

General Tips for Acquiring Grants

By and large, grant application reviewers state that research submissions are of high quality. However, they point to several recurring problems that cause reviewer frustration and frequently result in applicants receiving less funding than requested or being rejected.

Here's what the experts consider their top 10 tips for good grantsmanship:

1. **READ THE APPLICATION FORM AND TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.** "Do what the application form asks you to do and in that order," counsels Jon Muzio, University of Victoria computer science professor and NSERC group chair. "Committee members who have to spend substantial time sorting out an application tend to get annoyed and suspicious."
2. **PAY ATTENTION TO THE GRANTING OBJECTIVES AND CRITERIA.** Agencies that fund Canadian historical research won't take a second look at your whale biorhythms project.
3. **WRITE CLEARLY.** Long sentences, complex phraseology and jargon do not reflect scholarship. Indeed, Dr. Muzio says he has seen some applicant penalized for their lack of ability to communicate clearly.
4. **DON'T TRUST YOUR COMPUTER SPELL CHECKER.** Use a dictionary. Barb Davies, a professor at the University of Ottawa's school of nursing, recalls reviewing one application in which the word "lung" was misspelled as "lunch" several times. "You can imagine what the review committee did with that application," she says. Adds Dr. Slotin, "If you can't get the spelling right, how are you going to get the research right?"
5. **BE SUCCINCT.** More is not better. Dr. Muzio estimates his committee members read an average of 100 pages of application material each day from October to February in preparation for NSERC's February adjudication.
6. **AVOID AMBIGUITIES.** Fuzzy objectives are easy to spot, says Dr. Muzio. If objectives, which become the basis for assessing the progress of a project, are too vague or general, the reviewers will have no way of accurately assessing progress. "Moreover, says Steve Calvert, professor of oceanography at the University of British Columbia and NSERC group chair, reviewers should not have to second guess the intent of a research proposal. "They'll guess wrong as often as they guess right."
7. **PACKAGE THE APPLICATION MATERIAL WELL.** It is absolutely vital to format the application to be easy to read. Choose a dark, clear typeface and use headings to show the logical progression through the application. Have reasonable margins and break up the text into paragraphs. "It is an illusion to think that all white space must be filled," Dr. Muzio points out. "Remember that humans will be reading the material."
8. **BE HONEST.** Use the application to explain any interruptions or delays in the research progress, be they medical or maternity.

9. HAVE YOUR APPLICATION CRITICALLY REVIEWED BY COLLEAGUES. This recommendation is especially important for new researchers and first-time applicants. "Capitalize on the experience of your colleagues," suggests Dr. Slotin. He notes that the four Canadian medical schools which have established formal, pre-submission reviews of grant applications have higher success rates than those without in-house reviews.
10. SPEND TIME ON THE APPLICATION ...reviewers can tell when an application has been pulled together hurriedly at last minute.

Above all, don't get discouraged. "Make the strongest case you can," says SSHRC's Ms Lee, "and keep trying."

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