

Applying for Scholarships & Awards: A Professor's Advice to Students

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Introduction

My first scholarship application was a complete dud. Some mistakes I made were:

- I asked the wrong professors for reference letters;
- I failed to supply my reference letter writers with any information that would distinguish me from other students;
- I had no vision of my future; I had no sense of what my accomplishments were (if any!);
- all I wanted was the money, and I couldn't really say why I deserved it.

Not surprisingly, I was passed over when the results were announced. I realised that my application really did reflect me (possibly, a dud), and perhaps I could do better.

Two years later:

- I applied for two scholarships and received three! (one national, one provincial, and one local)

Since then, I have read and adjudicated thousands (this is true!) of scholarship applications at the local and national level. What follows are a few pieces of advice for students who are making scholarship applications.

The Obvious and Non-obvious Benefits of Applying for Scholarships

One might think that the benefit of applying for a scholarship is solely the potential for financial gain. But I believe there are other benefits: so doing will make you a better scholar and you will have a better understanding of what you will do in the short and long term with your life. Such gains are of greater value than the monies awarded. In particular:

- With each application you make, you are
 - organising your thoughts about your field of study (writing leads to ideas, ideas lead to scholarly advances, and good scholarly advances lead to academic awards)
 - developing an academic and personal profile for yourself: who you are, what you have accomplished, what you hope to achieve, and how you plan to attain your goals
 - thinking positively about yourself, coming to the realisation that there are things you do well, perhaps very well!

- coming face to face with your shortcomings (we all have them, by the way) and where your weaknesses lie, and how these might hold you back or be simply part of the package of that which is you
- With each application you make, you are again thinking about your field, yourself, etc., and revising your position on these
- With each application you make, your application becomes progressively stronger
- Every scholarship you receive enhances your academic profile, thereby strengthening your chances in future scholarship competitions
- The scholarships you receive are an investment in you, and your future. They are also a confirmation that you are doing well, and your good work has been recognised and (to some extent) rewarded. (Personal comment: the scholarship I received that gave me the greatest personal satisfaction was also the scholarship that had the smallest monetary value.)

Types of Scholarships/Awards; Where to Look for Them

- Entrance scholarships (to recruit you to a particular university)
- Academic proficiency scholarships (to retain you at a particular university)
- Travel scholarships (to assist you to disseminate your work at a scholarly conference)
- Niche scholarships (directed to applicants with specific profiles, eg., First Nations People, people who have completed military service, students studying a specific topic)
- Titled scholarships (bequests, memorial scholarships)
- Provincial and National scholarships (SSHRC, NSERC, etc)
- International scholarships (Fulbright, Rhodes, etc)
- Private sector (McDonald's [yes, it's true], commercial textbook publishers, etc)
- It is your responsibility to know the scholarships available to you and what the deadlines are; talk to other students for info, read your University Awards Guide, pay attention to the (very useful) information about scholarships on the University's website.

Assuming, now, that you are convinced of the value (in the broadest sense of the word) of applying for scholarships, let us review the "brass tacks" of making an application

Technical Issues

- Follow the instructions carefully, including directives concerning font sizes, page/word limits; it looks very bad to adjudicators if the applicant failed to understand, or did not bother to read attentively, basic instructions
- If you are making several applications, you will be tempted to re-use material from other applications; this is reasonable, but in so doing ensure to avoid copy/paste errors (eg, "Please consider my application for an NSERC scholarship" when you are now applying for a "Faculty of Graduate Studies Scholarship")
- get the application submitted on time

What Your Application Should Communicate to Readers

- Readers should be able to easily discern:
 - Who you are as an academic (your field of study, your achievements in your studies)
 - Who you are as a person (your contributions to common good, special talents)
 - Your plans for the future (short and long term academic/employment goals)
 - Your vision of the future (where you see yourself, your field of study, your contributions to your field of study and to the common good)
 - Your plan for achieving your goals (be somewhat specific about this)
 - That you are articulate, confident, and know where you are heading
- The reader should also come to a clear understanding of why you should be a contender for this particular scholarship; thus, be somewhat selective in what you apply for; be sure that you meet the eligibility criteria
- The points listed above should be in the back of your mind when making each and every application, regardless of how little detail you can actually provide on the form
- The points listed above can sometimes be communicated through a “Personal Statement” (PS) section of the application form.
- Ensure that your “Personal Statement” really does reflect who (you think) you are. Your PS should not contain too much BS. (Thank goodness for acronyms.)
- The PS may even serve as a catalyst to begin thinking about the person you want to become

Some Things That Selection Committees Tend to Evaluate

- The presentation of your application. The application must be well organised and well written; any sloppiness will undermine you (unfair though it may seem—especially for Einstein-types)
- Academic issues:
 - Length of time to complete the academic program (too much time looks bad)
 - Full course load versus partial course load (the former earns higher praise than the latter)
 - Challenging courses versus less challenging ones
 - Depth and breadth of your studies
- The number and value of scholarships/awards you have received in an open competition (the longer this list is, the better your chances will be in purely academic scholarship competitions)
- The clarity of your study or research plan. Write yours in a way that conveys to the reader that you understand your field well and that you have clear ideas about what you wish to learn further of, or contribute new knowledge to, your field of study. It is advisable to ask a professor to read this over (although you must certainly write it yourself) and provide you with comments
- Evidence of contributions to the community, especially taking your expertise to the community
- Evidence that you are a good communicator with strong interpersonal skills; evidence of leadership qualities

Selecting Your References, and Being Nice to Them

- If you have a thesis advisor, then he/she should be used as a reference
- Be careful about who you use.
 - Ensure that the individual knows you well enough to be able to write a reference letter that addresses the selection criteria. For example, if the professor only knows you as a name on a class roster, then he/she will not be able to say very much about your potential for independent research
 - If the individual knows you well, ask yourself, “Is this person really the type of individual who would make the effort to write an informative, positive letter?” You may want to consult other profs or students about your choice of references. Most professors will decline your request for a letter of reference if they are too busy or do not know you well
- Give your reference letter writers plenty of time to be prepare their letters
- Have a resume or curriculum vitae, as well as an unofficial transcript of your grades, available for them
- If you are making many applications, then you will be making many requests for reference letters and in so doing possibly taxing the patience of your referees. Therefore, again, be somewhat selective in what you apply for

Thank You

- If you receive a scholarship, then inform your referees and thank them for their letters of support
- If you don't receive a scholarship, then inform your referees and thank them for their letters of support
- For some types of scholarships, a thank you note to the organisation offering the scholarship is appropriate. In such cases, if you receive an award and do not send a thank you, then you are rude. If you did not receive the scholarship, you may still wish to send a thank you. For example, “I recently competed for the Dr. X Memorial Scholarship. Although I did not receive the scholarship, I appreciated the opportunity to apply for it, and I value the support that this scholarship gives for students in this field of study. This award is a very worthy memorial to Dr. X. Thank you.” Don't over do it; be sincere

Handling “Failure and Rejection” and Disappointment

- Even the absolute best students do not succeed in each and every scholarship competition
- If feedback on your application is given to you, then learn from the comments. Ask yourself, “Did I really fit the profile demanded of that particular award?” For example, it could be that your demonstrated lack of participation in sports is what knocked you out of the running for a Rhodes Scholarship

- Revise your application; you will find that every time you make a new application your new applications improve on your earlier ones
- There are things you do not know about the adjudication: in particular, you do not know how close you came to receiving the award. You may not have received the award, but there is a very good chance that your application made a positive impression in the minds of the Selection Cte. Unknown to you, this could pay off in the future through a job offer, or an informal recommendation from one professor to another about this really good student he/she became aware of in a scholarship competition
- It is wrong to think that you or your work is not of value. Everyone who has adjudicated scholarships walks away from the process deeply impressed by the talent of the applicants and the interesting work these students are doing
- Remember: there are non-financial benefits to making scholarship applications

Look Toward the Future

- A scholarship may not be in your immediate future, but in time this may change (as it did for me a long time ago). Start thinking now about your profile for your future scholarship applications
- Strengthen your communication skills by paying greater attention to your writing and by volunteering for public speaking opportunities (seminars, etc)
- If you are not contributing positively to the world around you, then start doing so. Start small: join the organisational committee of a student association or club; become a presenter at a kid's science camp; assist a local charity, etc
- Keep thinking about your area of study and how it fits into "big picture."
- Keep working hard
- Remember: success is not measure by dollars

Frequently Asked Questions

- I am not a straight-A student. Is there any hope for me?
 - My answer is: yes. For purely academic scholarships, one shouldn't have too many grades of B and C, and grades of D and F should be in your relatively distant past. But there are scholarships targeted to people in special circumstances who may not succeed in purely academic competitions. A single parent, for example, may not have had sufficient time and energy to compete grade-for-grade with someone living in residence with all of her/his needs provided for. The "rich get richer" may be generally true, but not all people believe that this should be a universal axiom of life.
 - A high GPA is wonderful, yes, but Selection Committees view a trend toward grade improvement over time as a positive aspect of the applicant. On the other hand, inconsistent grades (very high and very low grades in the same semester or year) suggest that the applicant applies himself/herself only for topics of sufficient personal interest

- How do I get professors to notice me?
 - Speak up in class: ask questions and offer answers to questions posed by the professor
 - Talk to your professor outside of class (but don't over do it, as these people are busier than you might imagine)
 - Be prepared when attending office hours
 - Do well in your classes

Final Word

The process of applying for a scholarship can be somewhat agonizing. We must look realistically at ourselves and then put that image out for critical evaluation and comment. A great deal of effort goes into making a scholarship application, and there are few guarantees of success.

On the other hand, the process of making a scholarship application forces us to reflect upon our field of study, what it is about, why it is of interest, and how might it evolve in the short and long term. This is a higher level of thinking, and thus has its own intrinsic value. We formulate academic goals and set a plan for achieving these goals. And without even noticing it, we have made some small, but important advances in our development as scholars—and, perhaps, as human being as well.

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