



# A Step-by-Step Guide for Finding and Applying to Scholarships

*Written and compiled by JW and Janet MacDonald*

Finding and applying for scholarships can be a daunting process. So if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed right now, please know that this is normal!

Given the intimidating nature of scholarships, it can be tempting to procrastinate, but we don't recommend it. Procrastination will only lead to more stress, missed opportunities, and likely a worse scholarship application due to the rushed nature of your essays. However, if enough time is set aside, applying to many scholarships can be a manageable, and even exciting process.

In this guide, we'll share the process JW used to apply to most scholarships, along with how long it took her, on average, to complete each step of the process. This information will give you an idea of what to expect with your own scholarship journey. Alongside these estimates, JW shares some tips that helped her with the process.

## Disclaimer

While JW has tried to generalize her experience, every scholarship will differ, and each one will take varying amounts of time to complete. While she has included fair estimates of how much time each step of the application process took her, it could take more or less time depending on your circumstances.

You may also find the tips provided unhelpful in your application process. What worked for JW may not work for you, and you may find a better way.

Lastly, these tips are for scholarships whose applications are essay-based. Some scholarships may require a video or creative piece, which will likely take a different amount of time, and perhaps a different strategy altogether.

## **The Steps to Finding and Applying to Scholarships**

The first step is generalized to every scholarship, but every step after that you'll have to repeat for each scholarship. Time commitments are approximate.

### **Step 1: Finding Scholarships**

**Time commitment:** 20-40 minutes every two weeks

The first step in applying for scholarships is finding scholarships that you are eligible for and which appeal to you or are a good fit.

There are many sites out there that have available scholarships, including scholarship search engines like [ScholarshipsCanada.com](http://ScholarshipsCanada.com), and [StudentAwards.com](http://StudentAwards.com). This is a great place to start. The best way to use these scholarship search engines is to create a profile on each one. The search engine will then start to match you with scholarships that fit your profile. Please note that these search engines are not perfect and they will match you with awards that you're not eligible for or that you're not interested in applying for. You will need time to sift through the results and save the ones that look promising.

Other places to find scholarships:

- a) **The websites of the universities you're applying to.** Make sure to check early in the fall, as scholarship deadlines are sometimes **earlier** than admission deadlines.
- b) **Your school counselling website.** Some scholarships, especially local ones, may come directly here. Also many schools and school districts have their own awards.
- c) **[Your affiliations](#),** or organizations you're connected to in some way. These are some of the most promising of all because they sometimes have a small/restricted applicant pool.

*JW PRO TIP: When searching for scholarships, it is important to read the requirements to ensure you are eligible for it and that it is tenable at a university you are interested in attending. Make sure you read the requirements carefully so you don't waste time working on a scholarship you don't qualify for or can't use.*

### Save to a spreadsheet

Once you have a few scholarships you have screened, save them on a spreadsheet that contains some key information about them, including a direct link to the award, what universities the scholarship is tenable for, the scholarship due date, and if references are required. [Here is a spreadsheet](#) you can use for this purpose.

Staying organized is KEY to a successful scholarship process!

### Search regularly

Check for scholarships regularly through the year. Scholarships are not posted all at once, and looking for them every two weeks allows you to find ones whose application periods are over different dates. We suggest you put a reminder in your schedule to look every 2-3 weeks.

As you find scholarships, add them to your spreadsheet. You may want to list them according to the deadline with the earliest deadline first.

## **Step 2: Ask for references, if required**

**Time commitment:** 15-25 minutes

Some scholarships, especially larger scholarships such as the TD Scholarships for Community Leadership, the Schulich Leaders scholarships, and the Loran Award, will require one or more references.

We recommend asking for references as soon as you decide to apply for a scholarship or when applications for that scholarship open.

Many referees will require at least two weeks, possibly longer, to write a reference letter.. They often will not be able to help you if you ask them too close to the deadline. Moreover, many of the people we know who have been references say they write better references when they are given ample time. So it's in your best interest to ask well in advance.

**JW PRO TIP:** *I find that asking for references motivates me to ensure I finish and submit a scholarship application. When someone completes a reference for an application I am working on, I now feel I should submit the application to respect the time my references put into creating their letters.*

While the time estimate on this task is 15-25 minutes, this step of the scholarship application process could take longer if you need to update or create a resumé or an activities list. A resumé or activities list helps your potential reference know more about your activities and strengths.

**Here is a guide on [How to Get a Great Reference](#).** It will tell you who to ask, how to ask, and when to ask. It also provides you with an email template to ask for the reference.

## **Step 3: Research the scholarships you're interested in applying to**

**Time commitment:** Up to one hour each

Many scholarships, especially larger ones, have dedicated websites where information can be found not only about the application process, but also about what type of applicants the scholarship funder is looking for.

If this kind of website isn't available, you can often glean more about the scholarship funder from their "About Us" page. Pay close attention to the organization's mission and/or values. They tell you what is important to the organization, and you can use this information to inform what you focus on in your application, especially in the essay. For example, if giving back to the community is important to them, it would likely be smart for you to discuss in your essay how you give back to your community and why it's important to you.

**JW PRO TIP:** *I found it useful to go through the pages on the scholarship/funder’s website and write down key insights about the scholarship or funder, such as the values or traits the scholarship is built upon. I also find doing a quick Google search on the scholarship to be useful, as you can often find resources related to the scholarship. For example, when I searched for the Schulich Leaders scholarship online, I found a useful webinar on applying to the scholarship which I could take notes on.*

Sometimes the funder has profiles of previous winners on their website. You can read these and look for the kinds of values, skills, and characteristics they highlight to get an idea of the “typical” profile of a winner for this award. You might wish to highlight some of the same qualities in your applications.

**JW PRO TIP:** *This research step usually won’t take more than an hour unless you find a resource or video which is longer. If you are in a rush and want to watch a video related to the scholarship, playing the video at 1.5 times speed will often allow you to still write down relevant information but will save you time.*

#### **Step 4: Brainstorming ideas for essays**

**Time commitment:** 10 minutes total per essay

Before you start writing an essay, it’s helpful to brainstorm ideas for what you want to say. Here are some things to think about BEFORE you start writing:

- What kind of essay is it – self-reflective or success-oriented?
- Is it more about your contribution or your achievement?
- Based on your research of the funder, why do you think they are asking the question(s) they are asking? What do they want to know about you?

Based on your answers to the above questions, you can start to determine what activities, skills, and characteristics you should highlight for the essay(s).

Brainstorming doesn’t take long but it’s important. We suggest brainstorming with someone else who knows you well, such as a family member or close friend. They can often help you develop your ideas, and may suggest things you haven’t thought of.

When you have brainstormed an idea for an essay that you are confident in, write it down, so you do not forget it later.

## Step 5: Writing the essays

**Time commitment:** 30 minutes per 100 words

Writing the essays, particularly the first drafts, can often be the most challenging part of a scholarship application.

***JW PRO TIP:** When I sat down to write many of my scholarship essays, I would find it hard to get started, because I was worried what I would write wouldn't be any good. To overcome this fear, I would write out whatever idea I had for the essay, not worrying about wording phrases the correct way or going over the word count.*

A great technique for essay writing is the S.T.A.R. method. The S.T.A.R. method is not new and Janet didn't make it up; it's been around for a while, and many students find it helps them to get beyond the blank page.

S.T.A.R. is an acronym for Situation, Task, Action, and Result. You can use this as a framework to organize your essays. I have created a chart with further instruction on using the S.T.A.R. method, and provided a handy chart to get you started.

Here is a link to get the S.T.A.R. Chart for essay writing:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1bq2HXUX2vng4H-BSHbb91YebAeL8ndwB/view?usp=sharing>

***JW PRO TIP:** When I try to start writing my essays, I often find it easy to procrastinate. To combat this, I employ techniques such as putting my phone in a different room or rewarding myself after I finish an essay draft with something I enjoy.*

Edit your essay so it's at or below the required word count. The last edit of the first draft should be to remove grammar errors.

***JW PRO TIP:** After writing the first draft, I find it helps to take some time away from the essay, preferably at least a day if I have the time to do that. If I'm able to take this time, I find myself coming back to my essays with "fresh eyes" and I'm much more motivated to edit them and find ways to improve them.*

## Step 6: Peer editing

**Time commitment:** 10 minutes per 100 words for the peer editor

It's definitely advisable to have someone with good writing ability to look over your essays (and any activity summaries that are short answer-type).

Another person can often give you new ideas on how to word your ideas or organize your essay. The person who looks over your essay could be anyone: a teacher, a family member, or a friend.

You might find it useful to have more than one person review your essays, as they can give you different perspectives on what wording and organizational techniques might be best.

It may be more effective to have someone who is closer to you and knows about the experiences you have written about in your essays, as they will know the context, and they can offer better suggestions.

***JW PRO TIP:*** *If possible, have your draft essay ready to be edited at least a few days ahead of the deadline, so the person who agrees to edit your essays has ample time. This demonstrates that you respect their time and will increase the likelihood of them editing another essay in the future.*

## **Step 7: Proofreading your essays**

**Time commitment:** 5-10 minutes per 100 words

The next step is to proofread your essays (and activities summaries, if applicable).

***JW PRO TIP:*** *My strategy for proofreading essays is to read through the essays once in my head and then use an online software like Grammarly to find other grammar errors and better ways of wording phrases. Finally, I will read my essays out loud to myself several times to fix grammar errors or phrase wording I do not like. Once I can read through an essay out loud and not find any errors I would like to fix, I consider that essay complete.*

## **Step 8: Entering information & ensuring you followed directions**

**Time commitment:** 20 minutes

Depending on the platform or submission format, you can normally copy and paste your essay (and any other applicable information) into the scholarship application. Make sure to read through the information online and ensure it's in the right format and reads correctly.

While the primary content of your scholarship applications will be the essays and activity summaries, there may be other information to enter, such as demographic information.

***JW PRO TIP:*** *This step typically doesn't take very long but it's important to complete this well before the deadline, so you are not scrambling at the last minute. Stressful!*

Ensure that you follow all directions. This step can be tedious, but it's important. You can be disqualified if you don't follow all directions properly. This happens a lot more than you think! Don't waste all of your hard work by being disqualified.

## **Step 9: Submission**

**Time commitment:** 5-10 minutes

It's finally time to submit the scholarship application. Hit that submit button!

***JW PRO TIP:** I recommend submitting your application at least an hour before the deadline, and a day ahead of the deadline if possible...in case the site crashes!*

## **Step 10: Celebrate!**

Finding scholarships and writing scholarship applications can be a lot of work. Plus, it's a lot of work that comes at a time when you're already busy with school and applying for university. It can cause stress, and sometimes a bit of friction in families. This is normal.

It's for these reasons that it's important to do something to acknowledge your hard work with a small reward. It could be watching a movie with a friend, baking cookies, or anything that relaxes you and gives you a break from thinking about scholarships.

This small reward is helpful because it provides the mental and physical break you need, and helps to motivate you to tackle the next scholarship application.

For what it's worth, they usually get easier and much faster after the first one!

## **Conclusion**

***JW:** Those are the steps I followed for the vast majority of my scholarship applications. While the scholarship process can be tiring, it was a very rewarding experience for me; I found out more about myself and my motives to contribute to the community.*

*Best of luck with your scholarship applications!*