# Strategies in Use in Successful SSHRC Applications

## Background

Grant writers are often given strict formatting guidelines, such as the length of each section and even margin width, but, as one UW researcher commented, content-related guidelines are less specific: “it’s filling in between the margins that seems to be the problem.” Furthermore, many of the strategies that grant writers use seem to be tacit.

In the fall of 2004, Dr. Catherine Schryer from the Department of English at the University of Waterloo and seven graduate students—Jennifer Chen, Cara DeHaan, Ryan Devitt, Jessica Fuchs, Elizabeth Rogers, Jeffery Stacey and Kate Wringe -- conducted a pilot study to identify some of the successful linguistic and rhetorical features that exist “in between the margins” of Standard Research Grant applications to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). After securing ethics approval for our project, we first analyzed seven successful proposals written by UW researchers (from Economics, Sociology, Planning, Recreation and Leisure Studies [RLS], History, Germanic and Slavic Studies [GSS], and Psychology) to identify common organizational and linguistic or style features. Each student then interviewed one proposal writer. Together we also interviewed three UW administrative staff members who provide assistance to UW grant writers: Dr. Heather McDougall, Associate Dean of Arts, and Dr. Susan Sykes and Selena Santi from the Office of Research. The transcripts of each interview (or interview notes, in the case of Sociology) were distributed among the class for analysis to identify emergent themes regarding the process of grant writing.

## This Document

This document presents in a concise manner a compilation of our findings divided into two parts: **the first section outlines some of the organizational and stylistic decisions present in the proposals; the second section reflects what our participants told us about the process of grant writing**. We acknowledge the limited nature of our findings, derived as they are from a limited pilot study. However, as we discovered in our literature review, almost no research exists on the actual strategies used by grant applicants.

# I. Language Use in SSHRC Grants

This section focuses on the organizational and stylistic strategies at work in the grant applications we analyzed.

## A. Organizational Strategies

This section uses the work of Connor & Mauranen (1999, 2000). Their research indicates that research proposals contain certain "moves." These "moves" are like tacit questions that grant writers answer. The moves assist the grant writer to organize his or her proposal. We found that successful grant writers at UW include these moves but that they also often make them overlap.

In effect, proposals often tell the following story: A problem exists of social and research importance (territory). Some research already exists, but there is also clearly an absence of research in a particular area (gap). The researcher(s) is/are well prepared (means) to address the problem (goal) by conducting the following study (methodology).

We have defined each move and provided examples below.

Territory: this move maps out or identifies the "territory" in which the research places itself. Territory can be divided into two types: *research territory*, which includes references to current research issues or problems; and *social*, or "*real world*" *territory*, which includes references current social problems or issues.

We found that writers often connect these two territories to suggest that a social problem exists that a specific research territory can address. The following example points to a "real world" problem (one of the effects of the second world war) and then carves out a research area that addresses that issue.

### Example

> It is true that the war and its atrocities had a profound effect on the public conscience in Canada, and that human rights were undergoing comparable

developments in other countries ... The literature on international human rights distinguishes three "generations" of rights: ...

Gap: this move establishes that there is a gap in knowledge or a problem in the territory. This move provides motivation for the study as it implies that the gap needs to be filled or problem fixed.

In the following example, the author asserts that his or her research is in "a largely undeveloped area."

Example: "The relationship between participatory IGIS and existing techniques for soliciting citizen involvement in planning is a largely undeveloped area."

Goal: this move states the aim, general objective, and chief contribution of the study. This move typically responds to the gap or problem identified by the proposal and is rarely found without the related gap move.

In the following example, the writer uses a heading to announce that he or she is moving into the goal section. Note that the goal move overlaps with the gap moving. This organizational tactic suggests that the goal of the research fills a need.

Example

"Project Objectives:

3. Contrast IGIS decision analysis with traditional public participation methods: The relationship between participatory IGIS and existing techniques for soliciting citizen involvement in planning is a largely undeveloped area."

Methodology: this move specifies how the goal will be achieved. Included are descriptions of methods, procedures, plans, or actions and tasks.

The majority of proposal writers proved their methodological competency in two ways: either they held the specific steps in their study open for scrutiny, or they specifically named a theory or methodology that included a means of accomplishing the project goals.

> Example 1: "In study 1, I develop measures of authenticity ... In studies 2 and 3, I use daily diary methods to examine ... In study 4, I test how specific constraints of the environment."

> Example 2: These goals will be achieved through a case study of land use change and development futures in the urban fringe of northwest Waterloo, Ontario.

Means: related to methodology, means refers to the writer's own credibility, his or her own readiness to conduct the research.

These proposal writers used a number of strategies to enhance their credibility.

- They often cite their own research (past, ongoing) in order to imply that a connection exists between the current proposed research and their own competency.

  One proposal implies that the author is competent to undertake the proposed research by demonstrating that she/he is already involved in related research:

  > "[a colleague] and I have recently written a paper that relaxes the assumption of constant returns to scale ... We are currently collaborating ... to add firm heterogeneity to the model and then we plan ... "

- Several proposal writers made explicit claims about their competency based on their previous research.

The following example lists the research accomplishments of the three participants, such as research areas, familiarity with certain methodology, and professional work

experience, and concludes with a concluding stand-alone sentence that explicitly ties the above list to the current project:

"The breadth of knowledge and experience with qualitative and quantitative research methodologies that the three investigators possess will strengthen the project and ensure that the study is conducted with rigor and integrity. "

- In interviews (see below), proposal writers told us that they used self-citation carefully in order to avoid claiming too much or sounding too arrogant.

  Some writers accomplished this strategy by citing their own research in the context of other research.

## B. Writing Strategies

The following outlines some of the writing strategies that we found in the proposals. We have divided these into two sets: objective and personal strategies. Academic writing aims towards an "objective" tone. At the same time, proposals are persuasive documents that should demonstrate author investment in the project so writers have to also develop a personal tone of some kind.

In our interviews, we learned that style preferences differ among the disciplines so readers should adjust these findings to their own contexts.

We found that proposal writers frequently used the following strategies.

### 1. Objective Strategies

#### a. Nominalizations.

A nominalization occurs when a verb is changed into a noun. The following two sentences illustrate the difference.

We **investigated** (verb) the area and found debris.

An area **investigation** (noun) revealed debris.

Nominalizations are useful as they remove agency and thus contribute to an objective tone. They also can conserve space as illustrated above.

We found that all proposals used nominalizations.

Example: “land related decision making” instead of “making decisions that relate to the land”

## Warning:

The overuse of nominalizations can create confusion because nominalizations can pile up and because nominalizations are more cognitively difficult for readers to unravel.

The following illustrates the problem:

Original: Research indicates that proposal writers use nominalizations to occlude agency and conserve space.

Nominalization: Research indications suggest that proposals use nominalizations for agency occlusion and space conservation.

### b. Passive constructions

Passives are transformations in which the receiver of the action becomes the subject.

The following demonstrates the difference between active and passive constructions.

> The dog ate the bone. (Active)
> The bone was eaten by the dog. (Passive)
> The bone was eaten. (Passive)

Like nominalizations, passive constructions are useful as they can contribute to a more objective tone as well as brevity because agency can be removed as in the last example above.

In these proposals, we found that passive constructions had the following specific purposes.

### To mitigate blame:

Example: Many of the women who are part of the criminal justice system are labeled as having mental health issues.

**To emphasize processes rather than agents:**

Example: The effectiveness of software meditation on individual and group assessment of decision problems will be examined through workshops.

## Warning:

Like nominalizations, passive constructions can create cognitive difficulty for readers. An overuse of passive constructions can also make a proposal seem unexciting.

For example, the following uses mostly active agency to establish credibility for the authors:

> "The breadth of knowledge and experience with qualitative and quantitative research methodologies that the three investigators possess will strengthen the project and ensure that the study is conducted with rigor and integrity. "

If re-written into the passive voice, the passage would read:

> The project will be strengthened by the breadth of knowledge and experience with qualitative and quantitative research methodologies possessed by the three researchers and the study will be consequently conduced with rigor and integrity.

### c. Negatives

We expected negative constructions (i.e., using not or no) to be common in research proposals. But, in fact, they were not. When present, they served to emphasize the gap in knowledge in the field.

In the following examples the writers used negative constructions to announce a gap in their field.

Examples:

> "This has not been addressed by…"
> "Critical attention has not yet focused on…"
> "Previous studies do not explore…"

However, writers were aware that it was risky to write too negatively about another's research.

A better strategy seemed to be to write positively about the writer's own contribution to the field.

Example:

> "While these findings are collectively **compelling**, they fail to elevate what **I believe** to be **some** of the **key** features of healthy emotion regulation."

### d. Definitions

We also expected that definitions to be common. We found they were used sparingly and strategically in the body of the proposal and were more common in the lay summary.

Full definitions were used to clarify particularly complicated, new, or evolving concepts.

In the following excerpt the writer is assigning a new meaning to a common term and therefore uses definition.

Example:

“Authenticity is defined by 1) an openness to allow all emotional experiences positive and negative to emerge in awareness as they arise, 2) active intrapersonal processes of taking interest in and ..”

More often definitions were brief with the authors using brackets or brief phrases:

Example:

Community Justice Initiatives (CJI), a community organization that…

Definitions were not used to define terms common within in a field in order to conserve space.

### e. Examples

Examples which ground an abstract concept in particularly social relevant illustrations occurred frequently throughout proposals.

Sometimes examples were brief but salient.

Example:

“(e.g., “formerly low status (‘blue-collar’) occupations”

### f. Framing

*Framing* refers to techniques (e.g., forecasting, using headings, and numbering systems) that provide a framework or conceptual map for the document. Their purpose is to help organize the information for the reader as they read the document (so the reader knows what they are reading and where they are going) and to help the reader retrieve specific information after an initial reading.

We found that these proposals use framing devices sparingly but effectively as in the following example:

"The proposal discusses these projects in this order…"

We also found that proposal writers use SSHRC headings to organize their proposal but also include their own headings to help orient readers. Headings can function as framing devices and can make a proposal more visually readable.

## 2. Persona Management Strategies

Although proposal writers had to convey a sense of an objective consideration of their research, they also had to convey a sense of their own investment and commitment. The following illustrates some of the strategic ways that they used to develop a sense of measured engagement with their work.

### 1. First-person markers (e.g., "I") were used to appear involved and confident but not arrogant.

This syntax creates the impression of involved, confident researchers who take ownership for their projects and claims.

*Examples:*

"In the proposed research, **I** model three key features of…"

**"I** seek funding for a research program on [X] that moves **us** closer to answers for these questions. […] **I** contend that […]. **I** would like to identify [….]."

Writers sometimes used statements such as ***I suggest*** and ***I contend*** to imply a limited position of knowledge and at the same time assert their views.

Sometimes, too, writers used "our" or "us" not to refer to themselves but to their field and thus to reach out to their readers.

Example:

"The study should contribute to **our** academic understanding of one of **our** 'fundamental' national characteristics, and also demonstrate to Canadians that the initiative for the continuation of the journey lies, as it has historically, with the citizens themselves."

**Warning:**
The use of the first person varies from discipline to discipline and even within disciplines.

### 2. Writers used attitude markers to balance understatement with emphasis and enthusiasm

There are three categories of attitude markers: hedges, boosters, and affective markers.

**Hedges** are used for understatement, valuable for expressing a degree of caution and deference to others in the community.

**Boosters** express a measure of certainty and accentuate claims.

**Affective** markers express surprise, importance, obligation, agreement.

Some of the common attitude markers used in the sample were:

| | **Hedges** | **Boosters** | **Affective Markers** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Modal auxiliaries | *may, would, should* (probability)*, could* | *Will* | *must, should* (obligation) |
| Verbs | *seem, suggest, argue* | *demonstrate, show* | *have to, need to* |
| Modifiers | *usually, generally, often, perhaps, some, possible(ly)* | *particularly, clear(ly), of course* | *important, key, crucial, (not) surprising(ly)* |

We found that attitude markers were used in specific areas and for specific purposes.

- **Boosters** such as *will* conveyed certainty, confidence, and competence about methodology.

Examples:

"This study […] **will** involve a multi-phased methodology, employing qualitative and quantitative research methods. A participatory approach **will** be adopted. The research **will** involve […]. Data collection **will** include […].

- **Hedges** such as *may, suggest*, and *attempt(ing)* to indicated a degree of modesty and openness about how exactly the research would help to reveal unknown territory (the benefits of the research).

Example:

"Finally in study 5, I will test an intervention to specifically foster need support and emotional authenticity within couples, **attempting** to **demonstrate** the potential to produce improvements in relational quality and personal well-being." (Psychology)

- **Affective markers** such as *important* and *need to* established the importance or urgency of the research and/or research field.

Example:

> "This case study will provide an **important** opportunity to contribute to research and knowledge building in several areas of academic inquiry […]." (

### *3. Writers cite others and themselves, without offending other researchers, to build competence (see also section on Means and Negation).*

#### Citing others

Writers often build on rather than demolish other researchers.

Example

> The literature on international human rights distinguishes three 'generations' of rights […]. I avoid the use of the word "generations" because it implies that one type is being superseded by another.

#### Citing themselves

Proposal writers often cite their own previous research to enhance their own credibility. This credibility is accomplished by the citation of their research (past or ongoing) while making the connection between this research and their own competency clear.

Writers often understate the importance of their own research, as if it were a third person's, but are careful to make either explicit or implied claims for their own competency based on their research.

Example:

> "[a colleague] and I have recently written a paper that relaxes the assumption of constant returns to scale ... We are currently collaborating ... to add firm heterogeneity to the model and then we plan"

## II. The Grant Writing Process and Experience

This section summarizes what our seven successful grant writers told us about the process of writing grant proposals and offers their advice to future grant writers. We have also included comments from officers from the relevant offices of research.

The following themes emerged from our interviews.

### A. Proposals are inherently persuasive projects.

Although these writers describe research proposals differently, they agreed as to its **persuasive** intent.

> "In academic writing, you're quite happy if the reader goes, "Ahhh. How interesting." But here [in a grant proposal] you actually want your readers to go, "This is so good, necessary, we have to give this fellow or woman money." (Germanic and Slavic Studies)

> "I see it as an exercise in persuasion. You are trying to persuade a committee of your peers that you can deliver socially important or academically important research on some topic." (Economics)

> "[If] I'm implying that this is an entirely empty field to plow, then they're going to say, "He doesn't know what he's talking about," or, "He doesn't know his field." If I say it's already been done, then they say, "Then he doesn't need to do it again." So I'm very deliberately trying to identify the particular rows that I can hoe, to convince them that I should proceed." (History)

> " [My advice to grant writers is] to use this as an exercise to pull together where you want to take your research […] and really to push the ideas so you come up with a plan or a coherent story about what you want to bring together and then fill those things out. (Psychology)

## B. Grant writers developed expertise in proposal writing.

All of our participants had experience in grant writing prior to their successful grant applications although they had developed that experience in a variety of ways.

Several had submitted prior SSHRC applications and used reviewers' comments to revise their applications. Several had also already submitted successful applications.

Several had been SSHRC reviewers and so had seen both successful and unsuccessful grant applications.

Two of our participants had specific training in writing grant applications provided by their educational training and had also participated in "useful" mentoring programs in their own departments.

## C. Grant Writing is a Process

All participants agreed that writing grants was time consuming although they disagreed as to the amount and duration of time.

> The offices of research would like proposals to be drafted several months ahead of their due dates and then circulated for revision and comments.

Several participants saw grant writing as a natural extension of their regular academic work. Several said that an effective proposal requires a great deal of background work and emerges from the trajectory of one's research. As one writer explained:

> "I'm not sure how long it takes to write a proposal. If it is about your research, then, you know, it is directly or indirectly tied to all the hours you put into your research. Lots of hours. I don't think you should be trying to write a proposal in just a week. You should be thinking about your research often and the proposal should be the natural outcome of your research."

And another said:

> "So writing a proposal for SSHRC is to imagine three or four years of scholarly activity and really it's like being married to something; you sleep with it, you wake up with it. So that's what I am doing when I'm designing a proposal for SSHRC or for the other granting agencies."

Several participants circulated their drafts to external readers—usually colleagues with expertise in their fields. But the experienced SSHRC grant receivers usually did not although earlier in their careers they had solicited feedback on their proposals.

Several participants mentioned that they were part of research teams who jointly developed grant applications and that they found this experience useful.

All mentioned that they had revised their proposals numerous times and had built in enough time for the revision process.

## D. Style and Voice

Our participants told us that proposals had to be "crisp and precise" and "confident but not overly confident."

In the opening sections of this document – organizational strategies and writing strategies-- we operationalize what this advice means.

In essence, proposals writers need to tell a coherent story (the characteristic moves of the proposal genre) and develop an objective and yet engaged tone.

## E. Claiming Social Relevance

All participants stated that claiming social relevance for their projects was an important part of their proposal. As one participant noted,

> "given SSHRC's mandate, if you're interested in research that isn't necessarily relevant at this time to the broader society, then you should be applying somewhere else."

One explained how she built social relevance into her proposal:

> "You can make explicit …claims to social relevance through illustrative examples that demonstrate where there is a shortcoming perhaps in current practice…you can build those linkages in that fashion through concrete examples. I think that helps in a way tie your research, tie your theory…into practice."

## In Conclusion

We would like to thank the anonymous participants in our pilot study. They shared their proposals, time and thoughts with us.

This material was produced by Dr. Catherine Schryer and the graduate students of English 780 (August 2005)

Jennifer Chen, Cara DeHaan, Ryan Devitt, Jessica Fuchs, Elizabeth Rogers, Jeffery Stacey and Kate Wringe