

Tips for Writing a Scholarship Essay

1. **Answer the Question** - You can follow the next steps, but if you miss the question, you will not win the scholarship.
2. **Be Original** - Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: "I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition." Consider an opening like, "Every morning I awoke at 5:00 to sweat, tears, and blood as I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown."
3. **Be Yourself** - The scholarship committee wants to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Unless a philosophy or societal problem has interested you intensely for years, stay away from grand themes that you have little personal experience with.
4. **Don't "Thesaurize" your Composition** - For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles. Think Hemingway.
5. **Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose** - If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details. Appeal to the five senses of the scholarship officers.

It's Time to Rewrite

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 rewrite. 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.

Revise, Revise, Revise - You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. If H.D. Thoreau couldn't write a good essay without revision, neither will you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Do you use transitions? Are your introduction and conclusions more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error? Remember that editing takes time.

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 Walmart.

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 Walmart 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 schoolwork 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 schoolwork. 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 5:35 pm. 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 Walmart in time to punch in for the 6 pm to closing shift. On nights that the family needs the car, Dad drives me both ways. I'm home again by 9:30 pm, 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 one another. 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 Noah Lukeman's marvelous book about writing, *The First Five Pages*, 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

Expect scholarship officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. This is not the place to summarize—why read the rest if you get the picture in the first paragraph? It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Instead, tantalize and encourage the next step. Create mystery or intrigue in your introduction. Raise questions in the minds of the scholarship officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter. Create surprise with a surprising fact. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.

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 percent of adults (over 40 million) in this country are functionally illiterate or because 43 percent of people with reading deficiencies live in poverty or even because 70 percent 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." You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay.

A Compelling Conclusion

The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, etc." As in the introduction, don't summarize. Essays are too short to need a review at the conclusion. Instead, reemphasize 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 and grammar. Every new pair of eyes helps. Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:

- What is the essay about?
- Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
- Do you detect any clichés?
- Do I use transition appropriately?
- Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
- What's the best part of the essay?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support your main argument or are immaterial to your case?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This MUST be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about your personality?
- Could anyone else have written this essay?

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 Walmart 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 that human condition.

Sources:

http://www.scholarshiphelp.org/scholarship_essay.htm

http://www.internationalstudent.com/essay_writing/scholarship_essay.shtml Information supplied by Essay Edge -