

# FGSR Professional Development Communication Module



## The Review Process

In order to better understand how to write a successful grant application, it is useful to understand how grant applications are reviewed by the funding agency of interest. A good way to understand the review process is to read the reviewers guide for the agency which can often be downloaded from the agency's website. This will help you to understand what the reviewers are looking for in your application. In Canada, the Tri-Council funding agencies (NSERC, SSHRC and CIHR) are the major sources of grants for researchers.

The criteria to determine CIHR grant applications are 1) research approach, 2) originality of the proposal, 3) applicant(s), 4) environment for the research, and 5) impact of the research. The proposal needs to include strengths and weaknesses of the project, scientific merit, importance and the potential of the proposed research. The background of the applicant includes previous training and research experience, significant contributions and productivity during the funding period.

The criteria to determine NSERC grant applications are 1) quality of the researcher, 2) quality of the progress report and proposal, 3) need for funds and 4) contribution to the training of highly qualified personnel. NSERC tries to use equal weighting for these criteria.

The criteria to determine SSHRC grant applications are 1) previous research achievement and 2) proposed program of research. SSHRC does not use equal weighting for these criteria (60% based on previous research and 40% on proposed research).

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## Steps of the Review Process

### 1. Initial Overview

Granting agency office staff will review the application. The office staff will check for eligibility, adherence to deadlines, completeness, adherence to guidelines and accuracy.

### 2. Reviewing

Grant applications will be sent to a specific review panel. The chair will read the summary page of all the grant applications sent to the panel. Based on the summary the chair will send your grant application to a panel member that has expertise in your discipline, or send to an external reviewer if no panel members have expertise in the area, or they can transfer your grant application to another panel.

Grant applications are sent to individual reviewers on the panel. Some applications are reviewed independently or in a face-to-face meeting. Usually your application will be reviewed by 2-3 people but could be reviewed by as many as 7-10 people depending on the program. Each reviewer receives 5-12 grant applications to review in about 30 days. The reviewers on a panel can vary with level of expertise (do not assume the reviewer knows the details of your field). Many review panels may also include members of the general public.

### 3. Assigning a score

Reviewers will assign a score to each of the grant applications they are assigned to review. Grant applications are often compared to each other. When the review panel meets, the primary reviewer will summarize your proposed research and announce the score they assigned. The second (and consecutive reviewers) will make comments on the original summary and announce the score they assigned. The entire panel will discuss the scores in relation to scores of other grant applications in the panel and a consensus will be determined in order to assign a final score to your application. Panel members reassess their scores.

## 4. Awarding Funds

The scores from each of the panel members are averaged and ranked from best to last. The ranked order is sent to a separate committee that considers the budget and begins making awards starting with the grant application that has the highest score and going down the list until there is no more money in the budget. Notice letters are mailed out to applicants with the results.

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## Questions a Reviewer may Ask when Evaluating an Application

- What are you trying to do? What is the central hypothesis or research question? What specific objectives are proposed to answer this question? Is the hypothesis or research question feasible? Can they deliver on the objectives?
- Why is this research important to do now?
- Why is this research relevant and important in the context of the mandate of the granting agency? What new knowledge will be obtained and how will this benefit those that support the research?
- How are you going to do the research? This should be answered sufficiently enough in the proposal so the reviewer can assess if you have a plan to do the research and if it is likely that your proposed plan will be successful. Some points to consider are the level of detail of the research plan, reasonable timeline, clear plan for analysis and interpretation of results, why the methods are the best to use, and potential pitfalls are discussed along with alternative approaches for any anticipated problems.
- Why should this person be the one to do this research? Does the applicant have prior experience and skills to do the methods in the plan? If they do not have experience in an area, do they have collaborators to help them in areas where they lack proven experience? Have they included preliminary data showing feasibility of the planned proposal?
- Does the budget include a reasonable list of what is required to do the research? This includes supplies, personnel, equipment, services and travel to conferences. It is generally acceptable to ask for one technician or one research assistant, and one or two graduate students. If requesting funds for a post doc or summer student, it is much more convincing if you have a specific individual in mind since these types of personnel are more difficult to find.
- Does the grant application include a detailed budget justification? Is the budget believable? Are there enough people to do the proposed work? Are they asking for enough or too much? Keep in mind reviewers have the power to adjust your budget and can award you the grant but for fewer funds than originally requested.
- Keep in mind each reviewer has to compile a report. The report typically includes a brief assessment of the applicant, brief synopsis of the proposal (including purpose, hypothesis, objectives, approach, and progress made to date), an assessment of the proposal, and comments on the budget. The assessment of the proposal should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the project in relation to the appropriateness of the research plan (feasibility and use of methodology), significance of the work, originality, research environment (availability of resources, personnel, and time required to complete proposed research), and impact or importance of work proposed (likelihood that it will create new knowledge).

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## Reasons for Applications to be Considered “Non-Fundable”

### Not following instructions carefully

Parts of application are missing or incomplete.

## **Irritating the reviewers**

Writing that comes across as arrogant, overly apologetic or hard to read may cause the application to fall outside of the fundable range.

## **Lack of accuracy**

Reporting your name on a publication in an order other than it appears on the actual publication. Listing papers as accepted without support from the editor.

## **Problems with the proposal**

The research proposal is not hypothesis driven. The research aims are interdependent. The projects are not logically linked. The proposal is too ambitious.

## **Not linking the person to the project**

You need to convince the reviewer why you are the best person to be doing this research. Let the reviewer know how this work builds on your previous expertise; without bragging.

## **Avoid being too novel or too safe**

Your proposed research should be feasible. Explain to the reviewer why your research is exciting and likely to be successful.

## **Providing too much or too little experimental methodology**

You should present a balance between the big picture and the details of the planned proposal. Remember that the reviewer is not an expert in the specifics of your field. Provide a logical review of the potential problems and feasible alternative approaches for each of the objectives.

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