

## CIHR Webinar - The Art of Writing a CIHR Application (September 2011)

### Summaries of Application-Writing Tips

*Dear Webinar Participants:*

*Thank you for participating in CIHR's webinar on "The Art of Writing a CIHR Application." Below you will find summaries for the complete set of application writing "tips," including those presented during the webinar.*

#### **Empower Yourself: Be Prepared!**

1. Assess your Readiness to Apply
2. Review the Funding Opportunity for Critical Information
3. Don't Wait Until the Last Minute

#### **Application Content: Success is in the Details**

4. Read the Instructions Carefully (and be prepared to follow them EXACTLY!)
5. Address the Evaluation Criteria
6. Substantiate your Claims
7. Include Gender and Sex in your Research Design (when appropriate)
8. Justify your Team Composition
9. Address your Project's Limitations
10. Justify your Budget Request
11. Address Previous Reviews with Respect

#### **Writing and Finalizing**

12. Engage your Audience: Write with the Reviewer in Mind
13. Summaries are More Important than you Might Think
14. Have your Application Pre-Reviewed

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### Empower Yourself: Be Prepared

#### 1. Assess your Readiness to Apply

Applicants are advised to carefully and honestly assess their readiness to apply. Are you eligible to apply for CIHR funding? Does your proposal meet the eligibility requirements of the funding opportunity? Do you have the appropriate experience to conduct your research, as required by the funding opportunity? Is your research institution in a position to offer you the time, space and facilities to conduct your research successfully (as applicable)?

If you do not yet have the research experience required by the funding opportunity, you can gain valuable experience by being a co-principal applicant or co-applicant on another researcher's project. Seek advice from colleagues who have been successful in obtaining CIHR funding and ask them if they would be willing to share copies of their successful applications with you so that you can use them as a reference when writing your own proposals.

#### Links

- **CIHR Grants and Awards Guide – Eligibility Requirements:** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/22630.html#1-D>

#### 2. Review the Funding Opportunity for Critical Information

New applicants to CIHR are often surprised by the amount of information they must digest in order to understand the agency's "culture" and to feel confident and at ease in completing a CIHR application. The biggest hurdle is "where to start?"

Applicants should always start with the funding opportunity. The CIHR funding opportunity contains the "map" that will guide you to important policies and guidelines necessary for the completion of a successful application (and steer you away from those that are not applicable). In the funding opportunity details you will find information on the objectives of the funding opportunity, the funds available for the competition, the names of partner organizations, the program or initiative objectives, eligibility requirements, Knowledge Translation requirements, evaluation and review criteria, allowable costs, conditions of funding and specific application requirements, in addition to vital information such as deadline dates and contact information.

What is more, many of CIHR's research funding opportunities are complex, and at times the information in a funding opportunity might contradict information or instructions found elsewhere on the website. Therefore, it is important to be aware that **the information in the funding opportunity supersedes information found elsewhere on the website**. If you have any

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questions throughout the application process it is important to contact the appropriate CIHR staff members identified in the “Contacts” section of the funding opportunity.

#### **Links**

- Most of CIHR’s funding opportunities are located in the Funding Opportunities Database. To get to the Funding Opportunities Database, click on “Find Funding” in the left-hand navigation lane of the CIHR Home Page.

### **3. Don’t Wait Until the Last Minute**

The CIHR application process can be very complicated, especially for new applicants. Applications are submitted electronically, and applicants need to obtain PINs, Common CV and ResearchNet accounts. The turnaround time for obtaining these can be delayed at peak periods. In addition you will be required to append documentation to your application, some of which may take a long time to obtain (e.g., letters of collaboration, references, cost quotations, documentation from your research institution). In order to be fair to all applicants, CIHR enforces its completeness policy and application deadlines: late applications will not be accepted and incomplete applications will be withdrawn.

Beginning your application as early as possible (e.g., three months or more in advance) will help you to obtain all of the necessary accounts and documentation and to get clarification from CIHR staff if you have questions or need more information. It will also help you to focus your reading and early thinking on the application process.

In addition, some institutions set internal deadlines for applications which may be different from the CIHR deadline for submission. Therefore, it is important to contact the Research Services office of your Faculty or institution well in advance of the CIHR deadline to determine if there is an earlier, internal deadline at your institution.

Finally, to avoid encountering systems delays at peak periods, don’t wait until the last minute to submit your completed application on ResearchNet.

#### **Useful Contact Information:**

- Grants and Awards Information: 613-954-1968; 1-888-603-4178; [info@cihr-irsc.gc.ca](mailto:info@cihr-irsc.gc.ca)
- Technical / IT Help Desk (ResearchNet): 613-941-9080; [support@researchnet-recherchenet.ca](mailto:support@researchnet-recherchenet.ca)
- Common CV: (613) 941-0068 or toll-free 1-888-603-4178; [CCV-CVC@cihr-irsc.gc.ca](mailto:CCV-CVC@cihr-irsc.gc.ca)

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### **Application Content: Success is in the Details**

#### **4. Read the Instructions Carefully (and be prepared to follow them EXACTLY)**

CIHR enforces its application deadlines, formatting rules, page allowances, eligibility guidelines and completeness policy in order to provide a fair playing field for all applicants: late applications will not be accepted and incomplete applications will be withdrawn from the competition. In addition, if your application is found not to be relevant to the research objectives of the funding opportunity or initiative it will be withdrawn from the competition. Therefore, it is extremely important to read and understand all of the application instructions for a funding opportunity, and to follow them EXACTLY. You will find the instructions, and links to other mandatory requirements in the funding opportunity. Read them carefully, and if there is something you do not understand, contact the CIHR staff identified in the “Contacts” section of the funding opportunity.

#### **5. Address the Evaluation Criteria**

It is a good idea to address the evaluation criteria outlined in the funding opportunity, because your application will be reviewed against it. The evaluation criteria will vary depending on the funding opportunity. Reviewers will use the following set of criteria for the evaluation of the Open Operating Grant Program. Other programs may adapt or add criteria to address the objectives of the funding opportunity.

- 1) Research Approach
- 2) Originality of the Proposal
- 3) Applicant(s)
- 4) Environment for the Research
- 5) Impact of the Research

Knowledge Translation is a fundamental part of CIHR’s mandate and many funding opportunities require a KT plan as part of the application. The KT component of the application is assessed under Criterion 5 (Impact of the Research).

#### **Links**

- **Understand Peer Review: Policies and Procedures:** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/39414.html>
- **More About Knowledge Translation at CIHR:** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/39033.html>

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### **6. Substantiate Your Claims**

Substantiating your claims will lend validity to your research proposal. Pilot data, power analyses, preliminary results or results of previous research or original referenced work can help to demonstrate the validity of your research question. Preliminary data and information from prior CIHR grants should be included in the “Summary of Progress” section of the application, as well as in the publications and references appended to the application. In addition, if you choose one methodology over another, explain why.

### **7. Include Gender and Sex in Your Research Design (when appropriate)**

CIHR expects that all research applicants will integrate gender and sex into their research designs when appropriate. CIHR has implemented a requirement that all grant applicants respond to mandatory questions about whether their research designs include gender and sex (effective December 2010).

The questions are:

1. Are sex (biological) considerations taken into account in this study? (Y/N)
2. Are gender (socio-cultural) considerations taken into account in this study? (Y/N)
3. (If the respondent answers yes for one or both questions) Please describe how the sex and gender considerations will be considered in your research proposal (maximum 2,000 characters).

CIHR has developed a tool to give health researchers a framework for thinking through how gender and/or sex might be integrated into their research designs:

#### **Links**

- **Gender, Sex and Health Research Guide: A Tool for CIHR Applicants:**  
<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/32019.html>
- **Integrating Gender and Sex in Health Research: A Tool for CIHR Peer Reviewers:**  
<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/43216.html>

### **8. Justify Your Team Composition**

It is important that the reviewers understand the significance of your team (as a whole, and individually) to conducting the proposed research. Team members should bring the necessary

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expertise to your proposal (e.g., if you are conducting a Randomized Controlled Trial, do you have a biostatistician in your team? If your proposal has a KT component, does your team include knowledge users?) Describe the role of each team member and how each member's expertise contributes to your project. Make sure that your team composition aligns with the key aspects of your proposal, and also that you are not missing a key player on your team. If appropriate, describe how the team members will interact through the course of the project.

#### **9. Address your Project's Limitations**

Be honest in identifying and addressing your project's limitations. All research proposals have them and the reviewers are sure to spot them even if you don't mention them. It's much better if reviewers know that you are aware of potential issues that might arise in conducting your research and that you have considered how you will address them. Be sure to mention alternative strategies that you will employ if necessary.

#### **10. Justify your Budget Request**

The review committee may recommend reductions to your budget if it determines that the amounts requested are not sufficiently justified. Therefore, it is important to provide strong justification for your budget items. In writing your budget it is essential to review the information contained in the "Allowable Costs" section of the funding opportunity to ensure that your budget items are eligible. In addition, linking personnel and other costs to specific aims, and explaining your budget request in plain and succinct language will help to ensure that the reviewers understand your budgetary needs. Also, don't leave the budget to the last minute. Preparing your budget could lead you to discover critical flaws that need to be addressed in the proposal.

#### **11. Address Previous Reviews with Respect**

Don't be discouraged if your application was not initially successful. Even the most seasoned researchers often have to resubmit their applications before they finally succeed in obtaining funding. Now you have the benefit of the reviewers' comments which may help increase your chances of success. In the "Resubmission" section of the application, you have two pages to address previous reviews. It is preferable to use these pages wisely by responding politely and demonstrating that you have carefully considered the comments and suggestions and that you have addressed the issues that were raised. Make sure your response is "self-contained" and understandable as a "stand-alone" document, because reviewers will not have access to your previous submission and there is no guarantee that the same reviewers will review your

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resubmitted application. Remember also that addressing previous reviews may not in fact increase your chances of success, because each competition is a “fresh” competition and the pool of applications will be different each round.

Give careful consideration, however, to immediately resubmitting an application to the next competition if you haven't had enough time to consider the reviewers' comments and to make improvements. Given the high competitiveness of competitions and the amount of time and effort involved in reviewing applications, you will likely not succeed, especially if it is sent to the same reviewers the second or third time around.

### **Links**

The following documents are published with the results of each CIHR Open Operating Grant competition and provide application and funding statistics as well as general information about how the competition results are calculated:

- **Operating Grant: 2010-2011 - Funding Decisions Notification (March 2011 Competition - 201103MOP)** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/43942.html>
- **CIHR Open Operating Grant Program Competitions - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/43939.html>

### **Writing and Finalizing**

#### **12. Engage Your Audience: Write with the Reviewer in Mind**

Engage your reviewers by keeping them in mind when you write your proposal. Remember that CIHR's reviewers are volunteering their services. Moreover, they are highly respected researchers who are dedicating a large proportion of their own valuable research time to reviewing your application. You do not have to be a professional writer, but employing a few simple writing techniques can help you to engage the reviewers in your project.

You can make your application easier to review by organizing your content (make it flow), being concise and precise, avoiding jargon, acronyms and abbreviations, and using clear and unambiguous language. Get to the point early (identify the research question, approach and likely outcomes within the first few pages) and clearly define your terminology. Employ illustrations to help explain, clarify and emphasize key points, and make sure to proofread the final version to eliminate spelling and grammar mistakes. Pay strict adherence to formatting guidelines such as font, margin and document size. And finally, don't assume that all of the reviewers will be experts in your particular field. Use language that will be understood by

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generalists, but that will also convince the experts on the review committee that you really know your stuff.

### **13. Summaries are More Important than You Might Think.**

As part of the application process, you may be required to summarize your project in various ways (you must include a “Lay Abstract” and a “Summary of Research Proposal”). It is tempting to give these summaries short shrift, given all of the other important tasks you must complete. **Stop and think again.** These summaries are among the most important parts of your application.

If your research project is determined to be of interest to the general public, the “Lay Abstract” will be published on CIHR’s website and it may be shared with the media. The Lay Abstract should be written in plain language so that the general public will understand the nature of your research project.

The peer review committee members use the “Summary of the Research Proposal” submitted with the Registration to determine whether or not they have the appropriate level of expertise to review the application. For the Open Operating Grants Program, the summary is also used to place the application in the most appropriate peer review committee by comparing its content to the mandates of the peer review committees, in discussion with the committee Chair and Scientific Officer.

In addition, for strategic competitions, the “Summary of the Research Proposal” may be used to determine whether or not your proposal is relevant to the strategic research areas of the funding opportunity (if your proposal is determined to be “not relevant” your application will be withdrawn from the competition).

Make sure that the “Summary of the Research Proposal” provides a concise account of the subject matter and methodology of your application, and that it reflects the significance of your project as well as its alignment with the relevant research areas of a strategic initiative. Describe your methodology and provide concise, specific project aims as well as an overview of each part of the research plan.

Finally, you might consider summarizing often throughout your proposal to wrap up key points or complex ideas, in order to make it easier for the reviewers to follow your train of thought.

### **14. Have Your Application “Pre-Reviewed”**

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Mentorship can be very important to your success in obtaining research funding. Before pressing “submit,” consider asking a trusted colleague (or colleagues) to provide a critical review of your application. Also, some institutions require applications to undergo a formal internal review process before they are submitted to the agency, but you might also wish to inquire if your institution organizes informal “pre-reviews” on behalf of their researchers. These formal and informal “pre-reviews” can sometimes be very elaborate, with internal committees structured on the agency’s peer review process.

### **Links:**

- **Understand Peer Review: Process – Start to Finish:** <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/39382.html>