

Writing Successful Scholarship Application Essays

In a nutshell, what you want to accomplish:

You want buy in from your audience; you want them to feel like they know something about you and care about what happens to you. You do not want them to feel like a voyeur or therapist by going into too much gory detail but you also don't want them to have no real idea of who you are. So you walk a fine line...

- Share your goals—they want to invest in your potential so they need to know your plan and that you have a sense of purpose. What have you done to pursue those goals, to learn about the field or dabble in it, etc.?
- Connect your goals to the scholarship opportunity. Help them see the link.
- Share your story so the reader knows how your life experiences have shaped you and your plans for the future. How have you learned from and overcome any personal, academic or professional challenges and how has that informed your life?

Reel them in with some good storytelling:

Readers for scholarships are busy folks. They will be going through many, many essays at one sitting. You want yours to stand out, and in a good way. You want to engage them, draw them in.

- Don't just make your essay sound like a resume in paragraph form ("I did this and then I did that and then..."). Be selective about what's included and then elaborate and make it vivid for your reader. Provide details that reveal important things about you such as:
 - What has led you to embrace your future goals
 - What personal traits you possess.
 - What some of the items on your resume or transcript actually mean.
 - Why you are ready for the opportunity at hand.
 - What personal challenges you have faced.
 - What has shaped your identity and/or outlook.
- Create some order to your narrative, not just a random listing of seemingly unrelated factoids. Here are some suggestions:
 - Sample one:
 - I hope to do X in my career
 - A was my first encounter with X
 - B and C confirmed by desire to work in X
 - I believe your opportunity will help me accomplish X because...
 - I believe that D and E have helped prepare me for this opportunity
 - Sample two:
 - I experienced A recently
 - It changed my mind about career X
 - It got me thinking about career Y
 - B and C confirmed that Y was right for me
 - D and E will prove valuable even though they were related to X

- Your opportunity is the right next step because...
- Do what your creative writing teacher always said: show, don't tell. Create a picture in your readers' minds by offering details, anecdotes, description, context. Vary sentence structure as well to keep things interesting. For example:
Weak: I interned in DC.
Better: I learned a lot about government working in DC last summer.
Best: We stayed far into the night, drinking coffee every half hour and scouring budget amendments. I began to see how much the Senate needs youth.

So how do you get this thing started?

First of all, go back to square one and remember what the parameters are for the particular scholarship you're working on. Jot down the information you need to be sure to cover. Keep that nearby and visible; it's your sounding board.

Give up the idea of creating a perfect draft. Look at it as a discovery process, a brain dump, as it were. Perfection comes later. *This is a process; you don't complete this in one sitting or even in one day!!*

Brainstorm or mind map personal experiences and background you have that are relevant and that might need to be highlighted in your essay. Just go for it without censoring or fretting until you run out of steam.

Some stuff to think about:

How do you spend your time?

What accomplishments are you proud of?

When have you displayed your best personal traits?

What are your most interesting life experiences or most powerful memories?

What's your field of study? What draws you to that?

What are your career and life goals? What makes this a good match for you?

What are your community and volunteer experiences? What relevant coursework or research projects have you done?

What extracurricular/governance activities are you involved with?

What's special or unique about you?

What challenges, if any, have you overcome to be in school or where you're at in your life? How did you do that, what did you learn about yourself?

How will this scholarship help you meet your goals?

Put it aside and let it percolate. If you think of new ideas to include, jot them down. Come back to it the next day when you can get a fresh feel for things. Start fine tuning, clarifying, organizing, and yes, deleting. Try not to get too attached to anything.

After reviewing and editing and doing what you can, get someone to read it and offer you feedback. The Writing Center folks are great at that. Then rework and rework and make it as perfect as you can, being sure to follow all the directions, including page limits. Have a perfectionist review it for typos and errors.