

SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS

Scholarship essays or responses vary widely depending on the scholarship you are applying for. Some scholarships are determined based on community service, professional experience, academic merit, or need. Some are specialized or targeted for a specific group of people or a particular accomplishment. Certain scholarships don't even require applications. That is why it is important to read each scholarship's guidelines and instructions before you start working on an essay. To start exploring, visit UNLV's Financial Aid & Scholarships page.

Below is general advice on how to prepare for and write scholarship essays.

READ THE MISSION STATEMENT, GUIDELINES, AND PROMPT CLOSELY

Pay close attention to who your audience is and what they are asking from you. Organizations providing scholarships have specific missions that shape their philosophy and constitute the reason why they give out awards in the first place. Familiarize yourself with that mission and explore your connection to it. Know that receiving a scholarship means aligning yourself with that mission and the values it entails.

Before you start writing, make sure to read the prompt carefully. To make sure your essay addresses the prompt on all levels, take some time to reflect and plan how you can address it. This can help you come up with a strategy and even an outline, making the rest of the process easy for you.

COMMON PROMPTS AND HOW TO PREPARE IN ADVANCE

There are some prompts more frequently seen than others. It is a good idea to identify prompts with overlapping elements, prepare written responses for these beforehand, and keep them digitally archived. This will help you save time when you apply, since you can simply adjust a pre-written draft and submit it. Some common scholarship essay prompts revolve around the following questions:

- Can you tell us about yourself?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What are your academic or career goals?
- Can you describe a challenge you had to face and how you overcame it?
- How has a given extracurricular shaped your personality?
- What makes you the right person for this scholarship?

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STRATEGIES

Organize Your Essay

Although scholarship essays may feel like they are their own genre, they aren't completely different from the essays you write in class. For the basics of organizing an essay, feel free to consult our handouts on Thesis Statements and Outlines. Also, note that scholarship essays and personal statements are similar, and our handout on Personal Statements and Strategies for Writing a Personal Statement can be helpful to you.

Start Strong

Scholarship committees read a lot of essays and may not get to spend a long time on each one. Take some time to think of an interesting beginning for your essay, one that is crafted for your audience and grabs their interest. Think of what makes a compelling story.

Make it Specific to You and Use Descriptive Language

Some essay prompts require you to write about important experiences from your past and reflect on the way they influenced you. Naturally, unlike academic writing, in scholarship essays you'll need to use first person language. Keep your essay specific to your story. Be descriptive, use the 'show don't tell' method. Details will not only help strengthen your essay but can also help you discover new connections between the prompt and your writing.

Pick the Right Moments

In your essay, focus on moments of significant growth that your readers can believe in. It doesn't always have to be a single incident. Finding patterns in your life which have built up over time and made certain growth possible can help you elaborate on a theme and write a more convincing essay.

Don't Oversell

Don't exaggerate or oversell the impact of your experience. Be genuine and open to nuance. Avoid generalizations,

Make Uncommon Connections, Avoid Clichés

Ethan Sawyer's (2024) framework on how to make your essay stand out suggests you should make sure the topic of your essay, the connections you make in it, the achievements you talk about, and the language you use have an uncommon quality. However, you can also make a relatively common experience sound uncommon by offering a unique takeaway or perspective. Let's say your prompt is on extracurricular activities. When you write about a popular sport like football, don't highlight discipline or hard work as many people probably do the same. Sawyer writes you can pick uncommon values, such as "critical thinking" and argue reading your opponent team's offense helped you develop this value, something you may have even carried over to the classes you take.

Re-read

Re-reading your essay will help you notice punctuation, grammar, or spelling errors, inconsistencies with tone, run-on sentences, and structural issues. You can always book a session with us to work with a consultant and develop your essay further.

REFERENCES

Sawyer, E. (2024, January 5). How to write a scholarship essay: Complete Guide + Examples. College. Essay Guy | Get Inspired. <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/how-to-write-a-scholarship-essay#>