

Scholarship Essay Guide

This article contains three parts:

- Step One: Brainstorming
- Step Two: Selecting a Topic
- Step Three: Writing the Essay

Step One: Brainstorming

Scholarship essays vary dramatically in subject. However, most of them require a recounting of personal experience. These tips will be more helpful for writing personal essays, like for the National Merit Scholarship, than for writing academic essays.

The most important aspect of your scholarship essay is the subject matter. You should expect to devote about 1-2 weeks simply to brainstorming ideas. To begin brainstorming a subject idea consider the following points. From brainstorming, you may find a subject you had not considered at first.

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments you have been formally recognized for since the most interesting essays often are based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life. This is especially true if the scholarship committee receives a list of your credentials anyway.
- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with? These questions should help you realize what you love most.
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
- What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your scholarship essay for you?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do you need? How does this particular scholarship fit into your plans for the future?

If these questions cannot cure your writer's block, consider the following exercises:

1. Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Colleagues, etc.

If you cannot characterize yourself and your personality traits do not automatically leap to mind, ask your friends to write a list of your five most salient personality traits. Ask your friends why they chose the ones they did. If an image of your personality begins to emerge, consider life experiences that could illustrate these particular traits.

2. Consider your Childhood

While scholarship and aid officers are not interested in reading about your childhood and are more interested in the last 2-4 years of your life, you might consider events of your childhood that inspired the interests you have today. Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life, even if you recently lost interest. For instance, if you experienced extreme poverty, the death of a loved one, immigration, etc., you might want to incorporate this into your scholarship essay. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped from your upbringing.

3. Consider your Role Models

Many applicants do not have role models and were never greatly influenced by just one or two people. However, for those of you who have role models and actually aspire to become like certain people, you may want to incorporate a discussion of that person and the traits you admired into your scholarship or financial aid application essay.

4. Read Sample Scholarship Essays and Admissions Essays

Before writing a poem, you would certainly read past poets. Before writing a book of philosophy, you would consider past philosophers. In the same way, we recommend reading sample application essays to understand what topics other applicants chose. EssayEdge maintains an archive of over 100 free sample application essays. **Click here** to view sample essays that worked.

5. Goal Determination

Life is short. Why do you want spend 2-6 years of your life at a particular college, graduate school, or professional school? How is the degree necessary to the fulfillment of your goals? When considering goals, think broadly. Few people would be satisfied with just a career. How else will your education fit your needs and lead you to a fulfilling life?

If after reading this entire page you do not have an idea for your essay, do not be surprised. Coming up with an idea is difficult and requires time. Actually consider the questions and exercises above. Without a topic you feel passionate about, without one that brings out the defining aspects of you personality, you risk falling into the trap of sounding like the 90 percent of scholarship applicants who will write boring essays. The only way to write a unique essay is to have experiences that support whatever topic you come up with. Whatever you do, don't let the essay stress you out. Have fun with the brainstorming process. You might discover something about yourself you never consciously realized.

Good Luck!

Step Two - Selecting an Essay Topic

Having completed step one, you should now have a rough idea of the elements you wish to include in your scholarship essay, including your goals, important life experiences, research experience, diversifying features, spectacular nonacademic accomplishments, financial need, etc. You should also now have an idea of what impression you want to make on the scholarship committee.

You must now consider topics that will allow you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole. While most scholarship essays allow great latitude in topic selection, you must also be sure to answer the questions that were asked of you. Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads 50 essays a day will not be easy, but we have compiled some

guidelines to help you get started.

Consider the following questions before proceeding:

- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance in your life, with which you can use **vivid personal experiences** as supporting details?
- Is your topic a gimmick? That is, do you plan to write your essay in iambic pentameter or make it funny. You should be very, very careful if you are planning to do this. We recommend strongly that you do not do this. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the scholarship committee unless a creative approach is explicitly recommended. Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.
- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs or standardized test scores in your essay if they are mentioned elsewhere.
- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different essay topic.
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit? If you plan on writing about something technical, make sure you truly can back up your interest in a topic and are not merely throwing around big scientific words. Unless you convince the reader that you actually have the life experiences to back up your interest in neurobiology, the reader will assume you are trying to impress him/her with shallow tactics. Also, be sure you can write to the scholarship officers and that you are not writing over their heads.
- Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word. The entire essay must be interesting, considering scholarship officers will probably only spend a few minutes reading each essay.
- Is your topic overdone? To ascertain this, peruse through old essays. EssayEdge's 100 free application essays can help you do this. However, most topics are overdone, and this is not a bad thing. A unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big.
- Will your topic turnoff a large number of people? If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican or Democratic Party is evil, you will not win the scholarship or aid award. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead Nietzsche's influence on **your** life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his claims.
- In this vein, if you are presenting a topic that is controversial, you must acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.
- Will a scholarship officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your essay topics with the above criteria and asking for the free opinions of EssayEdge editors, of your teachers or colleagues, and of your friends, you should have at least 1-2 interesting essay topics. Consider the following guidelines below.

1. If you are planning on writing an essay on how you survived poverty in Russia, your mother's suicide, your father's kidnapping, or your immigration to America from Asia, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities. Just because something sad or horrible has

happened to you does not mean that you should win a scholarship. You don't want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Unless you only use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay.

2. "Diversity" is the biggest buzzword of the 1990's. For this reason, so many applicants are tempted to declare what makes them diverse. However, simply saying you are a black, lesbian female will not impress scholarship officers in the least. While an essay incorporating this information would probably be your best topic idea, you must finesse the issue by addressing your own personal qualities and how you overcame stigma, dealt with social ostracism, etc. If you are a rich student from Beverly Hills whose father is an engineer and whose mother is a lawyer, but you happen to be a minority, an essay about how you dealt with adversity would be unwise. You must demonstrate vividly your personal qualities, interests, motivations, etc. Address specifically how your diversity will contribute to the realm of campus opinion, the academic environment, and the larger society.

3. Don't mention weaknesses unless you absolutely need to explain them away. You want to make a positive first impression, and telling a scholarship officer anything about drinking, drugs, partying, etc. undermines your goal. EssayEdge editors have read more essays on ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) than we would ever have imagined. Why admit to weakness when you can instead showcase your strengths?

4. Be honest, but not for honesty's sake. Unless you are a truly excellent writer, your best, most passionate writing will be about events that actually occurred. While you might be tempted to invent hardship, it is completely unnecessary. Write an essay about your life that demonstrates your personality.

Step Three: Writing the Essay, Tips for Success

Even seemingly boring topics can be made into exceptional scholarship essays with an innovative approach. In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the scholarship officer that you are extremely worthy of receiving college assistance and to make the officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

Unfortunately, there is no surefire step-by-step method to writing a good essay. EssayEdge editors at www.EssayEdge.com will remake your essay into an awesome, memorable masterpiece, but every topic requires a different treatment since no two essays are alike. However, we have compiled the following list of tips that you should find useful while writing your scholarship essay.

- 1. Answer the Question.** You can follow the next 12 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.
6. **Spend the Most Time on your Introduction.** Expect scholarship officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.
 - **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the scholarship officer need not read the rest of your essay.
 - **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. 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.
7. **Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction.** Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.
8. **Use Transition.** Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like "as a result, in addition, while . . . , since . . . , etc." but includes repeating key words and progressing the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.
9. **Conclusions are Crucial.** The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, etc." You should consider the following conclusions:
 - Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
 - Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
 - Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
 - End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not **try** to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
 - Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
 - Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer why your little sister died or why people starve in Africa; you are not writing a "sit-com," but should forge some attempt at closure.
10. **Do Something Else.** Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.
11. **Give your Draft to Others.** 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?
- How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more _____."

12. **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 transition? Are your introduction and conclusions more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?
- Allow for the evolution of your main topic. Do not assume your subject must remain fixed and that you can only tweak sentences.
 - Editing takes time. Consider reordering your supporting details, delete irrelevant sections, and make clear the broader implications of your experiences. Allow your more important arguments to come to the foreground. Take points that might only be implicit and make them explicit.