

Writing a Scholarship Essay From Fastweb.com

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But I Don't Like Talking About Myself!

As you probably already know, the essay is the most complicated part of the application. Even if you're the greatest writer who ever lived, the essay is going to take longer to complete than any other part of the application. And it should! After all, it's the part of the application where the 'real you' can shine through. Are you worried that the other applicants may have better grades or more impressive accomplishments? Well, put those fears to rest because you've got your essay - your own personal stamp of originality! And it could just make the difference.

That said, you probably won't be surprised to hear that the scholarship providers we consulted gave a big 'thumbs up' to originality when describing the kinds of essays they like to read. Your essay should reflect what is unique about you. Be honest and true to yourself and write about something that sets you apart. Remember that readers may be faced with hundreds of essays to read. It's your job to make your essay stand out from the rest.

The best way to do this is by being specific and personal when you write. Your personal insights will be special and unusual to your readers. And always be sure to include the details that will make your experience come alive: the 'who,' 'what,' 'where,' and 'when' of your topic. The simplest experience can be monumental if you present honestly how you were affected.

Similarly, you should not feel shy about 'talking about yourself.' A lot of the time the application will ask you to talk about things you should be proud of, such as your talents and past achievements. Don't be afraid to do this! You're not being conceited. After all, you've worked hard to become the person you are: a person who could win a scholarship. Be truthful and be proud of your accomplishments.

The Reader is as Important as the Writer

So far, we've focused a lot on you. But you are only half the story. It's also important to keep in mind the other half of the essay: the people for whom you are writing.

To put it in the most basic terms: know your audience. Essays and resumes are not 'one size fits all.' You should not be able to crank out one essay and send it out with every application you send. That is, you shouldn't if you want to succeed. Each essay you write should be particularly tailored to suit the interests and requirements of the award at hand.

Another way to think about this is to keep in mind that you are asking to be selected as the representative for the group sponsoring the scholarship. You need to be sure that your essay is specifically designed to reflect how you could serve as that representative - not that you are generally a good student, but that you fit the profile they are seeking to reward. You can't possibly convey that with a 'one-size-fits-all' essay.

Here's an example. Imagine you are applying for an award that is sponsored by a local philanthropic organization. Why talk about your experiences in your high school choir when you could be telling

them about your work with Habitat for Humanity? Save your description of your experiences as choir soloist for that music scholarship that you are applying for. In both cases, you are telling them about yourself; it's just that you are emphasizing different things in each essay - hopefully, things that will convince them that you are the kind of student they want to award a scholarship.

Neatness Still Counts!

Let's finish up with the most obvious bit of information - but a vital point, nonetheless: neatness counts! Sure, what you say is vital, but you shouldn't neglect how you present your pearls of wisdom, either. Turn in a sloppy essay and the committee may not even read it at all!

A big part of neatness is providing an essay that is easy to read. This means making sure it is clearly typed. If you have to print your essay, make sure it is very, very neat - but keep in mind it's always best to type!

Another trick for keeping things neat: provide a lot of 'white space' on the page. Double-space the essay, and provide adequate margins (1"-1 1/2") on all sides. The scholarship committee will be reading many, many essays. They'll appreciate it if you leave space for them to take notes in the margin.

Finally, what we said about the rest of the scholarship application applies here as well. Proofread very carefully. You don't want your readers to be stumbling over misspelled words and sentence fragments. Give them a chance to assess your ideas by making your style as clear as possible. Check the spelling and grammar, and then go nuts and run spell-check on your computer as well (if you have it). But don't stop there! Get someone else to read your essay. Another pair of eyes can catch the errors you may miss.

Before you sit down to Write (capital 'W'), you have to write (small 'w'). Get a pad and pen, and take some time to brainstorm. You may feel like you're only wasting time - but in reality it's the most crucial time you'll spend.

The 'Write' Stuff: Writing Winning Scholarship Essays

Part 1: Writing and Pre-Writing

As we've said before, the essay can be the most powerful part of your scholarship application. So how do you go about crafting the best possible scholarship essay, the one that gets you noticed and gets you the award? By following a few tips to make your writing stronger. And take heart: if you strengthen your writing skills for your scholarship essays, you'll strengthen your writing in general. That's a skill you'll be happy to have throughout college and for the rest of your life!

Brainstorming and Planning

So you've got a big writing assignment ahead of you. Maybe it's an essay you need to submit for a scholarship application. Or your 'Statement of Purpose' for college or graduate school. Or perhaps it's an essay for one of your classes. The best thing to do is launch right in. After all, it's a writing assignment, isn't it? So you should be writing, right?

Courageous notions, all. And completely wrong.

The truth is, one of the last things you should do when writing the essay is write the essay. It's a paradox most writers have experienced: the sooner you jump in with the writing, the longer it will take, and the worse (and harder) it will be.

So what exactly are we telling you? That you have free license to go watch t.v. and hang with your friends until the last second? Not in the least. You have plenty of work to do, but it's not writing. It's pre-writing.

Pre-writing refers to the many steps you take to get yourself ready to write. Have you ever sat down to write and found you just didn't know where to start? Why? Because you don't know what you want to say yet. Since you haven't yet figured out the "big picture," the "smaller picture" - the first sentence or paragraph - is impossible.

So before you sit down to Write (capital 'W'), you have to write (small 'w'). Get a pad and pen, and take some time to brainstorm. You may feel like you're only wasting time - but in reality it's the most crucial time you'll spend.

To see how this is done, let's take a case study: the 'personal essay.' "Write about yourself," the application form tells you. Well, that's a big, big topic. You want to leave a strong impression; you want to give a unique sense of yourself. But how?

First, think about the essay as the answers to questions you ask yourself. And here's the trick: the kind of question you ask is half the battle. Don't ask vague questions like "Why am I special?"; "Why should I win this scholarship?" Instead, ask questions that will produce concrete, detail-filled responses: "What are some of my favorite activities?"; "What was the best/worst experience of my life?"; etc.

Jot down a list of questions like these. Then, on a separate sheet, start jotting down your answers. Throw down whatever comes to mind. Use fragments, single words, references to things you remember - anything to trigger your memories.

If you're dealing with an assignment in which questions are provided, do the same thing, but use the questions they give you to help you brainstorm. But you shouldn't simply give a list of your answers to each question. Instead, use the questions to jumpstart your thinking.

Going From the Brainstorm to Your First Draft

Okay, so now you've generated some ideas, some things to write about. But how do you get those broad ideas into an essay?

There are two basic techniques that most writers have used at one time or another: free- writing and outlining. They'll help you to generate more specific ideas and organize your ideas into a coherent whole.

Free-Writing

The most basic technique is free-writing. Free-writing is a lot like brainstorming, but on 'zoom-in' focus. The difference here is that you've already chosen your main focus (during your brainstorming session) and you are starting to focus in on the details of your argument.

So what exactly is free-writing? It's just like it sounds: you start writing (hopefully on topic) and you don't stop to organize your points or think about the larger structure of the essay. You write in stream-of-consciousness, letting your ideas trigger new thoughts.

When free-writing, a good way to get the ideas (and the writing) flowing freely is to set a time-specific goal and stick to it. For example, start writing and don't look back at anything you've written for a set amount of time. The idea is to write until you relax and get on a roll.

When you're done, re-read what you've written with an eye toward revising. Pick out the good points, weed away the digressions, and rewrite this original draft so that your ideas come across clearly.

Some interesting things may come out of your free-writing. You may find that the last idea you came up with becomes the introductory premise in your next draft. You may find that you started with one statement but by the end of your essay, you completely disagree with it. You may even find that in the process of writing you've found a topic that interests you more.

Outlining

Another technique to try is outlining. Sometimes it's hard to get started until you know where you are going. In that case, starting with an outline can help. And if you've tried free-writing and are having trouble re-organizing your material, outlining can be a helpful next step in the writing process.

As you begin to outline, jot down a number of topics that you think you may want to cover in your essay. If you've already done some free-writing, you might want to go through your draft and underline or highlight topics that seem important. Put these topics in a list, leaving a space between the various ideas. Keep reviewing your list, filling in the spaces between points with additional details.

As the list gets longer, you will start to see patterns forming. Some details can be classed together under a single heading. You may come up with additional examples to bolster one of the points you want to make. Continue to revise your outline and reorganize the points as you work toward the kind of essay you want to write. With your full outline in place, you should feel ready to draft your essay. You've worked out your structure in advance, so there's little chance that digressions or irrelevant tangents will clutter your ideas.

Pre-writing and revising: these are the first steps toward improving your writing. Master these skills, and you're well on your way to a better essay. Here are some tips for producing a well-written essay that will make your English teacher proud - and will catch the attention of scholarship judges and admissions officers.

The 'Write' Stuff: Writing Winning Scholarship Essays Part 2: Crafting a Compelling Personal Essay

Last time, we talked about how to improve your writing through pre-writing, free-writing and outlining. This time, we'll be talking about how to construct a compelling personal essay.

The personal essay is a unique project. Like any essay, it needs to be well-written and clearly structured if it is going to persuade its reader. On the other hand, it's quite unlike the writing you do for your classes because it has a different goal: to give the reader a clear impression of your personality. Here are some tips for producing a well-written essay that will make your English teacher proud - and will catch the attention of scholarship judges and admissions officers.

Balancing Structure with Personality

The key to a well-written essay is a clear structure. It signals to the reader its main idea and builds detail after detail in a logical structure to create a single impression. In most essays, this structure consists of three parts:

Introduction: states what you are going to say;

Body: attacks the topic in a more detailed fashion, supporting each claim with evidence;

Conclusion: sums up the argument and reminds the reader of what's been proven.

Keep this structure in mind when you write your personal essay. Sticking to a well-defined structure helps your reader to follow your thoughts. But while you want to create a well-organized essay, you also want to create a memorable impression. Here are some suggestions for how you can do both.

THE INTRODUCTION -

The first paragraph of your personal essay needs to do the same thing any introduction does: prepare your reader for the rest of your essay. In a conventional essay, you would do this by making a general statement and summarizing how you plan to prove this point.

But remember that a personal essay can be more creative and reflect your personality. Here are some ideas for creating an introduction that has impact:

Recount an anecdote from your childhood and suggest how this experience influenced your later development. Open with a quotation you find meaningful, and provide an interpretation that sums up your personal philosophy. Select an aspect of your family history and describe how it guides your current plans.

By using a more imaginative approach, you create an eye-catching opening that will also help tie your essay together.

THE BODY -

In a more conventional essay, the body of the essay is where you present the evidence to support the main idea. In a personal essay, the body serves a similar function - but instead of providing evidence, the body should provide greater detail about your plans, experiences and background.

Your goal is to include enough detail to convey your individuality while creating a unified impression. The best way to do this is to plan ahead. If you haven't tried using an outline to plan your writing, this may be a good time to start. Before you start writing, choose which details you want to provide. Are you going to talk about your work experiences? Your school activities? Your relationship with your family?

Next, decide how you are going to categorize this information. Here are some examples:

Trace your chronological development throughout high school.

Talk about how your studies and your extracurricular activities reveal very different aspects of your personality.

Highlight how the various members of your family have influenced you, dedicating a single paragraph to each.

When you make these kinds of decisions about your essay's structure, you create a clearer statement about yourself - one that your reader can easily follow.

THE CONCLUSION-

In a typical essay, the conclusion is where you sum up your argument. In a personal essay, you need to provide a similar kind of summary to create a final image of yourself.

But avoid simply reiterating what you've said before. Instead, use your final paragraph to take your essay to the next level. Think about the consequences of everything you've written. Use the conclusion to point to the bigger picture: how will your experiences and background help you become the person you want to be?

Writing this kind of essay takes a lot of hard work, but it's work that can pay off. By paying attention to structure, you help your reader process all the information you are providing. The result is an essay that succeeds in its goal of creating a memorable picture of you - one that may help you win a scholarship!