

WRITING A SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY

When you write a scholarship essay, you'll want to work through the following steps. Some may seem obvious; others are easy to forget. Your goal is an essay that the readers will notice and remember—one that stands out from all the others they're getting. Your essay will show that you are interesting, capable, positive, and that you value the things the givers do. Ultimately, it will have a single theme: *you are the person who should get this scholarship.*

■ Do your homework.

Your first step is to read the scholarship announcement very, very carefully. How long should your essay be (and, if there's a strict limit, what does it count: words or characters)? When's the deadline? Obviously, you'll want to make sure that you meet the scholarship's minimum qualifications. If the scholarship is for economics majors who speak Spanish, there's not much point in applying for it if you're an economics major who **doesn't** speak Spanish.

Just as importantly, though, you'll want to think about the qualities that the scholarship committee is really looking for. Who is offering this scholarship? What do they care about? Is the scholarship for someone who cares about the environment? Somebody who can multitask? Someone who wants to teach? If the scholarship is offered by an organization, go to the organization's website and see what you can learn about what its values are.

While you do this, you also want to think about what you have to offer. It's OK to brag a little—you should!—but the most effective bragging lets the facts speak for themselves. What experiences have you had that make you a great candidate for this particular scholarship? What stories can you tell that will show what a good fit you are? What strengths do you have that relate to **this** scholarship? Make a list—and then try brainstorming or freewriting to come up with memories that show those strengths and lots of specific details about those memories.

It will probably help to write an outline. How will you get the reader interested? Where will you talk about your background? Your goals? How will you show **why** you care about the field you're going into? If you're going to write a formal conclusion paragraph, what can you put in it so that you're not just repeating what you've already said? If you're not going to write a formal conclusion paragraph, how will you end your essay on a strong, positive note?

■ Write your first draft.

How you'll convince your readers that **you** are the best person to get the award will largely depend on what the scholarship announcement seems to value. Consider this thesis: *I want to become a nurse practitioner specializing in geriatrics so I can help elderly people maintain their quality of life.* It might be great for givers interested in medicine or community service, but less so for givers focused on helping disadvantaged students.

To show the givers that you are the person they're looking for, you'll

- Focus on the issues raised in the announcement. Don't spend half the essay on your history of volunteer work if the scholarship is for a student interested in farming.
- Stay positive: if there are weaknesses in your application, focus on the things you've done to address those weaknesses or the good things that came out of them.

- Focus in detail on a story that lets the readers see you in action, demonstrating the qualities they're looking for. You can **say** you're a hard worker, but it's almost always more convincing to **show** your hard work: how you stayed late to clean a restaurant's fryers even though you had a zero hour class the next morning, or how you coped with a heavy patient load when other nursing assistants called in sick. These specific details will really help your essay stand out!
- Avoid simply repeating information that's already in your application: this is your chance (within reason) to mention strengths that your readers wouldn't know otherwise.

■ Rewrite your draft.

Now put your essay away for a day or two and then come back to it. Reread the original scholarship announcement and make sure you've addressed all the issues that the givers are interested in. Go over the list of strengths you made: did the most important ones make it into your essay? Did you describe them with enough detail that they'll stick in the readers' minds? Could you make any parts more specific—instead of saying *I did hours of homework*, could you talk about all the color-coded flash cards you made for that biology test?

If you've told a story, what tense is it in? Sometimes using the present tense in a story (*I walk into the shadowy concert hall*) can make the readers feel they're really there. Whatever tense you use, though, make sure you stick with it unless there's a specific reason to change.

And take out any words that are too general or you don't really need. Most scholarship essays have a length limit, so you'll want to make sure that every word counts. Have you written a sentence like *There were many things that made the test, which was on college biology, especially challenging?* Instead, try *many things made the college biology test challenging*. Better yet, skip the "many things" and give some examples: *Its two hundred questions and the need to choose between good and better options made the college biology test challenging*.

If you can, find someone else to read your essay. Friends and family members may catch small errors; more importantly, they may also notice places where a reader might want to know more or where your meaning isn't as clear as you meant it to be.

■ Check the details.

Think you're finished? Now *proofread*. Use your computer's spell-check function but don't trust it: there are a lot of errors that even the best software will miss. Make sure you check your spelling of homonyms (there, their) and proper names—like the name of the scholarship itself. Consider using a grammar-check program, too.... and make sure you've cited the source of any quotations or facts that you've gotten from somewhere else.

And recheck the scholarship announcement. How are you supposed to submit this essay? Do you need to print it as a hard copy and mail it somewhere? Upload it as a .pdf attachment? Copy and paste the text into a web-based form? Whatever it is, make sure you save a copy for yourself: all the work you've done will give you a great start on the **next** personal statement you'll need to write!