

SSHRC Doctoral Awards: Rejection, Revision, and Resubmission

On May 8, 2026, UAlberta PhD students were invited to a “Second Chance” Workshop designed for those who had recently received disappointing news from SSHRC. The event created space for students to find community, better understand the adjudication process, and think practically about how to revise and resubmit future applications.

Hosted by Dr. Jared Wesley (Arts Associate Dean, Graduate Studies), the workshop featured two morning panels: one with SSHRC doctoral award adjudicators focused on what distinguishes successful from unsuccessful applications, and a second with professors and academic leaders focused on resilience, rejection, and scholarly identity. An afternoon session allowed students to receive real-time, group feedback from faculty members and peers on their draft proposals

Adjudicators Panel	Revisions Panel	Feedback Panel
Dr. Ann McDougall Dr. Stefano Muneroni Dr. Gillian Robinson Dr. Mark Simpson	Dr. Ava Becker Dr. Liz Halpenny	Dr. Eddy Kent Dr. Mojtaba Mahdavi

Overall, participants heard that rejection is common, even among highly successful scholars. Everyone was reminded that an unsuccessful application is not a verdict on the applicant’s worth, intelligence, or future in academia. Nor is it always a definitive judgment on the quality of the research. Funding competitions involve limited resources, disciplinary conventions, reviewer expectations, institutional processes, and sometimes simple bad luck. The purpose of the workshop was therefore twofold: to demystify the “hidden curriculum” of SSHRC applications, and to help students turn disappointment into a concrete plan for revision.

Practical tip: Do not treat the result as the final verdict on your project. Treat it as data: something happened in the review process that your next draft needs to anticipate more effectively.

The following sections outline ten (10) key themes students should consider as they prepare to revise and resubmit their SSHRC CGRS-D applications.

1. Successful SSHRC applications make the project clear immediately

The adjudicator panel emphasized that a strong SSHRC doctoral application usually announces its purpose, significance, and direction very early. Panelists returned repeatedly to the importance of the opening paragraph. A strong opening does not simply introduce a topic; it catches the reader's attention, explains what the project is about, and makes clear why the work matters.

Students were encouraged to think in terms of three questions: **What? So what? Now what?** In other words, what is the project, why should anyone care, and what will the applicant actually do?

Practical tip: In the first paragraph, answer three questions clearly: ***What are you studying? Why does it matter? What will you do?*** If the reader has to hunt for those answers, the proposal is already working too hard against itself.

The panel stressed that SSHRC applications are often read by people outside the applicant's immediate field. A proposal may begin with departmental or disciplinary review, but it eventually moves into broader adjudication contexts where readers may not share the applicant's specialized knowledge. For that reason, applicants should not write only for their supervisors, their subfield, or themselves. They must write for an intelligent general academic reader who may be reviewing many files under time pressure.

A recurring image was that of a tired adjudicator reading dozens of applications, perhaps on a plane or late at night. The advice was not to pander or oversimplify, but to respect the reader's time. Students should not make adjudicators work too hard to discover the project's basic purpose. The strongest applications give readers confidence early: this applicant knows what they are doing, knows why it matters, and can explain it clearly.

2. Weak applications often assume too much

The most common weaknesses identified by adjudicators were not necessarily weak ideas. Often, unsuccessful applications had promising projects but simply failed to communicate them effectively. Some delayed too long before explaining the actual research question. Others became bogged down in detail before establishing the larger story. Some assumed the reader already understood the field, the stakes, the terminology, or the importance of the archive, community, case, author, or method being studied.

Panelists advised students to be especially careful with jargon. Technical concepts are sometimes necessary, and applicants should not strip their proposals of disciplinary substance. But when specialized terms are required, they need to be explained succinctly. The goal is not to make every proposal generic; the goal is to make specialized work legible to readers who may not share the applicant's background.

Practical tip: Do not ask, “Will people in my field understand this?” Ask, “Will a thoughtful scholar outside my field understand why this matters?”

One practical suggestion was to give the proposal to someone outside the field and ask them not merely, “Does this make sense?” but rather, “***Tell me what I am doing.***” If the reader’s summary does not match the intended project, that is useful evidence. It may mean the proposal is clear to the author but not yet clear to its audience.

Practical tip: Give your draft to a non-specialist and ask them to summarize your project back to you in three sentences. Their answer will tell you where your proposal is clear and where it is not.

3. Significance should be compelling but not overstated

The discussion repeatedly returned to the question of significance. Applicants need to explain why their research matters, but they should avoid inflated or implausible claims. For some projects, significance may be linked to public policy, community impact, education, reconciliation, democratic life, or other broadly recognizable concerns. For others, especially highly specialized humanities projects, significance may lie in changing a field, reframing a debate, expanding an archive, or making a neglected case visible.

Students were encouraged to distinguish between showing that a project is ***necessary*** and claiming that it is ***sufficient***. A doctoral project does not need to promise to solve a major social problem by itself. It does need to show how the proposed work contributes to a larger scholarly or public conversation. In this sense, niche projects can be highly significant when they are framed as case studies or interventions in broader debates.

Practical tip: Avoid saying, “This project will solve...” Try: “This project is a necessary step toward understanding...” That framing is usually more credible and more persuasive.

The panel also discussed how to handle politically charged topics. The advice was not to strive for false neutrality, but to ground the proposal in concepts, evidence, and clear research design. Applicants should avoid framing their work as a simple denunciation of one side or actor. Instead, they should show that the project applies an analytic lens consistently and fairly, and that it can advance knowledge even when the topic itself is politically sensitive.

4. Feasibility matters as much as originality

Panelists noted that ambitious proposals can be exciting, but they must be accompanied by a credible plan. Adjudicators look for evidence that the applicant can actually carry out the project. This includes a clear research question, appropriate methods, access to necessary materials or participants, relevant language or technical skills, and a realistic sense of scope.

A strong application therefore ***balances originality with feasibility***. The applicant should show what is new, important, or timely about the project, while also demonstrating that the work can be completed within the context of doctoral training.

Applicants should also be attentive to scope. A project can be ambitious without being sprawling. In fact, a well-bounded project often appears stronger because the applicant seems more in control of the material. The strongest applications persuade adjudicators that the student has identified a meaningful problem and designed a project that can actually be completed.

5. The applicant's record is part of the argument

The applicant's CV and record of achievement were discussed as important but not separate from the proposal. The record helps adjudicators assess whether the applicant is prepared to carry out the work. Publications matter, but they are not the only form of evidence. Presentations, conference submissions, community engagement, research assistantships, awards, relevant training, and other scholarly activity can all help demonstrate momentum and fit.

Panelists noted that expectations change depending on where a student is in the program. An applicant further along in doctoral studies will be expected to show more evidence of scholarly development than an applicant at an earlier stage. Students revising for the next competition were encouraged to strengthen the CV where possible, even in modest ways: submit to a conference, present work in progress, pursue relevant training, or document ongoing dissemination activity.

Practical tip: Between now and the next competition, look for small, concrete ways to strengthen your record: a conference proposal, a departmental presentation, a methods workshop, a community-facing activity, or a submitted article.

Reference letters were also identified as crucial. Students should give referees the proposal well in advance and, where appropriate, help them understand what the application is trying to demonstrate. Strong letters can affirm the significance of the project, explain the applicant's preparation, and help generalist adjudicators understand why the work matters.

Practical tip: Do not send referees only a deadline. Send them the proposal, your CV, the award criteria, and two or three points you hope their letter can reinforce.

6. Revision should begin with genre and criteria

For students preparing to resubmit, the adjudicator panel recommended starting with SSHRC's own categories and assessment criteria. The application is a genre of writing, and successful proposals often make it easy for adjudicators to see how the file meets the criteria. Students were encouraged to map their proposal against the categories (e.g., by using the same headings) before worrying about the final two-page constraint. One approach is to write out, in plain language, what must be said under each criterion, then refine and compress from there.

Practical tip: Before editing for length, write a rough criteria map or outline. Under each SSHRC criterion, jot down the evidence your application gives the reader.

Another theme was what one panelist described as a kind of “*modest self-promotion*.” Applicants need to make a confident case for themselves without overstating their accomplishments. A useful framing question is: What would a fair and supportive mentor say about why I am well positioned to do this work? This can help students who are uncomfortable self-promoting, while also tempering language that might sound inflated.

Students were also encouraged to ask supervisors and mentors for specific feedback. Rather than asking, “What do you think?” they might ask, “What is one thing I can do to improve this opening?” or “Where does the significance become unclear?” Specific questions generate more useful revision advice.

Practical tip: Replace “Can you give me feedback?” with a sharper question: “Where do you lose the thread?” “Is the significance clear by the end of paragraph one?” “Does the method sound feasible?” “What is one thing I should cut?”

7. Rejection is emotional, and that should be acknowledged

The second panel shifted from adjudication to resilience. Faculty members spoke candidly about their own experiences with rejection from granting bodies, journals, institutions, and job competitions. (For more on this theme, see the [Failing Forward: Dealing with Rejection in Academic Life](#) report from the Faculty of Arts.) The discussion normalized the emotional impact of rejection. It is reasonable to feel disappointment, anger, embarrassment, grief, or confusion after receiving bad news.

One practical takeaway was that students do not have to open results immediately if doing so would derail the rest of the day. Some panelists described waiting until they had time and space to process the outcome. Others emphasized identifying the core concern underneath the emotional response. Is the main issue financial insecurity? A perceived critique of the method? Fear about one's academic future? Once the main concern is identified, it becomes easier to decide what action is needed.

Practical tip: When results arrive, give yourself permission to pause. You do not have to process the decision, interpret it, revise your future, and comfort/congratulate everyone else in the same hour.

Panelists also encouraged students to separate the outcome from the self. A rejected proposal is not the same as a rejected person. It may mean the proposal needs work, that the fit was imperfect, that the competition was especially strong, or that the application did not communicate its strengths effectively enough. It does not mean the student does not belong.

Practical tip: Say this plainly: “The application was not funded *this time*.” Not: “I failed.” Not: “They rejected me.” The wording matters because it protects the distance between the outcome and your identity. It is also part of a growth mindset.

8. Resubmission can make the work stronger

Rejection can be painful, but it can also expose places where the argument, framing, methods, or audience-awareness need sharpening. Panelists encouraged students to celebrate submission itself as a milestone: once an application is submitted, part of the process is outside the applicant’s control. When feedback comes back, the task is to decide what can be learned from it.

Students were cautioned not to overinterpret every comment. Sometimes feedback is meaningful and should be taken seriously. Sometimes it reflects a reviewer’s limited perspective, disciplinary assumptions, mood, workload, or misunderstanding. The challenge is to look for patterns, identify actionable critiques, and avoid letting one comment define the project.

Practical tip: Read feedback twice: once emotionally, once analytically. The first reading is for reaction. The second is for sorting comments into three categories: useful, unclear, and probably not worth overinterpreting.

Several panelists encouraged students to keep multiple “lines in the water.” Applying for more than one opportunity, developing collaborations, presenting at conferences, and building broader scholarly networks can reduce the emotional weight placed on any single competition. Diversifying opportunities does not eliminate disappointment, but it can help students maintain momentum.

Practical tip: Do not make one competition carry your whole sense of progress. Build a wider net for success: conferences, publications, internal awards, assistantships, collaborations, and public scholarship.

9. Community matters after rejection

The workshop also highlighted the social side of funding results. SSHRC outcomes are often experienced collectively within departments or cohorts. Some students receive good news while others receive bad news, and that can be difficult for everyone to navigate. Panelists encouraged sensitivity around public congratulations and internal communications, noting that well-intentioned celebrations can unintentionally intensify the disappointment of those who were not successful.

At the same time, the panel emphasized that community can help. Students benefit from peers who understand the process, read each other's drafts, share experiences, and make space for both celebration and disappointment. One of the workshop's implicit messages was that rejection should not be endured alone. A "second chance" is not only an individual revision strategy; it is also a collective practice of supporting one another through the ordinary setbacks of academic life.

Practical tip: Find two or three peers who will read drafts, share deadlines, normalize disappointment, and celebrate effort, not only outcomes. Submitting an application or journal article is, in itself, reason to be proud.

10. AI is now part of the writing conversation

The second panel included an extended discussion of generative AI in grant writing. Faculty views varied, but there was broad agreement that AI tools are now part of the academic landscape and that students need to discuss their use with supervisors. The discussion emphasized transparency, disciplinary expectations, and the importance of preserving the student's own thinking and voice.

Some panelists argued that students may be at a disadvantage if they do not learn to use AI tools thoughtfully to improve clarity, identify redundancy, or test whether a proposal addresses the award criteria. Others cautioned that overreliance on AI can produce hollow writing, obscure the applicant's actual ideas, or contribute to deskilling. The consensus advice was not simply "use AI" or "do not use AI," but rather: use tools in ways that support learning, keep records of how they were used, be transparent where required, and make sure the final proposal still demonstrates the applicant's own capacity to think, write, and carry out the project.

Practical tip: Use AI, where appropriate, as a reader or coach, not as the author. Ask it where the proposal is unclear, where it sounds repetitive, or how well it addresses the criteria. Then do the thinking and rewriting yourself.

Students were also reminded that writing is not simply a delivery mechanism for ideas. Writing is part of thinking. Whether written by AI or not, a polished proposal that lacks intellectual depth will not persuade adjudicators. Conversely, a proposal with strong ideas but unclear writing may

not allow adjudicators to see its value. The goal is to produce work that is clear, credible, and recognizably the student's own.

Practical tip: Students are reminded to consult [University policies and guidelines](#) for best and promising practices for using generative AI, and that they should consult their supervisor early and often when considering the use of artificial intelligence in their research.

Key takeaways for students

Above all, the workshop reframed SSHRC rejection as a difficult but common part of academic development. Students left with the message that an unsuccessful result is not the end of the project, nor is it a judgment on their future. It is an opportunity to revise the application, clarify the contribution, strengthen the record, and re-enter the competition with a stronger, more audience-aware proposal.