

SSHRC Grant Application Tips

1. READ THE GUIDELINES before you put pen to paper. If something is not clear to you, phone your Office of Research, or email the SSHRC officer right away – their email addresses are on the web. This is absolutely legitimate – it is what SSHRC officers are there for. The thing to remember here is that your SSHRC officer is your friend. It's surprising how few people know that. SSHRC officers do not judge applications. Their job is to make sure that well-written grant applications go forward to the judging committees in the best possible shape. They will be happy to answer any query, and to send you on "up the line" if they can't deal with the matter themselves. That's their job. You are not stepping out of line by asking for their help - you are using them appropriately.
2. The next thing to do is to imagine yourself sitting round a table as a member of a peer review/judging committee. Some of these committees are interdisciplinary; some are not. In a funny sort of way, it doesn't matter. The gap between, say, History of Science and Eco-history, may be wider than that between Sociology and Social History. What does matter, more than anything else, is lucidity. If you have ever sat with 8 black binders containing 250+ applications in a basement room in a hotel in Ottawa for 5 days in a row from 8:30 am to 7:30 pm, then you will have no difficulty in understanding why this is so important. Committees are human, and they get tired, and impatient with complex obscure language, lots of typos, poorly laid-out or explained budgets, and incomplete information. There is a great deal of that. One thing that I always do is to ask a friend who is not overly familiar with what I do to take my grant proposal and read it some day/evening when he/she is tired and see if it makes sense. Then just tell me which bits are confusing, that's all. Then I sit down again and work on getting rid of the jargon, or the appallingly long sentence, or the floating subordinate clause that needs to be a new sentence, or whatever. I recommend this – it is both humbling and amazingly informative!
3. Remember also that committees are not only not infallible and tired, they are also starting with imperfect information about you and your institution. Give them the information you know is essential to your case, straightforwardly and without editorializing. If we pay research assistant rates that are unusually low — just tell the Committee what the rates are, don't attack them. If you are carrying a teaching load that is higher than that at other places, and this load affects your speed of production — say so. But don't complain. You'd be surprised how often I have had to wade through disgruntled oratory to get to a necessary point!
4. Don't squeeze so many words onto a page that the whole thing becomes a nightmare to read. Again, think of a tired committee member with a headache and indigestion. The guidelines now take care of some of this, but not all of it. I know that a well-laid out proposal says to a committee: “this person knows what they are talking about and they have taken as much care with their proposal as we are now doing.”
5. Take, for example, your list of publications, peer-reviewed or otherwise. Don't try to confuse the issue of whether something is short or long, peer-reviewed or otherwise, a book or a

vanity press, and all that kind of stuff. Rest assured that the committee is unlikely to give you the benefit of the doubt, but will be grateful for clean, easy-to-read, honest information that lets them do their job honestly.

6. Assessors may have the kind of specialized knowledge you need, but a committee will not. Give them a rapid introduction for intelligent non-specialists, explaining the point of the research, in what ways it is new and significant, how the questions are conceptualized and how they will be addressed. Provide appropriate references — bibliographies are important, but need not be excessive.
7. Present your research plans coherently, as a set of problems in logical and connected order and point to where your future research would then go, if possible. ALWAYS state the central problem of your work, and why it is important. It is not sufficient to just say that something is "interesting" – you are inviting the question “to whom?” or the comment of a tired committee member the he or she doesn’t see why it is interesting . . . a kiss of death to any proposal!
8. Don't designate a year for reflection and writing. Reflection should be ongoing, and writing, committees will say, can be done without extra funds, or an RTS.
9. Regulations about the RTS change from time to time. But the basic rule is: don’t ask for it if you don’t need it, that is when there is no chance to carry out the research without it, as, for example, when it has to be done far away and will take longer than the research semester designated as such by your university. Show that you are already devoting extensive time to your research during sabbatical leaves, research semesters etc.
10. If critiquing existing models/approaches in the literature, do so lucidly and without partisanship and demonstrate clearly why your approach is better. Be precise.
11. If you are departing from your earlier work make it clear that you have done your homework in your new area — literature surveys will be essential here.
12. Show: practical applications of your work where appropriate; training opportunities for your students/RAs (don't exaggerate) and how these will be provided; institutional and other support. Be precise about dissemination/communication — give names of likely journals, conferences, publishers (accompanying letter if feasible), and probable publication sequence over the period of the grant and beyond.
13. In some cases, the existence of a team (interdisciplinary or otherwise) will be helpful. Show how you will put it together, what the contribution of each part will be, how that will help in training students, or how it will help a new scholar (or one who is starting up again after a long while) integrate into the research world.
14. Track record: what this is really about is the issue of whether or not you can be relied upon to deliver. It's not a game of "who gets the highest publication score," but who delivers well and

on time so that scarce funds are not dissipated. Be clear about what's a book, chapter, report, or talk and also about the "other scholarly production" category — videos, for example. Do not fudge this. Co-authored means specifying how much was your contribution; forthcoming means accepted for publication, etc. Quality counts more than quantity. Committees are made up of your peers, and we all know what a padded CV looks like. Explain the restrictions on you if your publications are limited and don't fudge this either.

15. Also explain teaching loads, class sizes, administrative obligations, serious illness and other relevant matters crisply and matter-of-factly. And don't apologize or editorialize, just make your case succinctly where there is one to be made.
16. Budget. Do not inflate your budget. Do not underestimate it either. Neither of these helps you, they just make you look like you haven't done your homework properly. Well-justified and bare-bones budgets suggest care and thoroughness. Explain why you have put particular amounts against lodgings, travel fares, RA salaries, materials costs, and the like. Don't expect to get money for "fishing trips" — find out in advance (or be able to show that you did as much as you could) about the contents of archives, for example. Explain why you have to visit this particular archive in the Caribbean, and why you will have to be there for 3 months during the expensive tourist season! Tie the explanation tightly to the logic of your research. Keep equipment budgets to an absolute minimum, and explain why you cannot get them from your institution. Spell out RA costs and how the work will be divided between you and a student. If you are asking for travel money for a student/RA, justify this very carefully. Finally, get other financial support as well, if you can, even if it is not much. Provide information about where else you are looking for support. If this is not possible, explain why that is the case.

Grant competitions are still going to be on occasion unfair. It is not a perfect world, and some committees are even less perfect than others for many reasons ranging all the way from inexperience to exhaustion. After one rejection, do not despair, or sulk, or get angry . . . or at least, not for long. There will be readers' comments and there will be committee comments that come with the decision. Read them, put them away for as long as it takes to get over the disappointment or anger, and then look at them again. Take the advice that makes sense to you; ponder the rest and then accept or reject it. When you rewrite the application next year (and you should - most applications these days are not successful first time around, and are better for the rewrite) use the advice you can accept and make sure you have covered off the rest, but without referring to your previous application. Your chances of funding success will be greater than most that are coming in for the first time, and you may well find you are intellectually better prepared when you get your cheque and set off for those archives in the Caribbean . . .

Dr. Rosemary E Ommer
University SSHRC Grants Facilitator
University of Victoria
ommer@uvic.ca
(250) 472-4544