

Essays Tips

Scholarship evaluators have the difficult task of determining the best candidate for a donor's scholarship funds. This can be very difficult when multiple applicants perform well in school, participate in numerous extracurricular activities and work. Scholarship Services in the Office of Financial Aid designed its scholarship essay to differentiate comparable applicants. Without simply citing your resume or academic transcript, we want you to tell us who you are in a personal statement. Help us get to know what makes you brilliant, what makes you thrive. Remember, a scholarship resume informs evaluators of what you are doing, whereas a scholarship essay reflects who you are. Convince the readers why you are the quintessential choice to receive a scholarship.

Effective Essays:

1. Are insightful

Show us who you are, how you think, how you decide to act or not act, how you approach a problem, how you interact with your environment.

Ideas to help you brainstorm:

- Track the evolution of your ideas and actions -- Why do you have a particular opinion or point of view on an issue? Why are you persuaded by that viewpoint versus alternative viewpoints? What made you decide to take a particular course of action? What are you curious about and why? What compelled you to join the organizations and participate in the activities listed on your resume? What and why do you contribute to these activities?
- Consider your life story – Can you identify an influential event, person, and creative art piece, etc. that has significance in your life? What impact did/does that significant event, person, etc., have on you? Are there special circumstances that you feel would be important for the scholarship committee to know? What is your family history? Fill in the gaps between the generations; how is your family history related to your story? What is distinctive about you and/or your family? What does your story illustrate about you?
- Take a Survey – Ask your family, friends, teachers, coaches, mentors to describe qualities that they observe in you. Ask them to relay an experience or story that demonstrates these qualities.

2. Show how well you organize and express your ideas.

Write logically so the reader can follow your train of thought. Make sure your sentences relate to each other. Use transitions when a change takes place in your story or you are making a new point. Alternating sentence lengths, mild imagery, simple sentence structure, short paragraphs and relevant factoids often keep readers interested.

- Be succinct
 - Rambling compels readers to think, "and, so what?" while they merely skim an essay to find the main points, rather than feeling engrossed in anticipation of each next phrase. In many cases, you have to write within a word limit, so keep your response focused.
 - Avoid over describing. Describing in gross detail nouns that are not the subject of your essay, many times does not reveal anything about you. If your essay describes how your 1st grade teacher inspired you to become a writer and you only describe your teacher without demonstrating how she inspired you, your essay will be received poorly.
 - Avoid redundant sentences and phrases
- Use your own voice
 - You don't need to impress us by using esoteric jargon or vocabulary. Readers detect pretension when reading one mile-size multisyllabic word after another, which makes the writing less compelling. Scholarship evaluators are not looking for a certain type of student. Be yourself. However, it is a good idea to consult a dictionary and thesaurus to find the right words that convey your ideas with precision. Good diction strengthens essays.
- Write what you know
 - If you are trying to impress the committee by writing on a complicated subject matter but you are not passionate nor know little about it, the reader can pick up on this and your essay may seem disingenuous.
- Creative writing pieces (poetry) can work, but they can be a risky submission. If spoken word is your forte, then a poem can be effective; if you are known for your biting satire, then go for it. If you're not comfortable using these writing devices or have very little experience, you may want to refrain. However, describing what attracted you to creative writing and explaining why you express yourself artistically would make an interesting read.

3. Avoid Generic Statements

Generic statements don't reveal why you are unique. Remember, in many cases there is just one scholarship winner. Use detailed, vivid descriptions to produce distinct mental images of your story or essay topic.

Here are some examples to illustrate this point:

Generic Opening Statement:

Before starting my first job, I was much like Jack in the children's Book *Lazy Jack* by Tony Ross. However, the fast-food business has really made me grow up.

An Alternative Opening Statement:

One of my favorite books as a child was *Lazy Jack* by Tony Ross, the story of a boy who is sent off to work by his mother and methodically screws everything up. After losing his first day's wages, his mother instructs him to put his next day's wages in his pocket. Jack, who has no common sense, puts a pitcher of milk in his pocket. When his mother tells him that he should have put the pitcher on his head, he decided his next day's wages, a cat, should also go on his head. Every decision Jack makes is irrational and damaging. Little did I know Jack was me...

After spending most of my summers playing video games and watching my mom clean house, she decided it was time for me to get a job. At first I didn't take my fast food job seriously, and like Jack, continually received poor results. I dropped a \$30 order, washed my first paycheck, and slipped on a wet floor that I had mopped. It was when I became a complete liability for the company that I realized three things: the necessity of listening, the joy of a job well done, and the power of common sense.

Generic Statement:

My mom is the most influential person in my life. She is supportive in everything I do and she is a great role model. I try to emulate her and follow her teachings in everything I pursue. She has taught me the value of hard-work and responsibility. I owe much of who I am to my mother. I hope to grow up and be like her one day.

(In the above statement the writer does not describe how her mom is supportive or a great role model. The writer should think of a specific example or examples of her mother's qualities. Show vs. tell.)

An Alternative Description:

I want to raise my children like my mother raised me.

My mom never used a guilt trip to teach me wrong from right. When I told her in 4th grade, "I didn't need to practice "Silent Night" for my organ playing debut at Midnight Mass she merely asked, "Have you thought this idea through?" I thought it was a brilliant plan to keep me "fresh", so I said, "yes," without hesitation. My nerves got the best of me that night, and I started on the wrong note, stumbling through the finger patterns of the song, and completely played the piece off key. I couldn't help but see teens in the audience shaking in their seats, trying to stifle their laughs. After I played the final note, I ran/walked to sit next to my mom, who smiled at me and enfolded me in a huge pev hug. Afterwards, I was despondent; yet, my mother kept beaming with pride that I completed the full song in front of 300 people. She never let on if she was embarrassed or if she was embarrassed for me. She didn't need to remind me that practice would have made the experience less harrowing.

But she knew how to use the power of shame.

When I came out of our bathroom one morning, my raven hair bleached to white and my brown pupils sheered over by violet contacts, my mom's face went pale and immediately flushed to maroon. She paced between our narrow hall way five times, and simply asked, "Why have you erased your grandmother's features from you? Are you so ashamed of your heritage?" I felt the disappointment of generations with her words and her curt delivery stunned me. I then cried and couldn't believe what I had done to myself. Before I could run back into the bathroom to correct my appearance, she latched onto the edge of my shirt and forced me downstairs where a family reunion was gathering to celebrate my grandmother's 75th birthday. My new look attracted questioning stares and joke fodder from my family. With each embarrassing explanation and glances of shame, my mother made me accountable for my actions and taught me the impact of my decision and behavior that day. As in this episode, my mom passed down effective life-learning teaching methods that I hope I can emulate with equal patience and wisdom for my own children.

4. Show how much effort you put into the application process.

Crafting a good essay is a process. Start early to write multiple drafts and ask people to provide editorial feedback.

Use writing tools (see the following for suggestions, <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/pp/writproc.PPTListing>) to get your ideas out of your head and onto paper, but don't be committed to include everything you jot down in your ultimate draft.

Proofread!!

Proofread again after you Spell Check!!!!

Seek assistance and get feedback from a writing specialist during any stage of the writing process: Your school's Writing Center, English/Writing Teachers, (if you are at CU Boulder) Student Academic Services Center, online resources such as <http://www.colorado.edu/pwr/resources.html>

Use appropriate language. Keep in mind your audience – scholarship committee members who must choose the right scholar for the scholarship program.

If you don't receive a scholarship, reevaluate your scholarship essay. Submitting an identical essay when you failed to receive a scholarship from a previous application is a recipe for failure.

5. Stay Positive

Scholarship donors invest in a student's future. They are less focused on students' previous tribulations than on their potential to succeed academically and professionally. If you are applying for a scholarship that requires that you demonstrate financial need, your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) dictates your current financial situation. If your FAFSA does not reflect your current income, asset, or family situation, you should contact the Office of Financial Aid to discuss your options. Because financial need is determined using the FAFSA, scholarship evaluators often do not take into consideration financial woes listed in an essay.

In addition, avoid comparing yourself to other students as it may be misinterpreted as arrogance. Write an excellent essay and you'll stand out.

Best wishes for a successful essay writing season!

Works Consulted:

College Board "College Essay Writing Tips: Write an Effective Application Essay" <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/9406.html>

Dartmouth Writing Program "Attending to Style" http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/ac_paper/style.shtml

Purdue's Online Writing Lab <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/oldindex.html>

Norlin Scholars Program "Tips for Writing Scholarship Essays and Getting Strong Letters of Recommendation" <http://www.colorado.edu/norlinscholars/apply.htm>