How to Write a SSHRC Proposal

General Tips for SSHRC Applications

- Start early. If this is your first time putting together a SSHRC/grant application, you will be surprised by how time consuming it can be.
- Remember to request transcripts and ask for letters of reference at least a month in advance. After all the work put into your SSHRC proposal, the last thing you want is to not be able to complete it because one of your transcripts or letters arrives late.
- It is likely that your letter writers will want to see a draft of your Program of Study before they write a letter of reference. Therefore, it is helpful if you are able to put together a draft before you contact your letter writers.
- Don’t give up! Putting together a SSHRC application can feel overwhelming. Even if you find yourself behind schedule, or you don’t think that your application is good enough to win, it is still worth sending something in. Gathering all the documents, arranging letter writers, and writing a Program of Study is an important learning experience for putting together future grants, and even if you don’t win a SSHRC, the process will be that much easier next year.

The Program of Study

General SSHRC Writing Tips

- The Program of Study is the part of the SSHRC application where you propose a project, argue for its value, and state your qualifications. If you have already applied for graduate school, you likely had to do something very similar in your application. If this is entirely unfamiliar, you can also think of it as the cover letter of your application.
- Writing a SSHRC proposal is a different style of writing than term papers, articles, or even other grants. Most of the people who will be evaluating your application will be from outside your discipline, so you will need to write in a way that is not only
comprehensible to individuals outside of your own discipline, but also sells the importance of your project to them. It is important to write clearly (even plainly), which means that you should avoid acronyms, jargon, and name dropping. If you have to use some jargon, make sure that you explain the meaning of each term to the reader.

- The style/tone should be journalistic. Aim for the style/tone of popular science articles. It is obviously possible to go too far in this direction. You are proposing an academic research project, so you should still write in a way that shows that your project is rooted in your discipline and has academic merit. In other words, your Program of Study should be accessible, but also rigorous.

- Get a draft together early, and then ask your supervisor, professors, mentors, and peers to provide comments and suggestions. Revise/rewrite your draft and then ask others for comments and suggestions. If you can convince family, friends, or people from outside your discipline to read it and give you comments - even better! Bring your draft to the Writing Centre and go through it with a writing tutor. Form a working group with other applicants and go over each other’s proposals. Then revise, revise, revise. My most recent (and successful) SSHRC Program of Study was read by ten to fifteen people and went through five very different drafts before being submitted.

**Recommended Structure**

- The structure below should be taken as a suggested structure. While your application should have all of these components, if a different order works better for your Program of Study, you should feel free to rearrange/experiment.

1. **Context and Research Questions**
   a. Your first few sentences or paragraph should provide some sort of hook for your reader. Identify the problem or questions you wish to address in a way that a reader can relate to or find interesting. It might be tempting to start with background information or context, but it is generally better to start with something more attention grabbing. Similarly to the way magazine articles or newspaper articles avoid “burying the lead”, you should start with something that
makes your reader curious or interested enough to want to continue reading. So
start with a hook that naturally leads to your research questions or problem.

b. The next step is to provide the background/context for your project. This can
include both previous work you’ve done, the social/political/economic
background, and/or the scholarly debates the questions emerge from. A quick note
on each:
   i. If you are able to show that your current project is rooted in previous work
      you have done (e.g. “This project builds and expands upon the ideas I
developed in my MA thesis by…”), this shows both that you have the
      necessary background knowledge for your project and that you are capable
      of successfully designing and completing a project.
   ii. Tying your project to issues that are broader and more connected to
      society than merely academic concerns can be helpful in selling the
      importance of your project, but make sure these connections come across
      as natural instead of forced or opportunistic, and that they still connect
      back to academic concerns (this is an academic project that you are
developing after all).
   iii. Connecting your project to existing literature is possibly the most
      important of these three, as it shows that you have the necessary
      background knowledge, that established scholars have seen similar
      projects or concerns as feasible, and most importantly that your project
      will be making a knowledge contribution.

In developing the context, make sure you are showing the relevance and
importance of your project. Show how your previous work raised important
questions that can only be answered now, how theoretical ideas can make a
positive contribution to resolving societal issues, or how the literature has failed
to address an important issue or has addressed it inadequately. Think of this
section as building a narrative that leads to your project.
Finally, you should finish this section by stating the position you will be taking or the hypothesis you will be considering. This is where you provide a preliminary answer to the research questions from the beginning of this section. This paragraph should make clear the ‘thesis’ of your project.

2. Methodology
   a. This section states your research methods, including any empirical work, what kinds of sources you will be consulting, or ways you will be further developing your knowledge (courses, field work, technical training) so that you can address the problem you have proposed.
   b. It isn’t always clear what a methodology section should look like for a humanities proposal. One way to fill this section in is to provide an outline of your project (e.g. The first stage of my research will consider the ways that the current understanding of X fail to…, The second stage of my research will construct an alternative understanding of X by…).

3. Implications
   a. This section focuses on the consequences of your research. If you are able to, it is probably best to state both theoretical and pragmatic implications. In other words, state the ways in which your research will both contribute to furthering or resolving academic problems, as well as the ways it will advance concerns outside of a strictly academic context. This is the ‘why does it matter’ section. While writing it you should, once again, keep in mind that most of the people evaluating your application will not be from your discipline. Your presentation of the implications should, therefore, be compelling enough that those who are not well-versed in your discipline are able to understand the possible impact of your project and what the importance of that impact is.

4. Preparation for this Project
   a. The first part of this section should focus on selling yourself as the person who is most qualified to be doing this project. Up to this point, you have been trying to
convince your reader that your project is worth pursuing. But, even if the reader
has been convinced that the project is one that should be pursued, they still need
to be convinced that you are the right person to do it. This is a good place to
discuss any previous research (especially if you have presented or published it),
your coursework, skills, access to materials, or any other qualifications that make
you the ideal person to answer your proposed research questions.

b. If you need to explain any parts of your application that could be considered
negatively by evaluators, this is the section to do that. For example, if you have
some low grades because you were working in a discipline that you were not
passionate about, or your previous degree took longer than normal to complete
because you had to care for a sick relative, you can explain the reasons for these
results here. If you can, explain them in a way that shows that these are not strikes
but further evidence of your qualifications. For example, taking and struggling in
classes in one discipline helped you realize that the work you really wanted to
pursue was in your current discipline, or caring for your relative made the
societal/political injustices that you are addressing through your project all the
more apparent. You likely had good reasons for the (good or bad) results on your
transcripts/C.V., and so make sure you make evaluators aware of them.

c. The second part of this section should discuss why the university or institution
you are at or are applying to is the right one for you and your project. Here, you
can discuss your supervisor or professors you plan to work with, research
facilities, access to materials/sources, proximity to the field, and any other
relevant support your institution can provide for the project. At this point, you
should have convinced your reader of the importance of your project, why you are
the best candidate for your project, and why your department and/or university is
the best place to do it.

Some Final Considerations and Reminders

- Pay close attention to formatting details such as margins, fonts, spacing, and so on. Make
sure you go through formatting instructions provided by SSHRC and follow each one.
After all the work you have put into your application, the last thing you want is for it to not be considered because your margins are too narrow.

- Remember to properly cite the sources you are referring to and include a list of works cited or references.

**A Final Note**

- Putting together a SSHRC application can be exhausting and at times demoralizing. Selling your project or yourself can highlight insecurities, trigger imposter syndrome, or make you feel crass and opportunistic. Remember that you and your project have value outside of a single grant application and that you are not the only one who is feeling this way.

- If, after all your hard work, you do not end up winning a SSHRC grant, this is not an immediate repudiation of you or your project. There is a lot of luck involved in who wins and who loses, and there are many stories about applications that were rejected one year, only to be accepted the next. You have also gained important skills on how to write a grant and how to sell your project. These will be useful in the future, whether you are applying for another grant or trying to describe your dissertation over Thanksgiving dinner.