

**COLLEGE
SCHOLARSHIP
AND
FINANCIAL AID
RESOURCES**

The \$1 Million Question: How Do I Win an Essay Contest?

Writing a winning essay isn't hard—just follow these tips.

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With more than \$1 million in essay scholarships in the FastWeb database, suddenly learning to put your thoughts on paper is more important than ever.

The personal essay may be the hardest part of your scholarship application. But if done well, it will give you the edge over your competition. It's where the "real you" can shine through.

If you find it difficult to write, try talking into a tape recorder. After you're done, you can transcribe the recording and edit the result. This can be the genesis of a good essay. Most people speak at a rate of 200 words per minute, but write or type at a rate of only 30 words per minute. So the act of writing can get in the way of your creativity, interrupting the flow of thought. You will also be more expressive when you talk, yielding a more personal and interesting essay.

Make your essay a hit with these tips from scholarship providers:

- **Think before you write.** Brainstorm to generate some good ideas and then create an outline to help you get going.
- **Be original.** The judges may be asked to review hundreds of essays. It's your job to **make your essay stand out from the rest.** So be creative in your answers.
- **Show. Don't tell. Use stories, examples and anecdotes to individualize your essay and demonstrate the point you want to make.** By using specifics, you'll avoid vagueness and generalities and make a stronger impression.
- **Develop a theme.** Don't simply list all your achievements. Decide on a theme you want to convey that sums up the impression you want to make. Write about experiences that develop that theme.
- **Know your audience.** Personal essays are not "one size fits all." Write a new essay for each application—one that fits the interests and requirements of that scholarship organization. You're asking to be selected as the representative for that group. The essay is your chance to show how you are the ideal representative.
- **Submit an essay that is neat and readable.** Make sure your essay is neatly typed, and that there is a lot of white space on the page. Provide adequate margins (1" to 1½") on all sides.
- **Make sure your essay is well written and free of errors.** Proofread carefully. Check the spelling and grammar. Share your essay with friends or teachers. Another pair of eyes can catch errors you might miss.

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Making Your Scholarship Application Essay Unique

“Please write a short personal essay.” What does that mean? The message is clear—tell us what makes you the obvious and best choice. Keep your sentences short and clear. The reader is less interested in your vocabulary than in getting a clear picture of who you are. Here are some ideas for making your essay unique, complete with examples of the good (Aha!) and not so good (Ho-hum). Of course, if everyone who reads this flyer does all these things, no one will be unique, so build on these ideas as you create your personal essay.

1. **Peel back the surface.** You need to make your statement personal, not just in the sense that it is about you. Peel, but in the ways in which you share thoughts and feelings that go beneath the trivial. You need to get at what you feel and think about most deeply.

Ho-hum: I am a person with many interests. Among them are soccer, cheerleading, and a concern with the feeling of others.

Aha! Sandburg once noted that life is like an onion. You peel away the layers and sometimes you cry. Three things that make me cry are...

2. **Recognize the difference between being self-directed and self-centered.** Above all, avoid a self-congratulatory tone. Let the reader add the adjectives based on the information you provide.

Ho-hum: I believe that my talents go in many directions. My academic achievements, my lead role in the school play, and my high scoring in basketball all speak to my abilities.

Aha! Here is my personal “balance sheet” of assets and liabilities. My hope is to give you, the investor, a useful way of sizing me up.

3. **Go for depth, not breadth.** A complete listing of many factors is less helpful or engaging than a more focused look at one or two things you consider most important.

Ho-hum: I have been active in many different areas, including sports (football and track), theater, civic affairs, church activities, etc.

Aha! What I love above all other activities I have tried is writing. It is my way of understanding and clarifying my thoughts and values.

4. **Avoid the myth of the well-rounded person.** One reason writers try to cover so many fronts is they mistakenly think it is important to appear without deficiency.

Ho-hum: I work hard to understand and correct my weaknesses. My friends tell me I’m impatient. I have now learned how to master that deficiency and to stop rushing things.

Aha! I’ve always been an unrelenting optimist and have given up trying to totally change myself. Instead, I’ve figured out some contexts in which optimism is a strength. One is the leadership role of setting and sticking to a vision.

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Planning Your Scholarship Application Essay

Many people write by beginning anywhere with a free flow of ideas that they then mold into an appropriate order. Yes, that can work. You can occasionally start a project by writing down random thoughts. However, we recommend that you try very hard to approach your essay by writing an outline of what you want to say. The outline will assure that you have the right order and that you will cover all of the points you want to cover. Outlining does not necessarily mean that your essay goes into a required chronologic order, for instance. Some stories are best told by starting in the middle, then describing how you got there and how you are going to go forward. The outline will make it easier for you to move around the timing of various parts of the story to get the most dramatic effect.

1. **Prepare a scratch outline**—a short statement of the thesis followed by the main supporting points for the thesis. Do not underestimate the value of this initial outline – or the work involved in achieving it. Be prepared to do a good deal of plain hard thinking at this first and most important stage of your paper.
2. **Prepare a more detailed outline.** To write an effective essay, first prepare an outline, using a form like the one that follows.

FORM FOR PLANNING AN ESSAY

Introduction	Opening remarks
	Thesis statement
	Plan of development
Body	Topic sentence 1.
	Specific supporting evidence
Body	Topic sentence 2.
	Specific supporting evidence
Body	Topic sentence 3.
	Specific supporting evidence
Conclusion	Summary, closing remarks, or both

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Write A Scholarship-Worthy Essay

Brainstorm. Get out a pencil and paper and go to town thinking about your subject. This means you should write down everything that comes to mind. Even ideas that seem disconnected should be jotted somewhere so you can refer to them later if you discover a logical way to use them. When you brainstorm, brilliance shines through. Too often, by censoring ourselves, we toss out our best ideas. Put a stop to this before you get to college. Think critically; don't be critical of your thoughts.

Organize. When you are done brainstorming, organize your ideas into the most logical order. From these ideas, you should be able to see an outline for your thesis.

Research. You've established which brilliant ideas have made the cut, so support them. Textual support from noted authors or literary texts is always helpful. Use their ideas to add commentary onto your own. Just be sure to cite your sources.

Write.

- **Be enthusiastic.** Your interest in the topic you are writing about will shine through. If your writing says, "my mom made me write this essay and my hand hurts," it will not distinguish you. If you don't know your subject, involve yourself in it by doing research.
- **Share information.** When you write, you give another person (the reader) access to your thought life. For many people this is why writing is so intimidating. If you can get past the intimidation however, and be entirely honest with your audience something magical happens—your voice/thoughts become something of interest to another human being.
- **Teach your audience.** By sharing with your audience, you create an opportunity to teach them. You've got their attention; after all, they believe you are a credible individual with interesting insight. Now they can learn. And guess what that makes you? Their teacher.

Be sure your essay includes all criteria designated by the scholarship provider.

Avoid an unconventional format. Now is not the time to test out your creative abilities. If you are serious about the scholarship you are applying for, focus your creative energy into your synthesis of ideas. By playing with the formatting too much, you detract from your writing abilities. Your essay should include:

- **Introduction.** Include your thesis within the introduction. If you are a talented theses writer it can extend into two sentences. Keep your introduction short and punchy. A long artistic introduction is tempting, but resist the urge. You have a point to get to, and likely, a word limit.
- **Body.** Make at least three discernable points within the body of your essay. Each point should be in a paragraph of its own so that it can be easily identified by the reader. Additionally, weave sources into the body of your essay if possible. It will make your writing stronger and also show that you committed yourself to researching the topic at hand.
- **Conclusion.** "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 be captured your own reflections. A conclusion does not appear to be the introduction regurgitated—your reader will catch on to this.

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Writing your Scholarship Essay

The purpose of the essay is to tell the scholarship committee things that are not readily apparent from the rest of the application and to provide insight about you on a personal level. Write so that the quality of your character emerges. Here are some important tips for successful essay writing.

1. **Give yourself plenty of time.** Turn in a finished product, not a rough draft that you wrote at the last minute.
2. **Ask a friend to make suggestions.** Choose someone who really thinks a lot of you to look it over. This is especially helpful because many people find it hard to “brag” about themselves. Be sure, however, that the writing is your own voice.
3. **Market yourself.** If you have overcome hardships, show pride in your achievements and tell how they have helped you grow. Don’t write to elicit sympathy. Include information about your life experiences, special talents and hurdles such as a learning disability or having English as a second language, diversity that may be racial or ethnic or geographic (living in a rural area where opportunities to study or find interesting jobs may be limited), or a career in an occupation typically done by someone of the opposite sex.
4. **Avoid listing activities and honors.** These are probably elsewhere in the application and tell what you do, not who you are. Rather than giving a list of jobs or activities you have experienced, tell how the activity, job, or experience changed your attitude about something or perhaps solidified a belief, established a goal or sharpened a perception. Elaborate on the insights you gained from your experience.
5. **Write statements that are multi-dimensional rather than a one-dimensional statement.** An example: “I learned a lot from sports. I learned how to set goals, work on a team, and give 110%.” Another example: “I’ve always wanted to be a doctor because I’ve always liked to help people.”
6. **Describe what is important to you,** why it is important, and how you have demonstrated that importance in your life.
7. **Talk about your major and career goals** and tell how your interest in the field developed. Describe any related work or volunteer experience.
8. **Demonstrate creativity, intellectual curiosity, initiative, motivation, leadership, persistence, that special spark, and exceptional achievement.**

These ideas are from an article that appeared in California Notes, a publication of the University of California. The university application process includes a required essay for admittance that is also used for scholarship awarding.

Scholarship Essay Points to Consider...

The most important aspect of your scholarship essay is the subject matter. You should expect to devote about 1-2 weeks simply to brainstorming ideas. To begin brainstorming subject ideas consider the following points. From brainstorming, you may include something about yourself that you had not considered at first.

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments you have been formally recognized for since the most interesting essays often are based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Of everyone living and dead, who would you most like to spend time with? These questions might help you realize what you love most.
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
- 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 scholarship essay for you?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- 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 getting a scholarship fit into your plans for the future?

Excerpted from essayinfo.com

Tips for Applying for and Managing the Scholarship Search

- Start searching for scholarships as soon as possible. There are many scholarships available to students in grades K-11, so don't wait until spring of your senior year. Continue searching for scholarships even after you are enrolled.
- Use a free scholarship matching such as Fastweb.com. The Fastweb database is updated daily and the site will email notifications of new scholarships that match your profile.
- Answer all of the optional questions on a scholarship matching web site to create as many matches as available.
- Look for local scholarships on bulletin boards near the guidance counselor or financial aid offices, or the library's jobs and careers section. Improve grades for more matches.
- To win more scholarships, apply to every scholarship for which you are eligible. It gets easier after several applications. Also, pursue small awards and essay contests. Essays can be reused and tailored to each new application.
- Don't miss deadlines. Use checklists to get organized.
- Tailor your application to the sponsor's goals. Read and follow the instructions carefully.
- If you have difficulty writing essays, record yourself as you answer the question out loud and transcribe the recording. Most people think and speak faster than they can write or type. Write an outline afterward to organize your thoughts.
- Personalize your essay and be passionate. Write about something of interest to you. Make your application stand out from the crowd, talk about your impact on other people and give specific examples.
- Check your online presence to ensure that it looks professional. Review your social media profiles and remove inappropriate and immature material. Use a simple email address, such as firstname.lastname@gmail.com.
- Proofread a printed copy of your essay and the application for spelling and grammar errors.
- Make a copy of your application before mailing it. Send by certified mail, return receipt or with delivery confirmation.

Common Scholarship Application Mistakes

- Missing deadlines
- Failing to proofread the application
- Failing to follow directions, especially regarding essay length and the number of recommendations
- Omitting required information
- Applying for an award when you don't qualify
- Failing to apply for an award for which you are eligible
- Failing to tailor the application to the sponsor
- Writing a boring essay
- Writing an essay that may offend the reviewer
- Including exaggerations or lies on your application

Beware of Scholarship Scams

- If you have to pay money to get money, it's probably a scam.
- Never invest more than a postage stamp to get information about scholarships or to apply for a scholarship.
- Nobody can guarantee that you'll win a scholarship.
- Do not give out personal information like bank account, credit card or Social Security numbers.
- Beware of the unclaimed aid myth. The only money that goes unclaimed is money that can't be claimed

Essential Scholarship Resources

- Fastweb Free Scholarship Matching Service: www.fastweb.com
- FinAid's Scholarships Section: www.finaid.org/scholarships
- Search for Scholarships on the Web: www.finaid.org/websearch
- Beware of Scholarship Scams: www.finaid.org/scholarshipscams and www.ftc.gov/scholarshipscams
- Education Tax Benefits: www.finaid.org/taxbenefits and www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p970.pdf
- Federal Student Financial Aid: www.fafsa.ed.gov

Top Scholarships by Category

Most Unusual Scholarships

- Scholarship for Left-Handed Students
- Duck Brand Duct Tape Stuck at Prom Contest
- David Letterman Telecommunications Scholarships
- Zolp Scholarships
- Patrick Kerr Skateboard Scholarships
- Scholar Athlete Milk Mustache of the Year Award
- National Marbles Tournament Scholarships
- Klingon Language Institute Scholarships
- National Beef Ambassador Program
- Vegetarian Resource Group Scholarships

Most Prestigious Scholarships

- Marshall Scholarships
- Rhodes Scholarships
- Winston Churchill Scholarship Program
- Harry S. Truman Scholarships
- Henry Luce Foundation Scholarships
- Morris K. Udall Foundation Undergraduate Scholarships
- Robert C. Byrd Honors Scholarship Program
- Barry M. Goldwater Scholarships
- Elie Wiesel Prize in Ethics Essay Contest
- National Merit Scholarship Corporation

Most Generous Scholarships

- Intel Science Talent Search
- Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology
- NIH Undergraduate Scholarship Program
- Elks Nat'l Foundation Most Valuable Student Competition
- Davidson Fellows
- Intel International Science and Engineering Fair
- Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarships
- Collegiate Inventors Competition
- Coca-Cola Scholars Program Scholarships
- Gates Millennium Scholars

Scholarships for Age 13 and Under

- National Spelling Bee
- National Geography Bee
- National History Day Contest
- Jif Most Creative Peanut Butter Sandwich Contest
- Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
- Christopher Columbus Community Service Awards
- Dick Blick Linoleum Block Print Contest
- Gloria Barron Prize for Your Heroes
- Patriot's Pen
- Prudential Spirit of Community Awards

Scholarships for Community Service

- Segal AmeriCorps Education Awards
- The Do Something Awards
- Comcast Leaders and Achievers Scholarships
- Discover Card Tribute Awards
- Echoing Green Fellowships
- The Heart of America Christopher Reeve Awards
- Kohl's Kids Who Care Program
- Samuel Huntington Public Service Awards
- National Caring Awards
- Youth Action Net

Scholarships that Don't Need an A

- US Department of Education (Federal Student Aid)
- AXA Achievement Scholarship Program
- Horatio Alger Association Scholarships
- Ayn Rand Institute
- Girls Going Places Scholarships
- Holocaust Remembrance Project Essay Contest
- Americanism Essay Contest
- AFSA National Scholarship Essay Contest
- Red Vines Drawing Contest
- Community Foundation Scholarships

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Scholarships & Financial Aid Resources

MENDOCINO COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATION: <https://mendocinocollege.awardspring.com>
(application opens January 2 and closes March 1)

MENDOCINO COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP INFO: www.mendocino.edu/student-services/financial-aid/scholarships

SCHOLARSHIP DATABASE WEBSITES

Fast Web

www.fastweb.com

cappex

www.cappex.com

collegeXpress

www.collegexpress.com

College Scholarships.org

www.CollegeScholarships.org

EducationGrant.com

www.educationgrant.com

niche

colleges.niche.com/scholarships

Scholarships.com – Find Money for College

www.scholarships.com

ScholarshipPoints

www.scholarshippoints.com

Unigo.com

www.unigo.com/scholarships

FINANCIAL AID INFORMATION

FAFSA

www.fafsa.ed.gov

The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid

www.finaid.org

fedMoney.org – U.S. Government grants and loans

fedmoney.org

BankingSense.com

www.bankingsense.com/college-scholarships-grants-guide-where-to-apply

Affordable Colleges Foundation

www.affordablecollegesonline.org/financial-aid/financial-aid-for-online-college

ADDITIONAL SCHOLARSHIP RESOURCE INFORMATION

Mendocino College Outside Scholarships and Resource Guides

www.mendocino.edu/student-services/scholarships/outside-scholarships

The webpage above includes hyperlinks to the following resources:

- Scholarships for Minority Students
- Scholarship Guide for Black Students
- Scholarship Guide for Hispanic Students
- Scholarship Guide for Asian-American Students
- Scholarship Guide for Native American Students
- Scholarship Guide for Students with Disabilities
- Scholarship Guide for Women
- Scholarship Guide for Veterans

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Tips for Requesting Scholarship Application Letters of Recommendation

Most scholarship providers require applicants to provide letters of recommendation. Recommendation letters help the scholarship provider and selection committees learn a little more about you. Letters of recommendation are a great way to highlight your talents and abilities to scholarship providers and admissions officers. An outside perspective that acknowledges your accomplishments and strengths can go a long way toward convincing a donor that you are deserving of their scholarship dollars. Mendocino College Scholarship applicants must include two letters of recommendation with their application.

1. ***Two recommendation letters are required.***

- ***At least one*** letter of recommendation ***must be from an instructor/faculty member.*** You can ask your counselor, current or past instructor, employer, landlord, and/or someone who knows you well (someone who worked with you on a committee, a team, in a club, at a community service organization, etc.).
- **Do not ask a family member.** Family members do not qualify as recommenders.

2. ***Ask early to give Recommenders plenty of time*** to write your letter. The deadline for recommendation letters to post to your web-based application is March 1. Letters cannot be posted once the application period closes.

3. ***When asking someone to write a recommendation:***

- If you plan to apply for other scholarships, ask the recommender to write a general letter you can use for your other scholarship applications.
 - ***Give them a FACT SHEET*** of your skills and work background, favorite subjects in school, community activities, extracurricular activities in school, goals for the future, and accomplishments you think are noteworthy. Don't be modest. Sometimes a friend or colleague sees us in a different way than we see ourselves. Providing a Fact Sheet shows you are willing to provide information to help them write the recommendation.
 - Let the person know why you are asking them for a recommendation. ***If they agree to write a recommendation, ask for their email address*** and let them know you will send a request so they can access the scholarship site. Let them know the deadline to post the recommendation is March 1.
 - If the person hesitates or acts uncomfortable about writing a recommendation, try not to take it personally. Thank them for their time, and then choose someone else to ask.
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