Science Societies

How to Prepare Applications for Awards/Scholarships as a Student

By Gurleen Kaur, University of Florida; and Erick Begitschke, University of Georgia

April 1, 2023

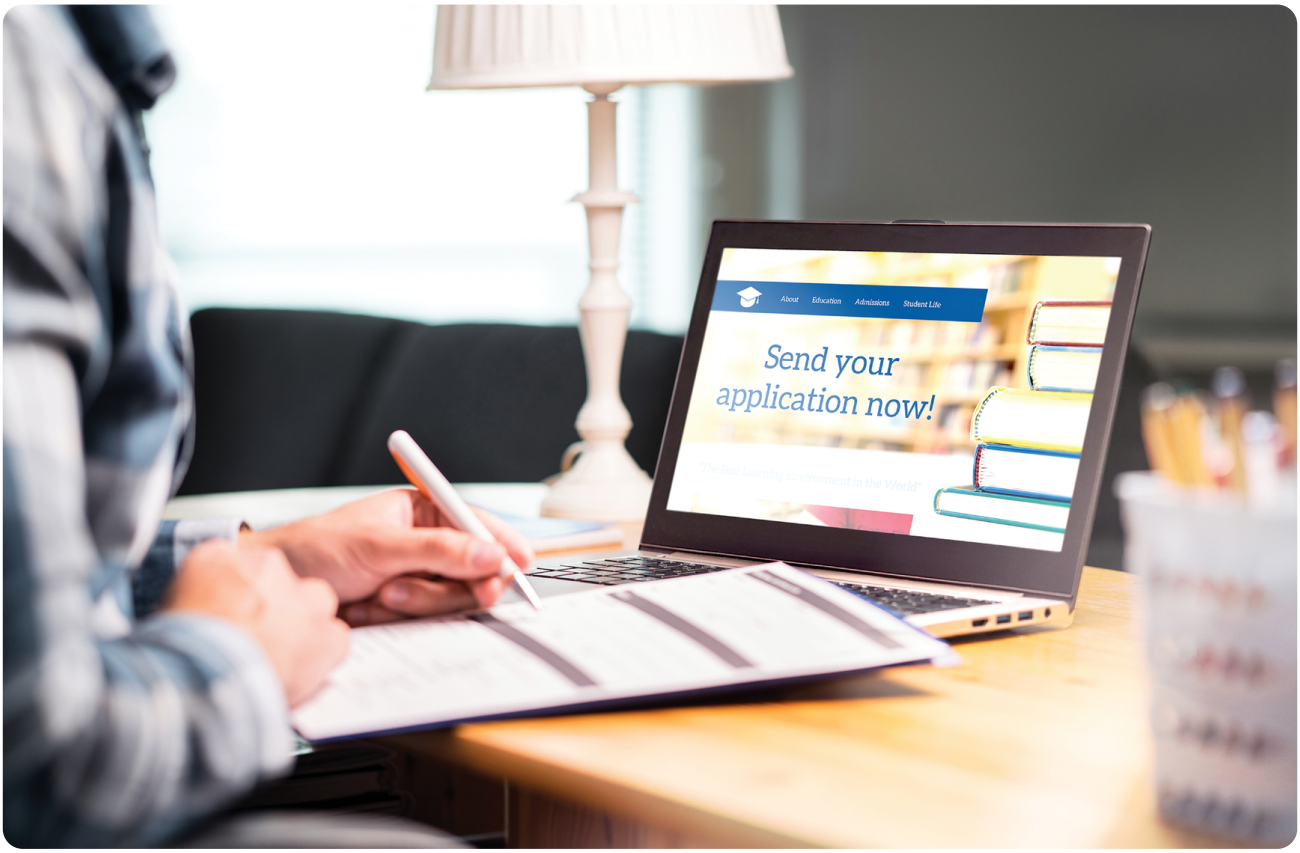


Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/terovesalainen.

There are several opportunities for awards and scholarships during graduate school. These opportunities can come from both private and public organizations. Scholarships can be based on merit, career stage, and diversity. They are awarded to students with proven academic credentials or for working on a specific research topic and promoting diversity in the academic environment. The process of applying for a scholarship or an award will involve you presenting your unique story and experiences. Because most of these scholarships are highly competitive and the process is tedious, students often feel intimidated or discouraged and end up not applying at all.

In this article, we will provide some tips on preparing applications and show how you can earn a scholarship by putting serious effort into them.

Quick Tips

1. **Be passionate and confident**. Being passionate and confident in what you do stands out in a scholarship application. Despite your background or stage of your academic career, selection committees like to see that you are passionate about what you do and are likely to succeed.
2. **Build a professional network of contacts**. Building a professional network of contacts can lead to identifying key opportunities for scholarships/awards and future jobs. Having connections in the industry willing to recommend you to others is critical and goes a long way in the application process.
3. **Communicate effectively and professionally**. It is crucial to communicate effectively with the selection committee throughout the application process. Getting your questions answered and creating a professional rapport with the

selection committee can make you stand out among other applicants.

4. **Know your strengths**. Knowing your strengths and using them effectively is critical when applying for scholarships/awards. It will help identify which scholarships to target and assist in the application process by focusing on what separates you from other applicants.
5. **Stay organized**. Staying organized will help the application process and allow everything to be submitted on time. Not only will this allow for all deadlines to be met, but it will also reduce the stress of undergoing the application process.

Identify the Opportunities

The application process for prestigious scholarships and awards can be daunting and overwhelming for graduate students. However, the first step towards landing a scholarship or an award is to familiarize yourself with several types of opportunities available. Ask your adviser, other faculties, fellow graduate students, or industry connections to look for a potential opportunity. Be proactive in seeking out suitable scholarship opportunities.

Developing a professional network by utilizing your brand and presence plays a significant role in identifying scholarships (Kaur et al., 2023). Sometimes, these scholarships and awards are also advertised by the department, school, and professional organization. It would be beneficial to become a member of these organizations and sign up to be included on their listservs. Do not be shy about contacting the scholarship or award providers. Pay attention to small awards; sometimes, students think it will only be beneficial if they land prestigious awards. Earning small awards add up. After identifying the scholarships that you are eligible for,

read the application description carefully, make note of the deadline, and start planning. A winning strategy requires preparation and organization.

Plan Ahead of Time

Once you have narrowed the list to key scholarships/awards available, it is crucial to begin developing a timeline to complete the application process. Many scholarships/awards have strict deadlines to submit the required documents to receive full consideration for the award. Due to the nature of many scholarships/awards requiring a quick turnaround in the application process, it is imperative to have as many commonly required documents as readily available as possible. For example, most scholarships/awards require a resume/curriculum vitae (CV) and transcripts. It is often easiest to maintain an up-to-date resume/CV throughout your academic career as opposed to trying to create one when applying for scholarships/awards (Boyle & Russell, 2020). Additionally, you can often submit an official or unofficial transcript during a scholarship/award application. Since unofficial transcripts are often free and relatively easy to access, it is recommended to keep an updated unofficial transcript readily available. Remember that if the selection committee requires an official transcript, it often takes several days/weeks to obtain, so be sure to plan accordingly.

While it is imperative to keep as many commonly required documents as readily available as possible, other required documents will take additional time and planning to include with your application packet. For example, many scholarships/awards require submitting an essay or writing sample. In most cases, the scholarship/award will give specific instructions for the essay (topic, length, or style). The essay can be the section of the application packet that most separates you from the other

applicants, so be sure to allocate enough time to write a good essay.

Additionally, most scholarship/award applications require several letters of recommendation from supervisors or colleagues written on your behalf. Having some key individuals in mind willing to write you a letter of recommendation beforehand is advised to ensure the letters are submitted on time. When asking for a letter of recommendation, give your supervisors or colleagues at least several weeks before the application deadline and include your resume/CV and any other relevant information to assist them in writing the letter. Try not to ask the same person for a recommendation letter. You can also ask someone who might be especially relevant to the topic of the scholarship or award (a committee member might be a better fit than your adviser in certain instances).

With many highly competitive scholarships/awards, staying organized during the application process can be the difference between receiving a scholarship/award or not, so be sure to mark your calendars and stick to the plan!

Focus on Your Strengths

Many scholarships/awards can be highly competitive with many qualified applicants. Therefore, finding ways to make yourself noticeable by adding personal stories will increase your chances of being considered for selection. When applying for scholarships/awards, it is crucial to highlight your unique experiences and attributes whenever possible in the application packet to stand out among the other applicants. These unique experiences include academic honors, volunteerism, organization and association involvement, or past athletic accomplishments. In many cases, selection committees search for well-rounded individuals passionate about their studies and activities. However, be mindful to structure your application around the overall theme

of the scholarship/award and the sponsoring organization. For example, highlighting your volunteerism can be beneficial if a non-profit, volunteer-based organization sponsors the scholarship/award.

There are several ways to highlight your unique story throughout the application. Re-structure your resume/CV or include documentation of certificates in your application packet that is especially relevant to the topic of the scholarship/award. The essay or writing sample is often the most valuable tool to express individuality. Even if it is not explicitly required as part of the scholarship/award application, including a well-written essay highlighting your key characteristics can provide some additional merit to your application. Focusing on your strengths and individuality can set you apart when applying for scholarships/awards.

Pay Attention to the Details

Be diligent and pay attention to the details. There are different requirements for scholarship or award applications. Take your time in writing any required document. Ask your adviser or someone else to review your materials. Make sure you have proofread all the required documents. Sometimes typos and missing materials can be a significant criterion of difference between winning or losing a scholarship. A few applications are very quick and easy to apply while others may take a little more time. You can also connect with past recipients of the scholarship or award you are applying for (consider using LinkedIn or your professional network to help if you don't know anyone). Do not ask past recipients for their application materials; instead ask how they prepared their application, about any specific questions you are having difficulty with, and for any suggestions they have. Remember to save a copy of your application materials so that you do not have to start from scratch each time.

Remember to write a thank you letter if you get a scholarship or an award. Sometimes, writing a thank you letter is required to receive and accept a scholarship offer. So, take your time and write a genuine letter. Letting donors know their support makes a difference in a student's life encourages them to continue supporting the scholarship programs.

Connect With Us

This article is brought to you by the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA (ACS) Graduate Student Committee. If you would like to give us feedback on our work or want to volunteer to join the committee to help plan any of the mentioned activities, please reach out to Maria Teresa (mariateresa.tancredi@uga.edu), the 2023 chair of the committee.

If you would like to stay up to date with the committee, learn more about our work, contribute to one of our *CSA News* magazine articles, or suggest activities you would like us to promote, watch your emails, connect with us on Twitter (@ACSGradStudents) and Facebook (ACS.gradstudents), or visit ASA: agronomy.org/membership/committees/view/ACS238/members/ CSSA: crops.org/membership/committees/view/ACS238/members/ SSSA: soils.org/membership/committees/view/ACS238/members/

References

Boyle, P., & Russell, T. (2020). Building a C.V. during grad school. *CSA News magazine*, 65, 28–31. https://doi.org/10.1002/csan.20224

Kaur, G., Griffith, K., Bradley, E.A., & Krupek, F.S. (2023). Why should you think of career networking during graduate school? CSA News magazine, 68, 40–43.

https://doi.org/10.1002/csan.20976

Text © . The authors. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Except where otherwise noted, images are subject to copyright. Any reuse without express permission from the copyright owner is prohibited.