



Scholarship and Grant Writing in Physical and Health Education: Top Ten Tips for Graduate Students

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Abstract

This paper is a compilation of ten top tips for scholarship and grant writing gathered from faculty members and graduate students of the Physical and Health Education Canada Research Council. It provides graduate students and early career scholars with information on how and where to find scholarship and grant opportunities; strategies for formulating and presenting one's achievements and research; and insight into the adjudication process.

Résumé

Ce texte présente les 10 meilleurs trucs pour l'écriture de demandes de subvention et de bourses d'étude. Ces trucs ont été recueillis auprès de professeurs et d'étudiants diplômés du Conseil de recherche d'EPS Canada. Ils décrivent pour les étudiants diplômés et les professeurs en début de carrière comment et où trouver des subventions et des bourses, des stratégies pour formuler et présenter leurs réussites et leur recherche et des aperçus du processus d'attribution.

In 2014, an informal online poll of graduate students and faculty members belonging to the Physical and Health Education Canada Research Council (PHECRC) revealed that professional development on scholarship and grant writing for graduate students was highly desired. This was not surprising as the amount of government funding distributed to universities continues to decline (Statistics Canada, 2022), and, thus, it is imperative that graduate students and early career scholars develop the skills necessary to successfully seek out and apply for internal and external scholarships and/or grants. These writing skills are essential, whether the funding is sought to afford the costs of degree programs, to facilitate graduate research studies (e.g., purchase necessary equipment, afford travel to remote data gathering locations), or to position students for admission to future academic programs (e.g., doctoral, postdoctoral) or faculty positions.

In response, our authorship group—who, at the time were physical and health education doctoral students at Western University, Queens University, and the University of Alberta, respectively—gathered top tips from PHECRC faculty members and graduate students who had a record of successful scholarship and grant applications¹. A roundtable presentation of ten of the top tips was delivered at the 2017 PHECRC Forum in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. This paper summarizes and updates that presentation. It provides PHECRC graduate students and early career scholars with information on how and where to find funding opportunities; strategies for formulating and presenting one's achievements and research; and insight into the adjudication process.

1. Be Proactive and DO Apply!

- Funding applications can be very lengthy. **Start well in advance of a deadline** so that you have adequate time to not only draft the written sections of the application, but also to compile the various supporting documents required (e.g., transcripts, reference letters, etc.). Be aware that many funding opportunities have internal university deadlines that can be weeks or months prior to the advertised funding agency deadline.
- **Leave more time than you think you will need for finishing touches.** Many funding opportunities are highly competitive. An application that is thrown together at the last minute is unlikely to be funded. Furthermore, do not wait until the day an application is due to press submit. Online funding portals are notorious for crashing on deadline days due to high volume.
- Even if you feel your chances of being funded are small, **putting an application together can be a worthwhile experience in and of itself.** The process can help you to clarify current or future research projects; provide a base for future funding applications; and offer practice writing in an entrepreneurial style, a skill which takes practice.

2. DO Search High and Low

- When looking for funding opportunities, **be sure to seek and consider a variety of sources.** You might consider smaller institutional opportunities from your university, professional/scholarly associations, and conferences, as well as larger opportunities from non-profit organizations and provincial, federal, and international governments. See Table 1 for examples.

¹ These contributors included: Dr.'s Doug Gleddie and Lauren Sulz from the University of Alberta; Dr.'s Tim Fletcher, Nancy Francis, Ken Lodewyk, Chunlei Lu, and Lindsay Cline from Brock University; Dr. Luc Martin from Queen's University; and Dr. Lee Schaefer from McGill University (now University of Saskatchewan).

- **Engage in conversations** with other graduate students and professors in your field and related fields to help identify grants that align well with your research focus.
- The eligibility criteria of particular funding competitions can change each time the competition runs (e.g., provincially and federally funded opportunities can shift when there is a change in government or budget), so be sure to **revisit criteria** periodically.

Table 1

Examples of Funding Opportunities from Different Sources

Type of Funding Source	Examples of Funding Opportunities
University/Institutional (Departmental, Faculty-level, and University-wide)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Visit university webpages and talk to internal research officers for more information about departmental, faculty-level, and university-wide opportunities (e.g., conference travel grants, thesis and dissertation awards, etc.)
Canadian Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) (i.e., Tri-Council) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Canadian Graduate Scholarships – Master’s Program and Doctoral Program ○ Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship Program
Canadian Provincial Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ministry of Colleges and Universities: Ontario Graduate Scholarship ● Government of Alberta: Queen Elizabeth II Award
NGO’s / Non-Profits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mitacs: Globalink Research Internship ● Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation: Doctoral Scholarships
Professional and/or Scholarly Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Canadian Association for Teacher Education: Master’s Thesis Award; Doctoral Dissertation Award ● EdCan Network: Pat Clifford Award (Masters and PhD)
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fulbright Canada: Traditional Fulbright Student Awards ● Harvard University: Frank Knox Memorial Fellowship

3. DO Your Research

- **Attend grant writing workshops** at your university or at conferences, especially those offered for specific applications. The presenters of these workshops often include the individuals who process the applications (and/or previously successful applicants) and have first-hand knowledge of the common mistakes that make applications ineligible, among other key insights.
- Seek out and **review previously successful applications** (as well as unsuccessful applications). Oftentimes your Faculty research office will have a catalogue of anonymized previously successful applications. If not, you might consider asking fellow graduate students or your supervisor for such applications.
- **Connect with funding officers before applying.** When applying to larger opportunities (e.g., Tri-Council), remember that your Faculty research office is there to support you. When applying to smaller, less formal opportunities, considering reaching out to the agency itself. The individual(s) at the organization offering the opportunity can often clarify the information that is available online.
- **Know the funder and its priorities.** Most funding agencies have a clear mission for each opportunity and indicate specific priorities for each funding cycle (e.g., SSHRC's 'Future Challenge Areas'). Consult these priorities at the earliest stages of the application process so that you can align your project with at least one and embed it into all aspects of your application writing.

4. DO Shift Writing Gears

- Reviewers can have many applications to evaluate, so be sure to **start your application with a clear and powerful statement.** Consider the '3-sentence rule' for your opening paragraph: 1. What's the problem? 2. Why does it matter? 3. How will you address it?
- **Avoid jargon and excessive acronyms.** The odds that reviewers will be experts in your area are low. Rather, selection committees are often multidisciplinary. For example, SSHRC combines education into a panel with linguistics, psychology, and social work. Therefore, use language that a diverse group of reviewers can understand and avoid testing their memory with multiple acronyms (one or two key acronyms are perfectly acceptable and a helpful way to save word count).
- Avoid losing the reviewers' faith in you and/or your proposed work by littering your application with tempered words like 'potentially,' 'might,' 'could,' 'likely,' or 'hopefully.' Instead, **use assertive language** about what you WILL do and the impact it WILL have.
- Oftentimes, reviewers are provided a rubric to score your application. **Use the language of the funders** to help reviewers to fill out the rubric without having to go searching or interpreting. Scour the application criteria and funders' website to identify key words and phrasing and use those words exactly. For example, if the criteria mention 'knowledge mobilization,' use that phrasing rather than something similar such as 'outreach.'
- **Be strategic with your sources.** Use sources that are seminal, 'important' (i.e., by key scholars in your field), and/or recent where possible to demonstrate your command of the literature. Also, given the limited word count of most applications, do not go overboard referencing each point with multiple sources, use only those that are essential.
- **String a line through the beginning to end** of your application by linking to your key messages (e.g., aims, impact) throughout. This strategy will help to underscore the coherence of your proposal.

5. DON'T Break the Formatting Rules

- **Follow formatting rules to the letter.** For highly competitive scholarships and grants, the first stage of application review is often a scan by administrative staff to eliminate those applications that are not formatted exactly as specified (e.g., correct margin size and font type). Help avoid such disqualification by double-checking that you have followed all instructions exactly.
- Reviewers often have many applications to read and are sometimes doing so as volunteers above and beyond their regular workload. Help make your application easier for reviewers to read by finding ways to **leave whitespace and use headings**. Also, if the criteria allow, **utilize bolded, italicized, and/or underlined text** to highlight key elements in your application (e.g., research questions, award criteria).

6. DON'T Sell Yourself or Your Project Short

- **Be explicit about your project's potential significance.** This is one of the most important things you will do in an application for funding. You need to make a convincing case as to why precious resources (e.g., taxpayer money in the instance of public funding) should be spent on your work. Try to link your project to a current local, national, and/or international scientific, social, or economic issue and/or policy priority (in addition to the funders' priorities). For example, can your work on culturally relevant physical education help facilitate the transition of new migrants to Canada which the federal government has indicated as a priority in the Speech from the Throne? Can your work help to address one or more of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals? Furthermore, do not stop at explaining why this work is needed, also explain why it is needed right now (i.e., is timely). A word of caution: While you do not want to undersell the project's significance, you must also avoid overstating it. This can be a fine line to walk.
- Consider that another applicant may be proposing to research the same topic as you. You will need to **explain why YOU are the right person** for the job. If you can demonstrate, for example, that the proposed work builds on previous work you have been involved with, this could show that you not only have the required skills but have a track record of success. Remember that funders are not just investing in the research, but also the researchers conducting that work (particularly when it comes graduate student funding [think SSHRC's 'Talent' programs]), so you must convince reviewers of your capacity.
- **Include all key project details** to demonstrate that your project has been fully thought out and is ready to be conducted as soon as it is funded. For example, do not just state that you will interview physical education teachers, indicate how many you will speak with, how you will recruit them, when you will do so, and other such details.
- **Share how you will maximize impact.** Indicate which academic journals and conferences you intend to disseminate your research. Consider spreading these efforts across fields (e.g., a physical education conference and a broader education journal). It is important to note that such academic dissemination is insufficient on its own. Many funders require (or at least desire) that you also indicate how you will communicate your research to the general public, end users, and others. Furthermore, many funders are looking to see that this communication includes both one-way (e.g., blog post) and two-way exchange (e.g., involvement in public events).

7. DO a Double-take! And Ask Others

- Once you have a draft of your application, **ask diverse sources to review** it. Asking your supervisor and fellow graduate students in your field (including, if possible, those who have had previous success in similar funding competitions) is a great place to start to ensure accuracy of content. However, given that most review panels are multidisciplinary (see Tip #4), it is advised to also ask individuals outside of your field to review your application. Furthermore, take advantage of review services most university research officers provide. These individuals usually have a keen eye for technical errors and areas where you might ‘punch up’ your application with ‘grant speak’ to further ‘sell’ yourself and your research. Finally, consider asking a friend or family member outside of academia to review your application for a sense of the clarity, impact, and relevance to the general public. Whoever you ask to review, be sure to provide them with key award criteria and sufficient time to review. Do not ask those who will simply say ‘great job’; you need constructive criticism.
- **Proofread, proofread, proofread!** Your application should be void of any spelling and typographical errors. This element of the process is within your control, so do not let yourself down in this respect. Great ideas that are poorly written are unlikely to be funded in competitive award cycles.

8. DON'T Leave Your Referees Hanging

- It is important to have referees supporting your application who know you and your work well *and* are supportive. These two factors are more important than a referee’s ‘status’ (e.g., rank, h-index, etc.). To **carefully select referees**, remember that when it comes to graduate student scholarships and funding opportunities, there is often an explicit or implicit expectation that your supervisor is one of your referees. If your supervisor is not serving as a referee for whatever reason, be aware that this sometimes requires an explanation. Furthermore, consider that you might not always use the same referees for every application, but instead should **tailor your selection of referees** given the particulars of the application. For example, if you are applying to a non-profit organization for funding to support a professional application of your work, consider having a referee who is a practitioner, rather than an academic.
- **Help them help you.** First and foremost, ask your referees well in advance of the deadline if they can support your application. There are multiple reasons for this. First, asking early might make it more likely that a busy individual will be able to agree to support your application and that they have the time to write a strong letter. Remember that a referee might receive multiple requests for the same competition and thus, their time near the deadline date might be limited. Furthermore, if a referee you invite is unavailable to support your application for whatever reason, asking early means you will likely have enough time left to ask another referee. Finally, most applications are considered incomplete unless all components – including reference letters – are submitted on time, therefore, if a referee has any technical difficulties uploading close to the deadline, there might not be time left to seek assistance, rendering your application ineligible. At the time of your request, provide the individual with all (or as much as possible) of the information they need to inform their decision to support your application and to be able to write a strong letter. This might include: a draft of your application, the criteria they are being asked to speak to, and your CV. You might also highlight or make notes on the elements of these documents that you suggest your referees might speak to.

- Writing reference letters takes time and energy so be sure to **thank your referees**. Whether it is via an email, handwritten note, or complimentary coffee, be sure to show your sincere appreciation for their support. Furthermore, be sure to **follow up** with your referees about the outcome of your application, whether successful or not. These individuals are invested in your application and deserve to know the result. These courtesies demonstrate respect and may also influence whether they are willing to support your applications again in the future.

9. DON'T Just Follow the \$

- **Consider whether the time and energy required to prepare a scholarship and grant application is worth it.** Depending on the nature of your research, your personal financial situation, and your future career interests, the work required to pursue scholarship and grant funding may or may not be worth it. Also, consider that not all funding opportunities are created equally. That is, sometimes the work required to apply for a small amount of funding is the same as that required for a larger amount.
- Know your research interests and availability so that you **do not lead yourself astray and/or spread yourself too thin** 'following the money' (i.e., funders' priorities) rather than your research agenda. Remember that if you are awarded and accept the funds, you will be required to do the work you proposed. Therefore, be sure that you actually want to do the work that is outlined in the proposal and do not simply pursue grant money for the sake of it.

10. DO Press Submit and DON'T Give Up or Get Down!

- While you certainly want to give an application your best shot, remember that, like anything, it will never be perfect. At some point, you need to just **press the submit button!**
- **Be persistent.** The same project that was rejected last year, might be funded this year or the next by the same funder. Or the same rejected project may be funded by a different funder. Alternatively, a particular funding competition might have declined to fund your project 'A' last year, but they might decide to fund your project 'B' this year.
- While scholarship and grant application review processes are usually based on a rigorous and transparent protocol, they are still subjective. You can have an important research topic, well thought-out plan, meticulously crafted application, and strong supporting reference letters and CV and not be funded. At the end of the day, there is still some 'luck of the draw' involved, so **keep it in perspective** and do not let a rejection get you down.

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