

SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY – Start Now!

Your essay is your best chance to make the case for why you should receive the scholarship; it helps the scholarship provider learn about you and gives them a much more detailed look at your school and home life.

If you use them right, those few paragraphs can help your application stand out—and could mean the difference between getting a "thanks for applying" E-mail and an award check.

Of course, putting so much emphasis on an essay may make it seem like a daunting task, especially if you don't consider yourself a great writer. By following these four tips, just about anyone can create a standout essay.

1. Know your audience: It is important to realize that every scholarship provider is looking for a specific student who meets unique criteria. When you get your application, look closely at the questions, the organization giving the scholarship, and any past recipients you can find.

Are they emphasizing classroom performance? Looking for someone who's dealt with adversity at home? Interested in character or community service more than grades? Whatever the answer, your research will put you a step ahead of applicants who are copying and pasting "one-size-fits-all" essays.

2. Plan far in advance: You can also avoid the "one-size-fits-all" essay by getting an early start on each application. Begin your research and planning a week or so before you think you should, and you'll be able to take enough time to turn out something great.

This will also give you time to craft an outline, which can help your essay stay concise and on target. Think of two or three main points you want to make in response to the essay question, add some supporting information under each of them, and consider a sentence or two of introduction and conclusion. Before you know it, you'll have built the structure and thesis of your essay, and you won't have to rush to write it.

3. Make it personal and passionate: When you do start writing, don't forget that the main purpose of your essay is to convince the scholarship provider that you're the student they've been looking for. Answer the questions you've set out in your outline, but make sure every point you make is illustrated with a specific detail that shows you care about the subject.

Don't just mention that you work with disadvantaged kids; tell them how your love of soccer got you into coaching those kids. Don't just tell them about your acting awards; show how the stage helped you conquer your shyness. Putting your unique interests and perspectives on the page will go a very long way toward creating a memorable essay.

4. Find an editor: Last but not least, make sure you have time to run your essay by a good editor, whether it's a parent, teacher, or grammar-nerd friend. Even a well-researched and passionately written essay can be derailed by spelling mistakes or awkward sentences, and if you've spent a lot of time looking at your words, it's easy to miss basic mistakes. A few minutes of proofreading by a trusted editor can make a huge difference. I also recommend reading your essay aloud to yourself, so you can hear how it flows.

Scholarship essays are a big component of your applications and can be a major headache, too. But by starting early, answering the right questions, and describing what makes you unique, you'll be writing standout essays without the stress.