

Writing scholarship and admissions essays: tips and websites



The application is a lifeless thing--a few sheets of paper and a few numbers. The essay is the best way to breathe life into it. - Admissions Officer

SCHOLARSHIP/ADMISSIONS ESSAYS IN 3 STEPS

Step One: Brainstorming

The most important aspect of your essay is the subject matter. If the scholarship provider has given you a clear indication of criteria, your essay should support your candidacy: why are YOU the best candidate for the scholarship – how well do you MEET their criteria? If your essay, on the other hand, is to be a document intended to give your reader a better idea of who you are, 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.

- 1.** What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments you have been formally recognized for. Often the most interesting essays are based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
- 2.** Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- 3.** Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- 4.** What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- 5.** Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
- 6.** Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- 7.** 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.
- 8.** Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
- 9.** 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 admissions essay for you?
- 10.** What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- 11.** What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- 12.** 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 university 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 the particular traits.

2. Consider your Childhood

While admissions officers/scholarship judges 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 were interested in math since an early age and now want to study medicine, you might incorporate this into your medical school admissions 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 DO 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 application essay.

4. 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 section, 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 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.

Step Two - Selecting an Essay Topic

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?. It is strongly recommended that you do not do this. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is more useless 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 – they're already listed in your data.
- 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, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as

a report or research paper? If you plan on writing something technical for college admissions, 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, without a basis in reality.

- Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word? The entire essay must be interesting, considering admissions officers & scholarship judges will probably only spend a few minutes reading each essay.
- Is your topic overused? To ascertain this, peruse through old essays. However, most topics are overused, 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? 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 applications evaluators remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the reader remember about your topic? What will the reader 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 your teachers 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 will be a good university student, or a person deserving of a scholarship to support your educational goals. 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.** Essays should fit in well with the rest of a candidate's application, explaining the unexplained and steering clear of that which is already obvious. For example, if you have a 4.0 GPA and a 95% average, no one doubts your ability to do the academic work and addressing this topic would be ridiculous. However, if you have a 70% Grade 12 average and a 3.9 GPA or a 98% average and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate in your essay an explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.
- 3.** "Diversity" is the biggest buzzword of the millennium! Every university, professional school, or college wants to increase diversity. 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 admissions 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 West Vancouver 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 social life.

4. Don't mention weaknesses unless you absolutely need to explain them away. Why admit to weakness when you can instead showcase your strengths?

5. 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

You may be surprised that actually writing the essay is not addressed until step three. From that, you should understand the extreme importance of selecting a proper subject matter. However, even seemingly boring topics can be made into exceptional admissions essays with an innovative approach. In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade admissions/scholarship adjudicators that you are extremely worthy of consideration and to make them aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

Answer the Essay Question. You can follow the next 12 steps, but if you miss the question, you will not be admitted to any institution. This is particularly important in scholarship applications: if you do not reference your unique suitability as a candidate (how you match criteria) your essay will be immediately discarded.

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."

Be Yourself - University admissions officers want 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 distinctive. 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.

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.

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.

Spend the Most Time on your Introduction - Expect admissions and scholarship committees 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 rest of your essay does not need to be read.

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 admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.

Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction - Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.

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.

Conclusions are CRUCIAL - The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. "In conclusion," statements are out. Lead into your conclusion clearly and gently. The body of the piece should work towards the conclusion, so your final comments should capture your own reflections. A conclusion should not appear to be the introduction regurgitated —your reader will catch on to this. Consider the following ideas:

- Expand (briefly!) upon the broader implications of your discussion.
- Re-define 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.
- Do Something Else. Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.

Editing the draft - Give your rough copy 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 cliches?
- 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 my main argument or are immaterial to my case?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This **MUST** be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

- Could anyone else have written this essay?
- If you were an admissions officer, how would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this university because our university needs more _____."

Revise, Revise, Revise - You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. 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 re-ordering 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.

Proofread - When there are thousands of applications to review, neatness and correctness becomes a significant factor for admissions officers and scholarship judges. While typing or printing your application, do it neatly and legibly, using a simple font (10 – 12 point unless specified) on good quality paper. Offer your essay to friends or a teacher for final proof-reading: spelling, grammar and typographical errors are guaranteed to result in your essay and application being discarded. Even if you have proofread your essay many times yourself, offer it to a teacher, parent or trusted friend to proofread one last time.

WEBSITES FOR ESSAY TIPS:

<http://www.medhopeful.com/articles/> and scroll down to High School/Scholarships: How To Write A Winning Scholarship Essay, Parts 1 - 4

http://www.scholarshiphelp.org/scholarship_essay.htm