

## Original Article

### Lessons Learned through Failure



**Olivia Maynard** @OliviaMaynard17 · Sep 8

So happy to have been awarded an @ESRC New Investigator Grant looking at what makes good tobacco health warnings for adults & adolescents

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This is how I chose to tell my colleagues on Twitter that I'd been awarded a prestigious [ESRC New Investigator Grant](#). People congratulated me and 'liked' my post – it looked like a fantastic success story. However, I'm sure there were many (particularly other early career researchers) who read my post in dismay - I certainly remember the feeling of personal failure when others had posted something similar in the past. So, I quickly decided to follow up my initial post to show that every success story has a (often long) back story...



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Replying to @OliviaMaynard17 @ESRC

...and for those of you writing fellowships, remember, if at first you don't succeed, try and try and try and try again! [#negativecv](#)

- 2017 ESRC New Investigators Award
- ~~2015 ESRC Future Research Leaders Fellowship~~
- ~~2014 Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Fellowship~~
- ~~2013 ESRC Future Research Leaders Fellowship~~
- ~~2013 MRC Fellowship~~

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I think it's important that we share both our [triumphs and our disasters](#). Not only are there valuable lessons to be learnt through failure, but it's important to remember that failure is an enduring feature of academic life, whether it's a grant, paper or job rejection, an experiment that didn't work out as you'd hoped, or a bad meeting with a supervisor.

So, this blog isn't about my successful grant (although [you can read more about the work I'll be doing if you're interested](#)). Instead, it's about what I've learnt from writing 4 unsuccessful fellowship applications...and 1 successful one.

## **Rejection 1 - MRC Fellowship 2013**

### **Lesson learned – Start early**

I've never understood why so many grant deadlines are just after Christmas. It's as if funding bodies want you to spend the entire festive season crying into a tray of mince pies.

Even without your social life getting in the way, there's a lot to do when writing a grant writing. If you've ever written a grant or even looked at an application form, you'll know just how many sections you need to complete. Not only that, but you'll need to run it all by your mentors, collaborators, heads of department and your finance team.

Looking back at my first rejected fellowship, I was surprised to realise I'd only started writing it 2 to 3 months before the deadline. Given that I had no idea what I was doing, or what I had to write, I'm impressed that I managed to get anything submitted at all.

For my most recent application, not only did I have 4 previous applications to work from, but I started working on it 6 months before the deadline. This allowed me to work through any bumps in the road, both [Known Unknowns](#) (e.g. collaborators taking weeks to get documents back, other projects taking priority) and Unknown Unknowns (e.g. having it torn to shreds by a senior colleague just a few weeks before it was due).

## **Rejection 2 - ESRC Future Researcher Leaders 2013**

### **Lesson learned: You need a killer idea and a killer squad**

It should go without saying, but you really do need a killer idea. I looked back at my first two fellowship applications, and they're all over the place. They're just a list of all the interesting (and unconnected) studies I wanted to run after finishing my PhD. The grant I've recently been awarded is much more coherent. Get thinking about what your idea is very early, talk it through with colleagues, present it at a lab meeting if you can. If other people aren't convinced, go back to the drawing board.

While the idea is obviously very important, the people you surround yourself with during the fellowship are also critical to success. Fellowships are about training and preparing you to become an independent researcher. You need to be thinking about working in different labs (if you can), making your research transdisciplinary (where appropriate) and creating opportunities for personal development and training.



*If you could assemble a fellowship squad which looked a bit like this, you could be in for a good chance of success.*

### **Rejection 3: Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Fellowship 2014**

#### **Lesson learned: Work out what the funders want**

There's certainly an art to grant writing. One of the best things I did to understand this art was to attend a 'mock panel'. Mock panels give researchers an excellent opportunity to gain insight into the mysteries of what happens after you press 'submit'. Being familiar with this process has given me a much better understanding of what reviewers and panel members are looking for when reading grants and choosing which to fund.

Have a look to see whether your university is hosting any mock panel events. If not, see whether you can get your hands on a successful application from your university R&D team. I found these invaluable when trying to work out what goes in each section and since being awarded my grant, have paid back the generosity of the researchers who shared their applications with me, by sharing my application with my R&D team.

### **Rejection 4: ESRC Future Research Leaders 2015**

#### **Lesson learned: You need to be resilient**

By my fourth rejection, you can imagine I was starting to get a bit despondent. Imposter syndrome was kicking in and I started to wonder whether there was any point in submitting any more applications. I was advised to take a look at the stats on the success rates for the grants I was applying for, and I quickly found out that my success rate is about the norm. The ESRC Future Research Leaders Fellowship had 11%, 20% and 14% success rates between 2015 and 2017 respectively. Only the grants scoring somewhere between 'excellent' and 'outstanding' were getting a look in.

Once you've accepted that the most likely outcome is failure, it's quite liberating. And when the failure does come, as it will do regularly throughout your academic career, you need to work how to deal with it. One of my less effective strategies includes watching the music video for Taylor Swift's [Shake it Off](#) on repeat for hours while drinking gin. A better long-term strategy is to learn to become more resilient.



*If you can, 'shake it off'*

While resilience is seen by some as a trait (I have been described as 'wildly optimistic' by a colleague) it can also be learned. Resilience includes talking to your colleagues about your failures *and* successes (I really like the idea of [negative CVs](#)) and getting yourself a good mentor. It means learning from your failures, having a positive view of your own abilities, realising that *everyone* suffers from imposter syndrome and yes, it means being optimistic. Resilience is also about keeping things in perspective and remembering that your PhD or job isn't everything and ultimately, taking care of yourself.

Statistically, fellowships are hard to come by. However, with some perseverance, the right idea, a fantastic support network and a healthy dose of optimism, you may be in for a good chance of success.

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