

COMPLETE SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY GUIDE

TIPS TO HELP YOU WRITE A WINNING ESSAY



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Introduction

As each new school year approaches, high school and college students across the country attempt to win scholarships to help cover college costs. An important step in many scholarship applications is the scholarship essay.

Writing a scholarship essay can feel overwhelming, especially with so much money on the line. However, with the right strategy, you can be on your way to convincing the selection committee that you are the right person to win the scholarship.

Your essay is a chance for you to show how you stand out, even if your GPA wasn't that great. You can showcase your unique capabilities and share your story. By the end, you may even realize you enjoy writing about yourself.

Scholarships are a significant part of free financial aid and a great way to finish college with less student debt. According to Sallie Mae and the 2021 How America Pays for College report, 16% of college fees during the 2020-2021 school year were paid using scholarships.

You want to access as much free scholarship money as you can. This guide will give you some scholarship essay tips that you can use to get ahead of the competition.

The Essay Prompt

The essay prompt is the topic of your essay. If you ignore the prompt and any other directions, your essay is not going to be effective – no matter how well it is written. Some prompts will be more specific than others. However, there will usually be some flexibility on what you can write about. Read the prompt multiple times to make sure you fully understand what it is asking.

When choosing your specific topic, write about something you enjoy. This could be a subject, significant events, or value that means a lot to you. When you care about what you're writing, it will be more compelling and authentic. Authenticity goes a long way in improving a personal

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Make sure your essay does not deviate from the prompt. The scholarship committee is looking for responses that they can compare against each other. If your topic veers off topic, this could easily get you disqualified.

Planning Your Essay

A scholarship essay is not something you want to rush. If you are applying for multiple scholarships, create a schedule for yourself so you can keep track of deadlines. You should plan for at least 2 weeks to write your essay. This should give you enough time to write your first draft and do multiple revisions.

Once you understand the essay prompt, you can start generating ideas. Write down some general topics and let them marinate in your brain for a few days. See which topic you are more drawn towards.

Another thing to consider when planning for your essay, is how long it must be. Most scholarship applications will give you a word or character limit. For example, it might ask for a 500-word essay. Try to stick as closely as you can to that limit. Anything that is too far above or below that limit, might get you disqualified for not following directions.

If you aren't sure what 500 words looks like, that is typically two double-spaced typed pages. Most word processing programs, like Microsoft Word and Google Docs, include word and character counts. Look back at previous essays you have written to see how long they were. This will give you a general idea of how long it might take you to write your scholarship essay.

Who Is Your Audience?

You are writing your scholarship essay for the selection committee. To familiarize yourself with your audience, do as much research as you can on the history of the scholarship, its purpose, and even past winners. Sometimes you can read excerpts of the essays from previous winners.

From there, you can customize your content to better fit what you imagine is the ideal candidate. However, be careful that you don't lose your personality or sacrifice your unique perspective to fit into a box. Focus on the criteria of the scholarship and the essay prompt and incorporate relevant information from your life.

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Brainstorming Techniques

When driving to a new destination, do you jump in your car and go without getting directions? No. You plan ahead or at least plug the address into Google Maps, so you know where you're going. You need to do the same thing with your scholarship essay. You need a roadmap of where your essay is going. The best way to get there is by brainstorming.

Here are some common brainstorming strategies that can help you get started with your essay.

What Is Brainstorming?

Brainstorming is the process of generating ideas. It lets you think freely about a topic and doesn't have any limitations.

How to Brainstorm

When you brainstorm, no idea is off limits. Record every idea that pops in your head – make connections, draw pictures, just start writing.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a good way to get words down on the page. Give yourself a set time limit, for example, 10 minutes. Start writing (or typing) using complete sentences and paragraphs and do not stop until your time is up. Don't worry about spelling or grammar and write down every idea that comes to mind.

If you cannot think of specific ideas, keep your hands moving and write things like "Ideas are coming. Ideas are coming," over and over until real ideas do come.

Idea Mapping

Another brainstorming tool is idea mapping. This lets you create a visual representation of your ideas and can be good for people who are more visual learners. Write down ideas you want to cover on various parts of a page. Draw lines between ideas that are similar. You can also add keywords and colors.

Clustering

Clustering is similar to idea mapping. You start with your central theme in the middle and add related topics around it. Use lines, arrows, and colors to connect ideas to each other.

How to Structure Your Essay (Mechanics)

Once you have a solid idea for your topic and have gone through a productive brainstorming session, it is time to make an outline. This will help you create an organized structure for your essay. Organize your ideas into sections. Include an introduction, various body topics, and a conclusion.

Create your outline using sentences, short phrases, or even just words – whatever you prefer. Make sure your ideas flow logically from one idea to the next. Continue to add more details for each point. If you have a well-developed outline, it will be much easier to write your essay.

What to Include (and Not to Include)

To create a powerful, convincing scholarship essay, you should appeal to pathos, ethos, and logos. These are Greek words that stand for rhetorical strategies of appealing to emotion (pathos), authority (ethos), and logic (logos).

- **Pathos:** Use honest, real emotions from your life to connect to the topic. You can also use creativity and your imagination to “paint a picture” of events.
- **Ethos:** Ethos is how you establish your authority or credibility on a subject. For example, if the topic is minimum wage laws, talk about any job experience you may have had.
- **Logos:** Apply logical principles to your argument. This could mean you add valuable statistics that apply to your topic.

The ideal essay will usually include all three strategies. Honesty is also one of the most important factors in a good scholarship essay

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There are also things you should not include in your essay. Avoid using cliches like starting with an inspirational quote, writing a sob story, or simply stating you volunteered at a soup kitchen (or other organization) once. You should also avoid topics that come off as pessimistic or negative.

The Hook

You want to grab your reader's attention right from the start with a compelling hook. This is the first 1-2 sentences of your introduction. It should "hook" your reader into wanting more like a shiny lure for a fish. Your hook could include a dramatic statistic, a humorous quip, or a rhetorical question. Here are a few examples of strong opening hooks:

- April 5, 2019 was the day I discovered my true purpose in life.
- Social media is a drug that many teenagers are addicted to.
- When I was little, my grandpa would always joke that I was going to be a meter maid. Now, I'm pursuing my dream of joining the criminal justice system.
- What would you change in your life if you had God-like powers for a day?

Hooks like this make the reader want to keep reading to learn more about what you have to say. Compare these two examples:

- I went on a road trip in 2010 with my grandparents.
- In 2010, I took a cross-country road trip with my grandparents – it forever changed my life.

Both examples cover the same topic, but the second sentence is more compelling.

Tell Your Story (Not Your Life)

It can be tempting to talk about numerous significant events in your life that have turned you into the person you are today. However, the person reading your essay does not need or want to read your life story. Focus instead on central details that apply to the essay prompt.

For example, if you're writing about the day your brother was born, only include details that apply to that event. Focus on your love of nature and don't include details about other hobbies.

Revising and Editing

Once you complete your first draft, you probably feel relieved that you are finally finished. However, before you click submit, you need to go back and revise and edit your essay. This is an important step that you do not want to skip. Use as many resources as you can to create a scholarship-winning essay.

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To get a fresh perspective on your essay, you need to wait a day or at least a few hours before proofreading. It can also be beneficial to read it out loud. This will help you catch simple mistakes and awkward transitions.

You should also ask other people to read your essay. This could be a friend, family member, or a teacher. They will have a different perspective on your writing and will be able to find information that might be confusing or unclear.

There might also be writing programs you can take advantage of through a local library, high school, or college. These programs are usually free and can be a great way to get higher-level feedback on your writing.

You can also use online resources that can help you improve your writing.

- **Grammarly:** Grammarly is a popular site that can check your grammar, spelling, and punctuation for free. It also catches misused words and can give you an idea of how your writing sounds. All these features are available for free.
- **Scribens:** This is another free site that lets you check for grammar and other common writing mistakes. After pasting in your text, it will highlight errors with various colors, so you know what you need to fix.
- **Hemmingway App:** With the Hemmingway App, you can check for complex sentences, passive voice, or sentences that are difficult to read.

Scholarship Essay Do's and Don'ts

Scholarship committees are looking for essays that stand out for good reasons. Here is a quick rundown of things you should absolutely do in your essay and things you should absolutely avoid.

Some Do's

Try to incorporate these strategies into your essay:

- **Be relatable:** Even if you think your experience is entirely unique, you need to find ways to relate to your reader. Do this by writing authentically, showing humility, or applying humor to your situation.
- **Show don't tell:** Your readers do not want a long, vague outline of what happened to you. Instead, help them visualize the situation with vivid descriptions. For example, don't just say high school was stressful. Instead, describe how you stayed up all night doing homework after working a shift at your part-time job, yet still graduated at the top of your class.

Some Do's (Cont'd)

- **Consider your audience:** You are writing your essay for a scholarship committee. Make sure you understand what they are looking for in an ideal candidate. Find ways to use your personal strengths to match their criteria
- **Hook the reader from the beginning:** Use a powerful, attention-grabbing opening statement to draw the reader in.
- **Follow the prompt:** Thoroughly read the directions and follow the specifics of the essay prompt. You can customize the prompt to fit your life, but do not go off topic. Be sure you pay attention to the length requirements.
- **Be honest:** The scholarship committee wants to know about you. Your life is interesting, and you have unique experiences. Do not make up details to “spice things up” or exaggerate details to make it sound more exciting. Stick with the truth.
- **Start your essay early:** Rushing through a scholarship essay is a good way to ensure you won't get the scholarship. Give yourself plenty of time for planning, writing, and editing. A two-week timeframe is a good place to start.
- **Consider what you want your readers to get from your essay:** The scholarship committee wants to know why you are the ideal candidate. Use your essay to prove that to them.
- **Discuss special circumstances that impacted you:** You have a unique story. Share any special circumstances or obstacles you overcame that demonstrate your perseverance and what you learned.

Some Don'ts

These are things you should avoid in your essay:

- **Regurgitate your resume:** The scholarship committee does not need to know about all your work experience. Focus on the prompt and only include applicable details.
- **Reuse old essays:** Do not reuse the same exact essay for every scholarship. However, you may be able to adjust an existing essay if it fits within the prompt criteria.
- **Use coarse language:** Do not use profanity or other coarse language in your essay. You might use these words in everyday conversations, but that is not how you want to present yourself as a scholarship candidate. Be creative and find alternative ways to convey your emotions.

Some Don't's (Cont'd)

- **Lack humility:** Yes, you want to talk about your achievements, but you do not want to come off as arrogant. In your essay, recognize the people or situations that helped you accomplish your goals.
- **Ignore the prompt:** Not following the directions is one of the quickest ways to remove yourself from consideration.
- **Ignore the word limit:** Writing an essay that is too short or too long is another way to disqualify yourself.
- **Tell your whole life story:** Your readers do not want to dig through every detail of your life. Narrow your story down to pertinent details and what you learned from those experiences.

Some students also ask:

How Long Should a Scholarship Essay Be?

The essay prompt will include all the directions on how long your essay should be. 200 and 500-word essays are common lengths. Make sure you pay attention to this information.

How Do I Start a Scholarship Essay?

Start your scholarship essay with a descriptive hook that draws your readers in. This will make them want to finish reading to find out more.

How Do I End a Scholarship Essay?

Your essay needs a conclusion. While you might not need a full paragraph, you at least need a concluding statement that ties everything together. Your conclusion should show why the rest of your essay mattered. Think of it as answering a "So what?" question.

How Do I Make My Scholarship Essay Stand Out?

Make your scholarship essay stand out by using unique details from your life and by being authentic. You can also take an alternative viewpoint for common questions. For example, if the prompt is, "Who has had the biggest impact on your life." Instead of choosing your mom or dad, talk about a literary character or maybe even an animal.

