



# How To Write Effective Scholarship Applications

## Overview

Aside from the obvious financial benefit, scholarships provide recognition of past achievements and can boost future opportunities. Being awarded a scholarship is difficult; however, there is an art to writing effective applications. You need to stand out from all the other excellent applicants to convince the selection committee to invest in you. Usually there is a finite amount of time you have to write an effective application, and the selection committee typically requires applications to be very concise. Here we provide a guideline for how to write an effective scholarship application. Although following these steps will not guarantee success, it will hopefully set you on the right path.

## Writing effective scholarship applications

### Where to Apply for Funding:

The first step in the process of getting a scholarship is finding one that is appropriate for you. Although some opportunities may be obvious, there are many others that are more difficult to find. There are many categories including academic scholarships (e.g., [www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca) and <http://www.nsfgrfp.org/>), non-academic scholarships (e.g., see [www.scholarships.com](http://www.scholarships.com)), society awards (e.g., [www.fisheries.org](http://www.fisheries.org)), foundations (e.g., [www.westonfoundation.org](http://www.westonfoundation.org)), industry-supported awards ([www.nsercpartnerships.ca](http://www.nsercpartnerships.ca)), scholarships from employers, and travel awards (e.g., John E. Skinner Memorial Award, American Fisheries Society). Searching online reveals many options and it will take some sifting to find the gems but this is a good way to find scholarships, and especially those that are within your field of study. Signing up for scholarship or award mailing lists can also expose you to a number of more cryptic scholarships. Your university undergraduate or graduate office will also have internal and external awards available and there may be an email distribution list for scholarship opportunities for current students. Finally, ask your fellow students, teachers, guidance counsellors, and professors as they may have access to other opportunities. The key is to stay focused on opportunities that will highlight your strengths.

### General Guidelines:

Once you have found an appropriate scholarship (make sure to read the eligibility section carefully!), there are some universal guidelines for writing effective scholarship applications. It is imperative to follow the format and structure of the application. This includes staying within

the word limits, using the appropriate font and margin sizes, numbering the pages, and using subheadings as necessary. Organizing the application appropriately can be a tremendous help to the selection committee and will work in your favor. Use the selection criteria to understand how to emphasize experience relevant to the scholarship. Explain your role in contributions you believe are significant. For longer sections or descriptions of past or future research, start with an opening sentence that hooks the reviewer, shows you are passionate about what you do, and makes the funding source want to invest in you. Develop the relevant information from there and make every sentence count. Always proofread your application to avoid grammar mistakes, and it is often useful to have your peers review the application to help spot errors. It is possible to reuse applications from one scholarship to another; however, ensure that the content is relevant to each opportunity. Some modifications to the application may be necessary in order to tailor the focus to different scholarships and it is important to take the time to make those changes. Finally, practice makes perfect, especially in the realm of scholarship applications. Your first draft will not be funded; give yourself ample time to write, pause, and revise.

### **Proposal:**

A number of scholarship applications require a short summary of your proposed study. Often, the granting agencies are assessing your communication skills, motivation, and likelihood to succeed. Remember that the selection committee has a short amount of time to read dozens of applications! Generally, you need to be clear and concise. Therefore, start with clear objective statements and an outline to keep you on track. A typical structure includes background (rationale and short literature review), objectives, proposed approach and significance of proposed work. Again, make sure you follow the guidelines and “sell” your ideas/study. Why should your project be funded over others? How will the granting agency benefit from funding you? Is their investment in you likely to succeed? You must show that you are a candidate that will succeed in what you said you would do, and that you and your ideas are worth investing in. Proper organization of your proposal (including using italics, underlined, or bold terms to highlight areas of the proposal) can help focus the selection committee to specific sections which will help them understand your proposal in a short time-period. Put yourself in the granting agency’s shoes and ask yourself whether you would understand the rationale, methods, and objectives of the proposal and if you would select yourself.

### **Personal Statement:**

Some scholarships require you to not only sell your proposed research, but to also sell yourself. Often it helps to organize this statement as a narrative that describes your experiences and highlights key achievements within specific topics that are sought by the scholarship. These topics could include leadership, outreach, community service, or professionalism (which could include society memberships and participation levels, scientific reviews, panel memberships, collaborations). Write it as a story (rather than a list of facts) to keep the interest of reviewers but use specific examples to demonstrate a history of proficiency in the areas emphasized by the scholarship. A goal statement usually accompanies this section, and is most effective if written as a cohesive statement that connects your past experiences within a broad subject area, which then serves as a foundation for your future aspirations.

## Reference Letters:

Think of reference letters as opportunities to provide more information in support of your overall application. It is imperative to choose your referees wisely and pick people that can speak clearly about your strengths that are relevant to the scholarship. Your referees should write a personalized letter that sets you apart from other students. Guidelines for reference letters are often less strict than the applications themselves and thus provide the perfect opportunity to elaborate on your application material, explain any missing information (i.e., years missing in education or work experience), and support your role in significant achievements. They must go beyond stating that you are excellent and actually explain why you are excellent. This is one significant area that can help set you ahead of all other applicants. It often helps your referees if you can provide them with your final scholarship application, specific suggestions regarding what to highlight, or both. Finally, it is very important that you ask your referees well in advance if they will provide you with a letter of reference, provide them as much time as possible to complete these letters, and follow up with a thank you for investing their time in your future.

Good luck!

Some ideas were derived from:

[http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/doc/Students-Etudiants/SF-tips\\_eng.pdf](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/doc/Students-Etudiants/SF-tips_eng.pdf)

By:

**Karen Dunmall, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Manitoba**

W. Garfield Weston Award for Northern Research (PhD) 2014-2016  
American Fisheries Society, J. Frances Allen Scholarship 2014  
American Fisheries Society, John E. Skinner Memorial Award 2014  
University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship 2014 (declined)  
Clemens-Rigler Travel Award, Canadian Conference for Fisheries Research 2014  
University of Manitoba Roger Evans Memorial Scholarship 2013  
NSERC Alexander Graham Bell Canada Graduate Scholarship 2011-2014

**Vivian Nguyen, Ph.D. Student, Carleton University**

American Fisheries Society, Peter A. Larkin Award (PhD) 2014  
Ocean Tracking Network Travel Award, Pathways Conference 2014  
NSERC Alexander Graham Bell Canada Graduate Scholarship 2012-2015  
NSERC Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement 2010-2011  
Ontario Graduate Scholarship 2011  
NSERC Alexander Graham Bell Canadian Graduate Scholarship 2010-2011

**Kyle Wilson, Ph.D. Student, University of Calgary**

Mitacs-Accelerate Graduate Research Internship 2014-2015  
University of Calgary, Dean's Doctoral Scholarship 2014-2015  
University of Calgary, Eye's High Doctoral Scholarship 2014  
American Fisheries Society, John E. Skinner Memorial Award 2014  
American Fisheries Society, Roger Rottman Memorial Scholarship 2013  
National Science Foundation, Graduate Research Fellowship (Honorable Mention) 2012

Aquatic Plant Management Society, William L. Maier Jr. Memorial Scholarship 2012