order of importance.
• Keep the body of the letter to two or three strong paragraphs.

Conclusion:
• Confirm that the applicant would be a desirable recipient of an award, adding any other comments you feel appropriate.
• Encourage the reader to contact you for additional information or with any questions.