

How to Write a Winning Scholarship Essay

You've spent who-knows-how-long finding scholarships. You've searched through books and the Internet, you've contacted local organizations and spoken to your counselors. You have a list of awards that are perfect for you. Now it's time to actually win the money. To do so, you will need to fill out applications and more likely than not, write an essay.

As with applying to college, the scholarship essay can either make or break your chances of winning. This guide outlines the steps you need to take to ensure that your essay gives you the best chance of winning. And winning the scholarship is, after all, what it's all about! Let's get started.

Make sure your essay fits the theme.

Let's say that you are applying for an award based on community service. In the application, you list all of the community service groups that you belong to and service project awards that you've won. But in the essay you vent about your disgust for the homeless and how they should find jobs instead of blocking your passage on sidewalks. Your essay may be brilliantly conceived and written, but if its message is not in line with the rest of your application, it will create a conflicting message and keep you out of the winners' bracket.

So how do you know what the theme of your essay should be? The answer is actually quite simple and goes back to why you decided to apply for the scholarship in the first place:

The theme of your essay is almost always determined by the purpose of the award or why the organization is giving away the money.

Once you know this, you can choose which aspect of your life to highlight in the essay.

Answer the underlying question.

Have you ever been asked one question but felt there was an underlying question that was really being asked? Maybe your mom asked you something like, "Tell me about your new friend Karen." But what she really was asking is, "Tell me about your new friend Karen. Are her 12 earrings and tattoo-laden arms a sign that you shouldn't be spending so much time with her?" In most cases, the essay question is just a springboard for you to answer the real question the scholarship judges want addressed. An organization giving an award for students who plan to study business might ask, "Why do you want to study business?" But the underlying question they are asking is, "Why do you want to study business, and why are you the best future business person we should gift with our hard-earned money?"

For every scholarship that you attempt to win, you will be competing with students who share similar backgrounds and goals. If you are applying to an award that supports students

who want to become doctors, you can bet that 99% of the students applying also want to become doctors. Therefore, the goal of every scholarship judge is to determine the best applicant out of a pool of applicants who at first glance look very similar. Use the essay question as a way to prove to the scholarship committee that you are the worthiest applicant for the award.

Share a slice of life.

As you are explaining why you deserve to win, it is important that you also reveal something about yourself. Obviously, in the short space of 500 to 1,000 words, you can't cover everything about you. This is why one of the most effective techniques is to share a "slice of your life." In other words, don't try to explain everything. Just focus on one aspect of your life. If you are writing about your involvement in an activity, it may be tempting to summarize your involvement over the years and list numerous accomplishments. However, this would sound more like a resume (which by the way you should include with every application) and it would not tell the judges anything new. However, if you focus on just one aspect of an experience, you could spend some time going below the surface and share something about who you are, which would be far more memorable. In other words, you would be sharing a slice of your life.

Most Students Don't Know How to Start the Essay...

Guess what? Getting started is sometimes the most difficult part of writing for professional writers as well. However, never starts writing without doing a couple of things first.

Understand the Purpose of the Writing and the Motivation of the Askers

Analyze the question or topic

Write down the essay question. How many parts does it have? Does the question suggest a structure or order, such as first describe your role in... then tell why it had the following effect... and what you learned from it....

Do you have to do research first or is this a question that is strictly about you that will come from an analysis of yourself?

Why have the judges asked this question or posed this topic? Recognizing that all essays are about you, how are the judges planning to get to know you through this essay?

Analyze the Organization

What is this scholarship about? Who founded it? What is the mission of the organization? Why are they providing scholarship money? Who are the judges? What special points of view do they bring to the judging?

How do you find out this information? Usually, you can find a great deal of background from the scholarship website or the printed material provided by the scholarship group. Dottie Theriaque

from the Community Foundation says that if you have a question about purpose or anything else, call and ask. Funders are eager to help applicants; that's what they are all about.

In a phone call with Josh Barsch , founder of the Dale Fridell scholarship, he was very clear in his explanation that his scholarship group does not believe that only valedictorians or super jocks or Ms. "I Belong to Every Club" should get help going to college. Josh notes that once you leave school, the only person who will care about your GPA is you. Your success will be based on what kind of person you are, how you approach challenges and what your work ethic values are. Your GPA may be some indicator of your potential, but you will have to figure out how to reach that potential and it's that process that will set you apart. That's why the Fridell scholarship doesn't request GPAs and SATs and club lists. Kind of levels the playing field, doesn't it? Plus, if you are the valedictorian or the super jock, the only message is that you are not solely defined by that honor or activity. You are much more and Josh's contest asks you to go beyond the usual high school achievement trappings and reveal more about yourself.

Create goals for the writing

For example, your goal in responding to an essay might be to:

- ✓ Demonstrate personal traits in myself that are similar to the personal traits of the person for whom the scholarship is named. (The Brower Youth Award is given in honor of David Brower, to "honor his lifetime of bold action, inspiring mentorship, and principled effectiveness which helped give birth to the modern environmental movement.")
- ✓ Use present tense and optimistic phrases to show that I am an active, vibrant, can-do person.
- ✓ Show how my strong family support contributes to my success.
- ✓ Emphasize my sense of balance in academics and family life.

Do these goals sound so generic that they could be written for any essay? That's not necessarily true. An essay for a scientific award may not want to portray a person as vibrant and can-do (and possibly lacking in the self-discipline necessary for rigorous scientific study) but instead as a diligent, highly curious person with a passion for understanding why things work and the patience to test all of the variables in order to come to a valid conclusion.

Depending on the award and the personal circumstances, a goal of the essay might be to demonstrate a commitment to succeed despite unstable family circumstances such as living in a variety of foster homes. Or, using a different approach, a conscious choice to forego balance between academics and family life to pursue a passion for learning about gene mapping in order to search for a cure for the multiple sclerosis that has made a family member an invalid.

Develop a Theme

Some may argue that you should develop a theme for your essay and then write goals. We believe that the opposite is true. When you read an essay question, it may be immediately apparent to you that the theme, or the message that you want to convey, has to do with your commitment to the healing profession as an extension of your desire to better people's circumstances. Wonderful! However, if the theme of your essay is not immediately clear, break down the work by establishing a set of goals based upon your understanding of the essay's intent, the mission of the funding organization, etc. These goals may lead you to one or more themes for your essay. In the set of goals above, the theme that may be emerging from the goals is an appreciation for the family or the team as a cornerstone to individual and group success. You can use your experience as a club leader in developing a team approach and your decision to ask members of your family to be on your college team to proofread, edit and search for opportunities as ways to show that you value working relationships and your leadership style will be successful in inspiring group success.

No matter which approach you take, goals first or theme development first, the important take-away is to establish a theme and goals and to be sure that the theme and goals relate you as a person to the subject you are writing about, even if the subject is a character in an Oscar Wilde novel or a pending piece of legislation.

Outline Your Response

Many people write by beginning anywhere with a free flow of ideas that they then mold into an appropriate order. Yes, that can work; you can occasionally start a project by writing down random thoughts. However, we recommend that you try very hard to approach your essay by writing an outline of what you want to say. The outline will assure that you have the right order and that you will cover all of the points you want to cover. Outlining does not necessarily mean that your essay goes into a required chronologic order, for instance. Some stories are best told by starting in the middle, then describing how you got there and how you are going to go forward. The outline will make it easier for you to move around the timing of various parts of the story to get the most dramatic effect.

There is a downside to the outline, we think. Sometimes it is difficult to make the transition from one section of the outline to the next, making the essay sound like explanatory words hung on a frame, very skeletal in effect. That's why later in this chapter, we will pay special attention to transitions so that your essay flows well.

It's Time to Write

Now it's time to fill in that outline and tell your story. We have chosen not to give you a lot of new rules and directions in this section because we want you to simply get the story out on paper. You already have the basics- a theme in mind, a set of goals to meet and an outline to work from. Do your best and we'll meet you in the next section to talk about it.

It's Time to Re-Write

Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo made dozens of sketches before embarking on their masterpieces. Read the biography of any writer and discover that everyone, yes everyone,

needs to re-write. You must do so because this is not an e-mail or a last minute book report, it's a ticket to money if you do it right.

Show, don't tell.

Go back through your essay. In every sentence where you have told the judges something, is there a way to show by example? Consider the following.

My family does not have a lot of money. I worked my way through high school at Wal-Mart.

This is a good piece of information to share. However, the message can be made more vivid by sharing more detail.

My family does not have a lot of money. I worked at the local Wal-Mart most evenings and did my homework on the bus ride home or after work.

Much better. Now the judges know that you were very busy and can feel the squeeze of needing to earn money and still get your school work done. One more time.

My family does not have a lot of money. We work together on a schedule so I can earn money for college and stay on top of my school work. Most weekdays after school, I attend one of my club meetings then catch the late bus home. I usually finish my math homework on the ride. I get home in time to grab supper ahead of time (Mom always has something ready on the stove) then work on other homework until Dad drives in at about 5:35pm. We pass each other in the driveway, transferring keys and information. ("I aced the math test"; "It needs gas on the way home".) The fifteen minute drive gets me to Wal-Mart in time to punch in for the 6pm to closing shift. On nights that the family needs the car, Dad drives me both ways. I'm home again by 9:30pm, in time to chat with my folks and watch thirty minutes of ESPN before going to bed.

Now this is a cool guy in a great family. Everybody participates, everybody cooperates. You can feel the close timing involved in making this situation work. You can hear the easy interaction of people who like each other. You know that this guy is not a robot because he needs a little human interaction plus a little TV before starting over. We like him, don't you? We'd like to help out this family; they deserve it. Bingo!

- Present Tense, if Possible

The present tense allows people to live the information with you. It's not always possible, but it's a great strategy when it can work. The above paragraph could have been written in past tense, e.g., "Dad drove me both ways." It's still a powerful sentence but it's already over. When Dad "drives", we're right there in the car.

- Kill the Adjectives and Adverbs

In his marvelous book about writing, *The First Five Pages*, by Noah Lukeman, he suggests that you go through your first page of writing (your whole essay, in this case) and circle every adjective and adverb. Then see if you can use a more descriptive noun or verb to make your

writing crisper. He uses examples like substituting "he was a tyrant" for "he was a brutal man" or "he was sprinting" for "he was running quickly". Try it. Your writing will be immediately refreshed by using fewer words to do the job efficiently.

- Make the Introduction Inviting

The introduction invites your reader to keep going. This is not the place to summarize – why read the rest if you get the picture in the first paragraph? Instead, tantalize and encourage the next step. How? Use emotion, raise a question, create surprise with a surprising fact.

Here is a possible opening for a discussion of a student's work with a literacy program.

I am a literacy volunteer. I did not decide to do this work because studies report that 21% of adults (over 40 million) in this country are functionally illiterate or because 43% of people with reading deficiencies live in poverty or even because 70% of people with reading deficiencies have no job or only a part time job. My reason for becoming a literacy volunteer was much simpler. My Dad couldn't read.

Okay, I'm hooked. I didn't really know how bad the literacy problem is but, even more, now I need to know if this person was able to teach her Dad to read and how this person, with an illiterate parent, made it to the point of applying for a scholarship and heading for college.

- Create Workable Transitions

Transitions are hard whether you are writing a speech, composing an essay or trying to get your little brother to go to bed. The trick is to show your reader where they are going next and why it's a logical next step. Try not to use standard transitional phrases like, "Secondly" or "As a consequence". Try repeating the prior thought and connecting to the next task. For example, "Once I learned how to scale rocks on the artificial rock face, I needed to try out my skills on a real mountain."

- A Compelling Conclusion

As in the introduction, don't summarize. Essays are too short to need a review at the conclusion. Instead, re-emphasize the main point or circle back to the beginning and tie the loop. Consider the literacy introduction. The body of the essay should have been about the student, her efforts as a volunteer, her feelings about the difficulties faced by those who can't read, her recognition of the gift that reading is and her decision to pursue a teaching career as a result of her experience. This story begs for a conclusion that answers the question, "Did her Dad learn to read?" Some possibilities.

Dad may never read Dostoyevsky but we are both thrilled that he can now read his sister's letters from his hometown in Romania and doesn't have to pretend to read the newspaper anymore.

Dad never did learn to read. But through his struggle, I learned that I want to give the gift of literacy to others, the gift that no one has been able to give to my Dad.

Very different endings but in each, we hear the effect that the experience has had on the writer. That's the point. We gained insight into this woman's life through her writing.

- **Take a Breather**

After you write and revise your essay, you need to take a break from it so that you can return with a fresh set of eyes. It's amazing how the sparkling prose you thought you wrote turns out to need a lot more work once you've gotten a little distance. Even more amazing is the realization that some of your writing is actually much better than you expected, now that you've followed some very standard writing rules.

- **Use Outside Readers**

Ask people to read your essay and help you with honest feedback. Ask them what they liked most and least. Ask if the essay is written in a logical fashion with reasoning that is supported by examples or other proof. Ask your readers to correct typos, grammar, etc. Every new pair of eyes helps.

- **I'm Not That Interesting!**

You don't need to have an illiterate father or wage a battle against cancer to write an interesting essay. The guy who is working at Wal-Mart probably feels that he doesn't have time to be interesting; he's too busy working! Everybody's life has interest and every essay topic can be made compelling by looking at how that topic affects the human condition and how you fit into it.

Writing Mistakes to Avoid:

Misspellings – Misspellings are the fastest way to ensure an essay is disqualified. When combing through a stack of essays, a judge will first rule out the essays with simple misspellings. Long story short: run a spell check and have someone else you trust look over it. It's always best to get a second set of eyes.

Incomplete sentences — Remember, each sentence should have a subject (someone or something) and a verb (action). Wondering if your sentence is complete? Here's a hint: A complete sentence tells a complete thought.

No capitalization – it's bad enough not to capitalize words at the beginning of a sentence, but at the beginning of a paragraph it stands out even more! Yikes!

Missing punctuation — In this example, the writer does not have proper command over the use of commas — namely they are missing in places they should have been added and added places they are not required.

Poor grammar and sentences that don't make sense— The essay writer uses poor word choices, improper grammar and mistakes such as having too many spaces between words. Another example of poor grammar is the confusion of grammatical persons — in the beginning of the essay the writer uses the first person plural (we) and toward the end, the writer uses the second person (you).

Run-on sentences— In this essay, one sentence has 72 words. As a rule, try to keep sentences no longer than 35 words each.

Avoid controversial topics and issues

Since you do not know the readers' personal beliefs and values, it is best to avoid controversial topics even though you may feel strongly about some of them. This avoids offending and alienating the readers.

Bad College Essay Topics

Don't go overboard with your freedom though. There are some essay topics you must avoid.

- Before and After

Talking about the changes you made is a good topic, especially if they have improved your character greatly. Yet again, don't go overboard. You will be making a grave mistake if you put unduly focus on the 'past' you.

Comparing your current self to the person that you were before is okay. But there is no need to give too graphic a detail about what a terrible person you used to be. You will only be leaving bad images to the readers and will be making a negative impression to their subconscious.

- Wisecracks

This is yet another way of overdoing certain techniques when writing an essay, especially in a person's attempt to appear unique. Do not overdo your attempts at being witty. Be natural. It should come along. So stop trying to make an essay written from your dog's perspective. Really, a wisecrack is the last thing your tired admissions officers need.

- Inappropriate Subjects

Avoid writing about your last successful chase against some hot chick. Yes, it is an engaging topic and it shows how persistent you can be but you are practically writing to a college. You will be painting a picture of you being shallow and immature. This is basically the last thing that you want to happen.

- Slapstick Comedy

Being funny can be a great part of your personality and showing that side of you can be good for your essay. But then again, don't overdo it and use it appropriately. If anything, avoid slapstick comedy. They will only present you as someone who is superficial and insensitive.

Go for good, smart humor. The keyword is wit. That is-humor coupled with intelligence. Also, good humor leaves people feeling good. There is some element of warmth to it.

- Sportscast

When asked to talk about current events, avoid talking about the last season of the Major League Baseball. The game may have been hugely remarkable in that the teams have worked hard and were met with a good match. Then again, you are presenting a rather shallow you.

The same thing goes when you talk about your big game back in college. There is a big chance that you will be talking about the same things most athletes talk about-the value of sportsmanship, hard work and winning. You don't want to bore your jaded admissions committee with such clichés.

- Negative Imageries

Avoid leaving any negative imagery as much as possible. One very bad topic you can write about is the death of a person. The event may have left an important mark in both your life and the type of person that you've become.

However, there is still a big chance of the whole thing sounding grim. You will be leaving you readers with negative emotions and you will have a difficulty making the bright side of your personality shine through.

There are plenty of college essay topics, so there really is no need for you to settle for the bad ones.