

10 Steps to writing a WINNING Scholarship Essay

By: Gen and Kelly Tanabe

Founders of SuperCollege and authors of 13 books on college planning.

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.

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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.



Show passion in your writing.

As a student you have written a lot of essays. And let's be honest—most were probably on topics you didn't care much about. You might be tempted to approach the scholarship essay in the same way that you did when writing about the Roman Aqueducts, but this would be a tragic mistake. The last common feature of all winning essays is that they are written on subjects about which the author is truly passionate. It is very difficult to fake passion for a subject. (Just try to be excited throughout your Uncle Larry's hour-long slideshow of his tonsil operation.)

But when you are genuinely enthusiastic about something, it does not take much effort for that energy to naturally show in your writing. Therefore, when you are choosing a topic, be sure it is something you truly care about and are interested in. Without even trying, you will find that your sentences convey an excitement that the reader can almost feel.



Be specific.

A common mistake in essay writing is to use general statements instead of specific ones. Don't write, "Education is the key to success." Instead, give the judges a slice of your life that shows them how education has impacted your life in a single experience or realization. If you are writing about your desire to become an astronaut, you might explain how this started when your father bought you a model rocket for the Christmas you were five years old. Focusing on a specific example of your life will help readers relate to your experiences and ensure that your essay is memorable and (as a bonus) original.

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Have a thesis statement.

It sounds obvious, but make sure that your essay has a clear point—many students' essays don't. Whether you are describing the influence of your father or the effect of World War II on race relations, you must have a central idea to communicate to the reader. To see if your essay has a central thesis, try this simple exercise. Ask yourself, "What is the point of my essay in a single sentence?"

Here are some answers that would satisfy the question for essays on independence and drug addiction, respectively:

"Growing up in the country taught me to be independent."

"Treatment of addiction is the only way to win the war on drugs."

If you cannot condense the point of your essay into a single sentence, then the main point may not be clear enough. Or worse, your essay may not have a thesis.



Build on your accomplishments.

Winning a scholarship is about impressing the judges and showing them why you are the best candidate for a monetary award. Your accomplishments, activities, talents and awards all help to prove that you are the best fit. Since you will probably list your activities on the application form, use the essay to expand on one or two of the most important ones.

However, don't just parrot back what is on the application. Use the opportunity to focus on a specific accomplishment, putting it into the proper context. Share details. Listing on the application that you were a stage manager for a play does not explain that you also had to design and build all the sets in a week. The essay allows you to expand on an achievement to demonstrate its significance.



Avoid the sob story.

Tear-jerking stories may be popular subjects for television specials and song lyrics, but they rarely, if ever, win scholarships. A common theme students write about is why they need the scholarship money to continue their education. While this is a perfectly legitimate topic, it is often answered with an essay filled with family tragedies and hardships—a sob story. Again, there is nothing wrong with writing about this topic, but don't expect to win if the intent of your essay is to evoke pity.

If your main point (remember our test) is this: "I deserve money because of the suffering I've been through," you have a problem. Scholarship committees are not as interested in problems as they are in solutions. What have you accomplished despite these hardships? How have you succeeded despite the challenges you've faced? This is more significant and memorable than merely cataloging your misfortunes.

Unfortunately, the sob story is one of the more common types of essays that are written by students, and it is hard to stand out when you are telling the same story that literally hundreds of others are also writing. Remember that every applicant has faced difficulties. What's different and individual to you is how you've overcome those obstacles.

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Show positive energy.

Mom has probably said: "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Everyone likes an uplifting story. Especially since you have your entire future ahead of you, scholarship judges want to feel your enthusiasm and zest for life. In fact, one reason some people love to volunteer to be scholarship judges is to meet positive and enthusiastic young men and women who do not have the cynicism or closed minds of many adults.

Try to stay away from essays that are overly pessimistic, antagonistic or critical. This doesn't mean that you have to put a happy spin on every word or that you can't write about a serious problem. But it does mean that you should not concentrate only on the negative. If you are writing about a problem, try to present some solutions. Your optimism is what makes organizations excited about giving you money to pursue your passion for changing the world. Don't shy away from this fact.



Find people to read your essays.

There is an old writer's saying: "Behind every good writer is an even better editor." If you want to create a money-winning essay, you need the help of others. You don't need a professional editor or even someone who is good at writing. You just need people who can read your work and provide useful and constructive feedback.

Roommates, friends, family members, teachers, professors or advisors all make great editors. When others read your essay, they will find errors that you missed and they may give suggestions for making the essay clearer to someone who is not familiar with the topic. You will find that some editors catch grammar and spelling mistakes but will not comment on the overall quality of the essay. Others will miss the technical mistakes but give you great advice on making the substance of your essay better. It's essential to find both types of editors. As you find others to help improve your essay, be careful that they do not alter your work so much that your voice is lost. Editing is essential, but your writing should always be your own.



Final Thoughts ...

Writing scholarship essays may not be your ideal way to spend a Friday night or Sunday afternoon. But remember that these essays can win you hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars for college. Try to keep this in mind when you feel burned out. If you really get down on writing, take a break. Go outside. Watch some meaningless television. Then when you are refreshed, get back to your essay.

Every successful scholarship applicant we've met—and we will include ourselves here—has at some point got tired or disgusted and contemplated quitting. But each persevered and didn't give up. They pushed ahead and finished their essays. Had they given up, they would never have won scholarship money and that all important college diploma would have been a far more expensive (and for some impossible) accomplishment.