

## Do's for Writing a Winning Scholarship Essay

1. Plan far in advance
  - a. 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.
  - b. 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.
2. Directly answer the question/prompt
  - a. Too many times, writers make interesting points, but they are not about the questions at hand. If you are asked to answer a specific question, stick to it.
3. Use clear, concise, and simple language throughout the essay
  - a. Don't overuse the thesaurus
4. State your accomplishments without coming across as if you are bragging
  - a. 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.
5. Make sure your grammar and spelling are impeccable
  - a. We all know the importance of putting our papers through a spell and grammar check. Still, grammatically incorrect essays continue to be turned in. Until that stops, this point deserves to be repeated. Otherwise excellent applications can be taken out of the running because of spelling mishaps. Even when you have put a lot of time into your essay, it may appear sloppy if it is grammatically incorrect. You have a lot to offer. Make sure your essay stands out for its excellence and not its errors.
6. Have someone with strong writing and editing skills proofread the essay before you submit it
  - a. 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.
  - b. 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.
7. Share a slice of life
  - a. As you are explaining why you deserve to win, it is important that you also reveal something about yourself. Obviously, in the short space of 500 to 1,000 words, you can't cover everything about you. This is why one of the most effective techniques is to share a "slice of

your life." In other words, don't try to explain everything. Just focus on one aspect of your life. If you are writing about your involvement in an activity, it may be tempting to summarize your involvement over the years and list numerous accomplishments. However, this would sound more like a resume, and it would not tell the judges anything new. However, if you focused on just one aspect of an experience, you could spend some time going below the surface and share something about who you are, which would be far more memorable. In other words, you would be sharing a slice of your life.

## Don'ts for Writing a Winning Scholarship Essay

1. Rushed writing
  - a. You may work great under pressure, but no one is at his or her best when rushed and stressed. Start your application early and give yourself plenty of time to brainstorm ideas. Use school breaks or write your essays the summer before you start applying, so you're not preoccupied with homework, sports, and school activities.
2. Not knowing your audience
  - a. Once you have a stack of scholarship apps in front of you, take some time to get to know the organizations that are sponsoring the scholarships. Check out their websites and pay attention to their vision, history, and programs. Then think about ways you can make your essay appeal to their missions, or at least avoid offending them. And make sure you follow the directions. Don't write a 700-word single-spaced essay if it calls for 500 words, double spaced.
3. Choosing a vanilla topic
  - a. Most scholarship applications aren't going to accept your YouTube videos in place of a written essay, but you can still stand out. It starts with picking a topic that's unique and interesting but that still answers the question. "What I learned on my summer vacation" has been done before. (Tip: try doing an online search on "popular scholarship essay topics." Then you'll know which ones to avoid.)
4. Uncreative writing
  - a. Use imagery to draw your reader in. Instead of beginning an essay with: "My father inspires me because he puts his life on the line serving as a Chicago police officer," consider an opening like this: "Every day at 5 a.m. sharp, Dad rolls quietly out of bed, polishes his badge until it shines, carefully buckles on his gun belt, and signs on as a police officer for the city of Chicago. My mother starts her day saying a prayer that Dad will come home safely."
5. Using text speak
  - a. While getting to the point is almost always a good thing, that doesn't mean you can shorten words using "text speak." I'm sure most of you know the difference between the proper way to write a text vs. an essay, but believe it or not, text speak has been slipping into college application and scholarship essays. Although you probably won't accidentally write an entire

essay in text, if you're constantly working your iPhone thumbs, you may have to steer away from your instinct to use "thru" instead of "through" or to drop in an "IMO."

6. Unpolished and unproofed

- a. Before you run spell-check or start looking for proper punctuation, make sure your essay shines. Are your phrases eloquent and intelligent, without sounding like you chose all your words from a thesaurus? Does your essay paint a picture for the reader? Will the reader care about—but not pity—you? Read your essay aloud and ensure it makes sense. Most high schools have writing centers where you can get advice for your essay—take advantage of them. To catch spelling errors or misplaced commas, read your essay backward. E-mail your essay to your parents and trusted advisers. A fresh set of eyes can prevent a big mistake.