Tips on Preparing SSHRC Insight Grant Applications

The following information was taken from a number of different sources, including mentoring workshops, research administrators' conferences, interviews with adjudication committee members, lessons learned shared by previous successful SSHRC research grant applicants, and reviewer feedback comments.

Most Common Problems with Proposals
Helpful Hints on Preparing the Proposal
Employing Graduate Students
Choosing External Assessors
Formulating the Budget
Thirty-Seven Ways to Really Annoy an Adjudication Committee
About Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Reviews

Most Common Problems with Proposals

- Proposal is deemed to be premature—this is commonly found with new scholars.
- Proposal appears to be a fishing expedition, a representation of scattered ideas.
- Proposal is thought to be too ambitious for the resources and/or time allotted—this is commonly found with new scholars.
- The conceptualization of the problem is seen as unoriginal.
- The methodology and/or theoretical perspective is under developed and/or insufficiently explained.
- Literature review is inadequate—remember, your application will be read by at least two expert assessors.
- The proposal is a 'trust me' application—one in which the committee is expected to accept the program of research simply on the basis of the applicant's previous record. This is more common in applications from senior scholars.
- Proposal is seen as insufficiently distinct from your past work.
- The research is so narrowly conceived that major advances are unlikely.
- The proposed research is seen as being 'too small'—implicit here is the belief that it should be funded out of local funds.
- Proposal is 'out of the blue'—there is no connection with previous research. If you are changing your entire program of research, you must clearly indicate this in your proposal.
- Lack of synergy among team members—expertise/experience is not complementary or doesn't serve the purpose of the research.
- Proposal language is too technical for a non-expert to appreciate the research—note that some members of the adjudication committee may not be experts in your specific field.
- Resubmitted proposal ignores or does not adequately address previous reviewer comments.

Back to Top

Helpful Hints on Preparing the Proposal

Write your application as clearly as possible, with an eye to persuading specialists and generalists alike. You cannot expect (given upwards of 160 files and 5 review groups divided into committees), that all committee members will be conversant with your file or your specific field of research. In some cases, there will not be a specialist in your field on the committee.

- Try to engage with some of the wider questions in your field/discipline so as to show the wider relevance of your proposal.
- Make sure the one page summary captures the challenge and feasibility of your research and your capability to accomplish it—this is not only the first part of the application that committee members will read, it is also what many will turn to should your file come under prolonged discussion in a meeting. Specialists and generalists alike must be able to understand it.
- Demonstrate to the committee that you are familiar with the most recent work that pertains to your topic. Cite the most recent literature.
- Make sure your title accurately captures to content of your research. External assessors are sometimes misled by titles. Your title is also what the program officers at SSHRC will initially use when trying to identify external assessors.
- Cut back on jargon—not only will your committee include some non-specialists, but it is also wearing on specialists.
- Avoid excessive or inflated claims to originality and/or significance—you do not want to encourage one of the committee members to set about proving you wrong.
- Check out the programs that have been funded by your committee in the past so as to get a better idea of the range of activities: http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/recipients-recipiendaires/index-eng.aspx and http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/award_search-recherche_attributions/index-eng.aspx
- Avoid using a combative or overly aggressive tone when locating your work within the wider scholarly community—you never know who will be your external assessors and committee members.
- Ambition should be tempered by realism, especially for first time applicants.
- Avoid choosing a topic, or framing it in terms of what you think is trendy or sexy—committees are wary of applications which strive too hard to be fashionable.
- Presentation is important, but content is even more critical.
- It should be clear to the reader what is the relationship between the bibliography that you attach to your application and your program of research.
- If there is a scholarly debate surrounding your topic, acknowledge all sides respectfully and carefully locate yourself within it.
- Make explicit any links between this proposed program of research and what you have done before.
- Your methodology or research plan should be laid out clearly such that each stage is visible to the reader.
- Even if the intended result is a book, don't talk about the book per se—committees fund research, not book production. Remember that you are writing for a committee of scholars, not a publisher's representative.
- Avoid any appearance that the application is intended to tidy up some earlier work.

- Never start your research plan by proposing that you (or your graduate student) will dedicate the first year to a literature review—committees assume that will already have been done in the course of preparing your proposal.
- Make certain that your bibliography is up to date.
- If you have already conducted a pilot project, tell the committee about it and the results.
- If space is tight and you need to show your grasp of key methodological or conceptual issues, you can always cite previous work in which you have already demonstrated such familiarity.
- Ask your colleagues to look at your application in order to get some specialist feedback.
- The first paragraph should make it clear to the reader why this study is so important and why you are the person to do it.
- Provide definitions for any unfamiliar terms/acronyms.
- Use headings/subheadings to organize your thoughts.
- There are no good grant writers—only good grant *rewriters*. Be prepared to go through many iterations.
- Make certain that there are no errors in syntax, spelling, or fact—if there are, committee members are inclined to mark such applications more harshly on the basis that they were too hastily put together.

Employing Graduate Students

- If you are employing graduate students in the research program, make certain that both they and the program will benefit.
- Committees tend to be suspicious of large teams of graduate students who are not seen as integral to the research program.
- Graduate students should not be employed as gophers or as scanner slaves. Nor should they be doing all the critical research—an IG is not primarily intended as a means of funding the work and training of graduate students (you will find those types of funding opportunities in the Talent umbrella suite of programs). However, SSHRC is very supportive of the use of graduate students where appropriate.
- Use the appropriate level of graduate students—make sure the tasks assigned to them match their stage of training.
- Owing to the costs of a post-doctoral fellow, extra care needs to be taken in justifying their inclusion on the research team.
- Undergraduate students can be included, if appropriate and where graduate students are not available. However, as a general rule, committees favour graduate students.

Choosing External Assessors

- When recommending external assessors, choose scholars who are well regarded in the profession and who are well versed with your approach. Be sure to avoid conflict of interest between them and yourself.

- Generally, assessors from Canada and the U.S. are more helpful because they are more familiar with the prevailing research grant culture, rules and expectations.
- On the other hand, listing scholars elsewhere in the world is suggestive of your wider impact and presence.
- If you think that SSHRC might choose an assessor who is prejudiced against you, you can ask in the "Exclusion (Assessors)" section of your online application that they do not approach him/her. Your request will remain confidential and will not be seen by committee members or external assessors.

Formulating the Budget

The budget is one area where you are almost guaranteed to find that every committee member has an opinion. Committees often attract individuals who were accountants in a previous life. Committees are often asked to try and find extra savings so as to help fund more projects. Consequently, budgets tend to be scrutinized closely.

- In addition to ranking all the applications, committees are also required to recommend a budget for all applications deemed worthy of funding.
- While SSHRC tries to dissuade committees from micromanaging budgets, their own research experience has given committee members a good sense of what it takes to conduct research within their fields and they can become very vocal if they suspect that the budget is inappropriate or unnecessary for the task. Be sure to provide a compelling rationale in your budget justification.

Remember: committee members also live within a culture of poverty.

- Your budget must demonstrate that you have worked through the costs of your research. If the committee feels that the budget is unwarranted or unjustified, this may lead them to think that the research itself has not been adequately thought through.
- A detailed and carefully costed budget also makes it more difficult for committee members to recommend a global/general cut.
- It is useful to find out what the typical budget is for the committee to which you will be applying. This is not to say that they will not fund any more than the median, but it gives you some sense of their comfort zone, and when/if more explanation/justification is called for.
- Be certain that whatever you request is not only carefully costed in the budget justification but is also accounted for in the detailed proposal.
- Avoid padding —committees are willing to recommend an appropriate amount but can easily become annoyed if they suspect the budget is inflated.
- Don't economize too much—not asking for adequate funding is also grounds to reject an application (though this rarely happens). It is a signal that your research is not well thought through.
- Remember that committee members can call on their own personal experience to know what is appropriate and what is not.

- Do not ask for things that are specifically prohibited under SSHRC guidelines (e.g., furniture, more than 125 days subsistence in a given year, etc.).
- Make sure that requests for hardware (computer, printers, cameras, etc.) are justified by the research tasks that they need to perform. Not everyone needs a top of the line, high-powered computer, but if you do, make sure you explain why.
- Travel costs should be reasonable, and wherever possible, trips should be combined so as to minimize costs.
- While SSHRC rules do allow for the incorporation of post-doctoral fellows, unless there is a clearly defined need for a post-doc, committees will often replace a post-doc with a doctoral student.
- Wherever possible, use students rather than non-students, and if non-students are needed, provide a clear rationale in your budget justification.
- If the training of graduate students is an important and integral part of your proposal, consider including students in your requests for conference travel, particularly if they will be presenting papers.

Thirty-Seven Ways to Really Annoy an Adjudication Committee

- Insist on flying business class.
- Tell the Committee that last year's committee members were complete idiots.
- Claim that nobody has ever done anything vaguely related to your topic before.
- Invent your own format for providing bibliographical information.
- Try to elicit the Committee's sympathy with tales of how badly treated you are by your home institution.
- Apply for money to work in an archive that burned down years ago.
- Ask for a $5000 laptop when all you need is a simple word processor.
- Use the section on extenuating circumstances to bemoan your heavy teaching load.
- Talk about how badly under-funded you have been.
- Tell the committee all kinds of things about yourself that were not requested and are not relevant to the application.
- Challenge the contributions of every named scholar in your research area.
- Do not include anything in your bibliography that has been published in the last ten years.
- Misspell the names of your referees.
- Rely exclusively on your spellchecker—there is considerable difference between 'public affairs' and 'pubic affairs.'
- Show up before the same committee on three different applications (as principal investigator on one and co-investigator on two others).
- Ignore syntax rules and avoid punctuation and paragraphs.
- Identify the leading figure in the field as an 'idiot.'
- Double-count publications in your c.v.
- List publications more than six years old in the c.v. section of the application.
- Include a big name on your team but do not define her/his role.
- Fail to explain the reasons for your trips to various places.

- Under publications, type 'too many to list'.
- Add up your budget incorrectly.
- List Wikipedia as a publication.
- Tell the committee that ethics reviews are a waste of time and irrelevant.
- Use the application to carry on a polemical fight with your colleagues in other institutions.
- Be repetitive.
- Insist that you are waiting for the science to catch up with you.
- Insist that there is a conspiracy (feminist, Marxist, right-wing, vegetarian, or all four) out there trying to get you—and then arrange for your external referees to back you up.
- Justify your application to interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary studies on the basis that your colleagues in your discipline are hopelessly out of date.
- Invent new acronyms.
- Use as many acronyms as you can, but then change their spelling part way through the application.
- Keep submitting the same application without taking any notice of previous committees' comments.
- Employ a graduate student to help cart books back and forth from the library.
- Insist that you have nothing to learn from recent scholarship.
- Dare the committee to reject you and thereby prove that they are a bunch of hide-bound bureaucrats doing Ottawa's dirty work.
- Ask for office furniture in your budget.

About Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies

In many cases, there is a natural fit between your proposed research and an existing committee. With the rise of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research, however, it can be tempting to request an interdisciplinary review.

- Think this through—SSHRC takes a very rigorous view of what constitutes interdisciplinarity. Merely having a program that might interest scholars in a range of fields is not sufficient, nor is simply attaching another perspective to your work—they must be integrated. Explain how your research will integrate intellectual resources (theories, methodologies, perspectives, etc.) drawn from two or more disciplines. List the various disciplines/areas of research from which expertise should be drawn to assess the research proposal.

- Remember that a committee with scholars in the same or similar discipline to yourself will likely be better placed to evaluate your record of research achievement (e.g., they will know the leading journals/presses in your field). For instance, if your research involves both history and cultural studies, but is primarily historical in nature, you should select Group 1 (which includes History) and, under disciplines, indicate History as Discipline #1 and Cultural Studies as Discipline #2. Your application will be adjudicated

by the committee responsible for applications in History. If no member of that committee has expertise in Cultural Studies, such expertise will be sought from another committee, where possible.