

Scholarship Essay Tips

Do's and Don'ts

DO: Follow the prompt and other instructions exactly. You might write a great essay but it may get your application rejected if you don't follow the word count guidelines or other formatting requirements.

DON'T: Open your essay with a quote. This is a well-worn strategy that is mostly used ineffectively. Instead of using someone else's words, use your own.

DON'T: Use perfunctory sentences such as, "In this essay, I will..."

DO: Be clear and concise. Make sure each paragraph discusses only one central thought or argument.

DON'T: Use words from a thesaurus that are new to you. You may end up using the word incorrectly and that will make your writing awkward. Keep it simple and straightforward. The point of the essay is to tell your story, not to demonstrate how many words you know.

DO: Research the organization and make sure you understand their mission and values and incorporate them into your essay.

DO: Focus on your strengths and turn in any problems or weaknesses into a success story.

DO: Use actual, detailed examples from your own life to backup your claims and arguments as to why you should receive the scholarship.

DO: Proofread several times before finally submitting your essay.

DON'T: Rehash what is already stated on your resume. Choose additional, unique stories to tell sell yourself to the scholarship committee.

DON'T: Simply state that you need the money. Even if you have severe financial need, it won't help to simply ask for the money and it may come off as tacky.

DO: Tell a story. Discuss your personal history and why those experiences have led you to apply for these scholarships.

DO: Write an outline. If you've already started writing or have a first draft, make an outline based on what you've written so far. This will help you see whether your paragraphs flow and connect with one another.

DON'T: Write a generic essay for every application. Adapt your personal statement for each individual scholarship application.

DO: Run spellcheck and grammar check on your computer but also do your own personal check. Spellcheck isn't perfect and you shouldn't rely on technology to make your essay perfect.

General Guidelines

Unless specified otherwise, scholarship essays should always use the following formatting:

- Double spaced
- Times New Roman font
- 12 point font
- One-inch top, bottom, and side margins

Other useful tips to keep in mind include:

- Read the instructions thoroughly and make sure you completely understand them before you start writing.
- Think about what you are going to write and organize your thoughts into an outline.
- Write your essay by elaborating on each point you included in your outline.
- Use clear, concise, and simple language throughout your essay.
- When you are finished, read the question again and then read your essay to make sure that the essay addresses every point.

Eight Steps Toward a Better Scholarship Essay

Writing a scholarship essay can be very difficult – especially if you want to do it well. Your essay will need to wow the reader, and speak directly to the goals of that organization, as well as the objectives of that award. If done properly, you will very rarely be able to submit the same application to multiple awards – it is not a one-size-fits-all; most essays will need to be tweaked or completely altered to show the reader that you are deserving of the award above and beyond any of the other participant who also applied.

Misconception: No one actually reads your scholarship essay! – Wrong!

Fact: Your essay is the key to your scholarship application. It is an opportunity to demonstrate to the selection committee that you are a well-rounded individual, that you are more than your GPA, that you are a strong writer, and it gives you a chance to talk about your experiences and qualifications in greater detail than what appears on your [resume](#) or transcripts.

- Step 1: Read the Essay Prompt Thoroughly
- Step 2: Make a List of Important Points and Keywords to Include
- Step 3: Write an Outline or a Rough Draft
- Step 4: Write a Strong Statement that Summarizes Your Points
- Step 5: Fill in the Missing Parts
- Step 6: Rewrite, Revise, Rewrite
- Step 7: Have someone else read your essay
- Step 8: Refine the Final Draft

Step 1: Read the Essay Prompt Thoroughly

Many schools and other organizations that give out scholarships will give you a "prompt" or a question which the essay is supposed to address. Read the question or prompt carefully and try to "read between the lines."

For example, the prompt you are to answer might be, "Describe a book that made a lasting impression on you and your life and why?" Ask yourself, "Are they really interested in my literary preferences or is there something more to this question?" More than likely, they want to get a better idea of who you are—not only what types of books you like but also what motivates you and what sorts of stories or topics interest you. They may also be interested in getting a sense for how promising a student you are based on the type of book you choose and what you have to say about it.

Instead of being given a prompt, you might be asked to write an essay on the topic of your choosing. Although challenging, this is also an opportunity to demonstrate your creativity. Finally, if anything about the directions aren't clear, don't be afraid to contact someone at the funding organization and ask for clarification.

Tip: Always keep in mind that any scholarship essay question, no matter the topic, should demonstrate your interests, your background, and most importantly, highlight the experiences you've had that fit with the goals and mission of the funding organization.

Step 2: Make a List of Important Points and Keywords to Include

Regardless of the essay prompt, you will want to make sure to include the important and relevant information about your experiences and background that makes you an ideal candidate for the scholarship award. To complete this step, it can be helpful to first research the organization to which you're applying and try to find their mission statement on their website. Circle a few key words from the mission statement and make sure to include those buzzwords in your essay.

Scholarship committees are not only looking for good students, they are often looking for a person that fits their organizational goals. You should gather your other application materials such as transcripts and resumes so you can review your qualifications as well as make note of what is missing in these materials that needs to be included in the essay.

For example, if you're applying for a general academic scholarship, you might want to talk about a specific class you took that really piqued your interest or inspired your current academic and career goals. The committee will see the list of the classes that you took on your transcript but they won't know how a particular class inspired you unless you tell them. The essay is the best place to do this. Your list of important points to make might also include:

- Any academic awards or other honors you've won.
- Any AP or college-level courses you took in high school.
- Any outside courses, internships, or other academic experiences that won't necessarily appear on your transcript.
- Why your experience and the mission of the funding organization match.

- What you plan to major in during college and how you think that major will be useful to your future career goals.
- Any special training or knowledge you have, or a project you completed in school or as an extracurricular activity.
- An example of how you overcame a challenge.
- Your financial circumstances that makes it necessary for you to finance your studies through scholarship money.
- The challenge now is to integrate those points that you want the committee to know with an essay that answers the prompt. You can see our example scholarship essays to get a better idea of how to do this.

Step 3: Write an Outline or a Rough Draft

Not everyone likes to make an outline before they begin writing, but in this case it can be very helpful. You can start with your list of important points to begin writing the outline. For many, telling a story is the easiest and most effective way to write a scholarship essay. You can tell the story of how you found your favorite book, and how it has changed and inspired you. Start with large headings in your outline that describes the basic storyline. For example:

1. High school composition teacher recommended book
2. Read it over one weekend
3. Made me see the world around me differently
4. Inspired me to pursue a career in social justice

Now you can start filling in the subheadings with points from your previous list:

1. High school composition teacher recommended book
 - a. Favorite class in high school
 - b. Class opened my eyes to new ways of thinking
 - c. Teacher noticed my enthusiasm- recommended outside reading
2. Read it over one weekend
 - a. Was the first time I was so drawn in by a book, I read it very quickly
 - b. I realized my academic potential beyond getting good grades
3. Made me see the world around me differently
 - a. Started to look for jobs in social justice
 - b. Interned for a summer at a law firm doing pro bono work for the poor
 - c. This was a big challenge because I realized you can't help everyone and resources are limited
 - d. Overcame this challenge by knowing that small change can be big, and working hard in a field you are passionate about will inspire you everyday
4. Inspired me to pursue a career in social justice
 - a. The book is a constant source of inspiration and will keep me motivated as I pursue my career
 - b. The book will always remind me how people with limited financial resources can still make a huge difference in the lives of others

Step 4: Write a Strong Statement that Summarizes Your Points

You will want to include one strong thesis statement that summarizes all the major points you will make in your essay. It is often easy to start writing with this simple statement. Your essay doesn't have to

begin or end with the thesis statement, but it should appear somewhere in order to tie all the individual sections together.

For example, your thesis statement might be, "You will find that various experiences from both my academic career and my personal life align very well with your organization's mission: shaping community leaders who are working towards a more just and sustainable world." Starting with this sentence can help you organize your thoughts and main points, and provide you with a direction for your essay. When you've finished your essay, be sure to reflect back on your thesis statement and ask yourself, "Does this essay further explain and support my thesis statement?"

Step 5: Fill in the Missing Parts

Now that you have a thesis statement, an outline, and a list of important points to include, you can begin to fill in the missing parts of your story. The first sentence is particularly important: it should capture the attention of the reader, and motivate him or her to continue reading. We recommend starting your story by painting a vivid picture of an experience about which you will be talking in the essay.

For example: "It is 6 am on a hot day in July, I've already showered and I'm eating breakfast. My classmates are all sleeping in and the sun has yet to awaken, but I'm ready to seize the day, as I couldn't imagine spending my summer any other way but interning at a local law firm that specializes in representing the poor. I work a typical 8-5 day during my summer vacation and nothing has made me happier. But I wouldn't be here if it weren't for one particularly savvy teacher and a little book she gave me to read outside of class."

Step 6: Rewrite, Revise, Rewrite

A good writer rewrites and revises his or her work many, many times. After getting a first draft on paper, take a day or two away from the essay and then come back to it with fresh eyes. Make appropriate edits for content, and pay attention to proper spelling and grammar. If need be, you might want to write an entirely new draft and then integrate the best of both into a final draft. Writing a new draft can inspire you to think of new ideas or a better way to tell your story. Some other tips to think about as you rewrite and revise:

- Make sure it sounds like your voice. You want the scholarship committee to feel like they are getting to know you. If you don't sound authentic, the committee will know. It is better to be yourself than to say what you think the committee wants to hear.
- Strike a balance between modesty and arrogance. You should be proud of your accomplishments, but you don't want to sound arrogant. Don't exaggerate a story; instead be clear about what you did and the impact it had and let that speak for itself.
- Check to make sure you are answering the prompt and fulfilling all other requirements of the essay as directed by the committee, such as font preference and word count limits.
- Don't just list your accomplishments; describe them in detail and also tell the reader how you felt during these experiences.
- A scholarship essay is not a dissertation. You don't need to impress the committee with big words, especially if you're not completely clear if you're using them correctly. Simplicity and clarity should be the goals.

- Make sure your essay will be read from the beginning to the end. Committee members won't dedicate much time to reading the essay, so you need to make sure they are given motivation to read the entire thing. If you are telling a story, don't reveal the end of the story until the end.
- Check to make sure the buzzwords from the mission statement appear. It is easy to forget the scholarship committee's goals as you write. Return to their mission statement and look for spots to place keywords from the statement. Be sure, however, that you're not copying the mission statement word-for-word.

Step 7: Have someone else read your essay

Ideally, you could give your essay to a teacher or college admissions counselor who is familiar with scholarship essays and the college admission process. If such a person is not available, virtually anyone with good reading and writing skills can help make your essay better. When your editor is done reading and you've looked over his or her notes, be sure to ask the following questions:

- Was the story interesting and did it hold your attention?
- Were there any parts that were confusing?
- Did you find any spelling or grammar errors?
- Does the essay sound like my voice?
- Does the essay respond appropriately to the prompt?
- Is there anything you would have done differently or something you thought was missing?

After having an editor (or two or three) look over your draft, it is time again to revise and rewrite.

Step 8: Refine the Final Draft

Once you feel satisfied with the draft, review it one more time and pay particular attention to structure, spelling, grammar, and whether you fulfilled all the required points dictated by the committee. If you are over the required word count, you will need to make edits so that you are within the limit. If you are significantly under the word count, consider adding a supporting paragraph.