

To Apply or Not to Apply?

How to Make Applying for Scholarships a Successful Experience

By Christopher Beausoleil



Applying for scholarships brings different experiences for everyone. When I look back, I remember all the stressful nights where my mom and I were working on the final touches before we sent applications out either by internet or by mail. But I also know that it was time well-spent, as I have earned \$71,000 in scholarships, which definitely will help finance my university education.

From my experiences applying for 20 or more scholarships/bursaries/awards, I have quite a few tips for anyone interested in the process.

First and foremost, prior to applying for anything, be realistic in what you can apply for. I cannot stress enough that you don't need to have a super high average to apply; being an honour student with an average of 80% or higher is usually required, but not always. What you do need is a well-rounded background in volunteer involvement in your school and in your community. To top that off, it is wise to have a focus to show that you are trying to make a difference in the world for a specific reason. From the age of ten, I have been promoting the importance of an active lifestyle for people with CF, and I have always stressed that in my applications.

Next you need to look for scholarships or financial assistance at the start of your high school graduating year or even earlier, like during the summer before your final high school year. Some applications are due in October! Find out what scholarships and bursaries you are eligible for, and make a list month by month in order of the application due dates. Be careful to note whether the date is the postmark date or the date the application must reach the office. Phone or e-mail to get that information if it is not clear on the form. I always made it a point to Express Post my applications, so that I could track when they were received.

There is a difference between scholarships and bursaries. Bursaries have an element of financial need, which is a hard and fast rule. Eligibility is based not only on your circumstances, but also your family circumstances, no

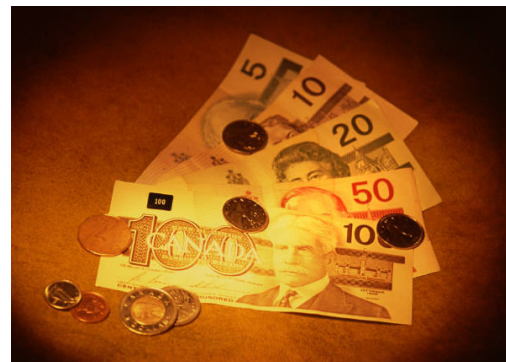
matter if you will be paying for your education or not. I applied for a bursary from one organization for which I have done a good deal of fairly high-profile volunteer work, yet to my surprise did not receive the bursary. From that I learned how stringent the "financial need" rule is.

Once you have chosen which awards you will apply for, begin your applications early and take your time to complete portions that require research on your involvements, such as from your "school days" book, photo albums, parents, medals, certificates, etc. Make an impressive "resume" style page or pages which may be sent with some applications; you will definitely use all of this information in some form for all applications. Include everything, no matter how small. It all adds up. Make sure to keep this up to date.

You can also prepare your essay answers in advance. Do this in a word processing program, so you can copy them to the application form at a later date. If you start early, you are able to revise and add more to each application. Many forms have similar questions, but are different enough that you need to combine and revise your answers from one to another. Each form has "number of words" requirements. I always started these by writing my entire answer, and then editing it over and over until it fit the number of words. This can come in handy for big scholarships such as those given by the Canadian Merit Scholarship Foundation (90% required), Millennium Scholarship Foundation, TD Canada Trust and the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award Program.

There are many places in which you can find scholarships, bursaries and financial assistance. Web sites, such as www.studentawards.com, www.aucc.ca, and searching on Google.com are a few good places to start. Don't forget to go through what your college or university has to offer.

Many organizations that you are involved with as well as places of employment have scholarship programs. Your local





newspaper often will announce local programs. With StudentAwards.com, all you do is sign up and it shows all the scholarships that you can apply for in the upcoming year. Make sure you read the descriptions of each one because there will be some on your personal list that you actually won't be eligible for. Also, keep checking throughout the year as new scholarships are added as the year progresses.

Students with cystic fibrosis are also eligible for scholarships/bursaries for people with disabilities. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (www.aucc.ca) has two, and in Ontario there is the Aird Scholarship for People with Disabilities. For these, you need to get a form filled out by your doctor. Of course, it's best to get your CF doctor to fill it out. Your doctor may ask you first for some information. Ask your doctor to answer some of the questions to reflect how you stand out from other applicants.

This brings me to the fact that most applications require either reference letters or referee forms to be filled out. Try to choose people as references that represent different facets of your life. Allow at least one month between asking someone to be a reference and your mailing date! Some letters/forms can be emailed to you, some can be mailed directly to the scholarship foundation, but many need to be mailed as part of your application package, so you need to allow enough time for your referees to mail them to you (often required to be in sealed envelopes) so you can mail them out with your package on time!

You can now see that with all these scholarships you will have many hours of frustration if you wait until the last minute. In addition you may be working on two or three at the same time - the due dates seem to be clustered. So, if you follow a plan, allow yourself plenty of time, start early and work on each over a couple of weeks for an hour or two a day, by the end you should feel that you have done a much better job and you will

be much more relaxed.

For the major scholarships, the finalists are granted an interview from which the recipients are chosen. Some are in person, and you have to travel to them. I had to travel four hours to Toronto for three of these interviews. Others are phone interviews, of which I had two. About two months after the applications are sent in the finalists are chosen and are notified that they have made it into the interview level. At this point you may be interviewed in front of a panel of three to eight different judges – former recipients, Olympians, authors, doctors, business executives, etc. Of course, the more judges, the more intimidating it can be as they are all taking notes, and asking questions. So a word of advice - be prepared. You need to practice hard for the interview, and do your research. This is one time you are expected to promote yourself and to show focus as you promote your cause. It is not the time to be shy or humble.

The most important thing to remember in the whole process is that you have to use your time wisely. Manage your time so you have enough of it to finish each scholarship/bursary application you wish to apply for.

Applying for scholarships can be very stressful and frustrating, but in the end the rewards can be great. Think of it as a part-time job. For me, it has been the best paying part-time job I have ever had! Perseverance really does pay off!

