

Tips for College Scholarship Essays

Now we're in the most anxiety-producing part of the application process - writing the essay response. We know that many people struggle with the writing process. We also know that the requirement to respond to an essay question like the following can be intimidating:

- One that seems like one more school assignment in an already crowded calendar, like the Annual Signet Classics Student Essay Contest that asks you to read *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins and answer a question such as: How do different female characters in *The Moonstone* embody or defy what we might think of as traditional Victorian or nineteenth-century values and expectations for women's behavior?
- One that asks you to talk about yourself in some broad or narrowly defined way, such as the all-ink.com \$5,000 scholarship contest that requires a 50-200 word essay on who has had the greatest impact on your life, and a 50-200 word essay on what you hope to achieve in your personal and professional life after college.

Developing a college scholarship essay can be intimidating. Anne Lazaroney, a guidance counselor, says that students don't know how to begin writing essays, and they are intimidated by the competition, figuring that they can't possibly write well enough to win anyway, so why bother?

Let's look at the facts. You are graduating high school, right? Some educators apparently believe that you are capable of putting together coherent thoughts on a piece of paper. Plus, we already know that 90 percent of the people who apply - valedictorians, creative writing gurus, school paper journalists, and just plain folks - have already failed to get to the finalist circle because they messed up the application. This information suggests that you probably have a decent chance at winning a scholarship if you put your mind to it.

Before we go any further, we should be clear on one point: regardless of the theme of the **scholarship essay**, Wilkie Collins or anything else, the essay is really about you. Clearly, Signet wants to encourage enjoyment of the classics, but more than anything else, the judges want to know about you, your thoughts, your beliefs, and your ideas.

Scholarship Essay Tips

Most Students Don't Know How to Start the College Scholarship Essay...

Guess what? Getting started is sometimes the most difficult part of writing for professional writers as well. However, never start writing without doing a couple of things first.

Understand the purpose of the writing and the motivation of the askers

Analyze the question or topic

Write down the essay question. How many parts does it have? Does the question suggest a structure or order, such as first describe your role in...then tell why it had the following effect...and what you learned from it....

Do you have to do research first, or is this a question that is strictly about you that will come from an analysis of yourself?

Why have the judges asked this question or posed this topic? Recognizing that all essays are about you, how are the judges planning to get to know you through this essay?

Analyze the Organization

What is this scholarship about? Who founded it? What is the mission of the organization? Why are they providing scholarship money? Who are the judges? What special points of view do they bring to the judging?

How do you find out this information? Usually, you can find a great deal of background from the scholarship Web site or the printed material provided by the scholarship group. Dottie Theriaque from the Community Foundation says that if you have a question about purpose or anything else, call and ask. Funders are eager to help applicants; that's what they are all about.

In a phone call with Josh Barsch, founder of the Dale Fridell scholarship, he was very clear in his explanation that his scholarship group does not believe that only valedictorians or super jocks or Ms. "I Belong to Every Club" should get help going to college. Josh notes that once you leave school, the only person who will care about your GPA is you. Your success will be based on what kind of person you are, how you approach challenges, and what your work ethic values are. Your GPA may be some indicator of your potential, but you will have to figure out how to reach that potential, and it's that process that will set you apart. That's why the Fridell scholarship doesn't request GPAs and SATs and club lists. Kind of levels the playing field, doesn't it? Plus, if you are the valedictorian or the super jock, the only message is that you are not solely defined by that honor or activity. You are much more, and Josh's contest asks you to go beyond the usual high school achievement trappings and reveal more about yourself.

Create goals for the writing

For example, your goal in responding to an essay might be to:

- Demonstrate personal traits in yourself that are similar to the personal traits of the person for whom the scholarship is named. (The Brower Youth Award is given in honor of David Brower, to "honor his lifetime of bold action, inspiring mentorship, and principled effectiveness, which helped give birth to the modern environmental movement.")
- Use present tense and optimistic phrases to show that you are an active, vibrant, can-do person.
- Show how your strong family support contributes to your success.
- Emphasize your sense of balance in academics and family life.

Do these goals sound so generic that they could be written for any essay? That's not necessarily true. An essay for a scientific award may not want to portray a person as vibrant and can-do (and possibly lacking in the self-discipline necessary for rigorous scientific study) but instead as a diligent, highly curious person with a passion for understanding why things work and the patience to test all of the variables to come to a valid conclusion.

Depending on the award and the personal circumstances, a goal of the *scholarship essay* might be to demonstrate a commitment to succeed despite unstable family circumstances, such as living in a variety of foster homes. Using a different approach, a conscious choice to forego balance between academics and family life to pursue a passion for learning about gene mapping to search for a cure for the multiple sclerosis that has made a family member an invalid.

Develop a Theme

Some may argue that you should develop a theme for your essay and then write goals. We believe that the opposite is true. When you read an essay question, it may be immediately apparent to you that the theme, or the message that you want to convey, has to do with your commitment to the healing profession as an extension of

your desire to better people's circumstances. Wonderful! However, if the theme of your essay is not immediately clear, break down the work by establishing a set of goals based upon your understanding of the essay's intent and the mission of the funding organization. These goals may lead you to one or more themes for your essay. In the set of goals above, the theme that may be emerging from the goals is an appreciation for the family or the team as a cornerstone to individual and group success. You can use your experience as a club leader in developing a team approach, and your decision to ask members of your family to be on your college team to proofread, edit, and search for opportunities as ways to show that you value working relationships and your leadership style will be successful in inspiring group success.

No matter which approach you take, goals first or theme development first, the important takeaway is to establish a theme and goals and to be sure that the theme and goals relate you as a person to the subject you are writing about, even if the subject is a character in a Wilkie Collins novel or a pending piece of legislation.

Outline Your Response

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.

There is a downside to the outline, we think. Sometimes it is difficult to make the transition from one section of the outline to the next, making the essay sound like explanatory words hung on a frame, very skeletal in effect. That's why later in this chapter, we will pay special attention to transitions so that your essay flows well.

It's Time to Write

Now it's time to fill in that outline and tell your story. We have chosen not to give you a lot of new rules and directions in this section because we want you to simply get the story out on paper. You already have the basics - a theme in mind, a set of goals to meet, and an outline to work from. Do your best and we'll meet you in the next section to talk about it.

It's Time to Rewrite

Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo made dozens of sketches before embarking on their masterpieces. Read the biography of any writer and discover that everyone - yes, everyone - needs to rewrite. You must do so because this is not an e-mail or a last-minute book report, it's a ticket to money if you do it right.

Show, don't tell.

Go back through your essay. In every sentence where you have told the judges something, is there a way to show by example? Consider the following.

My family does not have a lot of money. I worked my way through high school at Walmart.

This is a good piece of information to share. However, the message can be made more vivid by sharing more detail.

My family does not have a lot of money. I worked at the local Walmart most evenings and did my homework on the bus ride home or after work.

Much better. Now the judges know that you were very busy and can feel the squeeze of needing to earn money and still get your schoolwork done. One more time.

My family does not have a lot of money. We work together on a schedule so I can earn money for college and stay on top of my schoolwork. Most weekdays after school, I attend one of my club meetings then catch the late bus home. I usually finish my math homework on the ride. I get home in time to grab supper ahead of time (Mom always has something ready on the stove) then work on other homework until Dad drives in at about 5:35 pm. We pass each other in the driveway, transferring keys and information. ("I aced the math test"; "It needs gas on the way home.") The fifteen-minute drive gets me to Walmart in time to punch in for the 6 pm to closing shift. On nights that the family needs the car, Dad drives me both ways. I'm home again by 9:30 pm, in time to chat with my folks and watch thirty minutes of ESPN before going to bed.

Now this is a cool guy in a great family. Everybody participates, everybody cooperates. You can feel the close timing involved in making this situation work. You can hear the easy interaction of people who like one another. You know that this guy is not a robot because he needs a little human interaction plus a little TV before starting over. We like him. Don't you? We'd like to help out this family; they deserve it. Bingo!

Present Tense, if Possible

The present tense allows people to live the information with you. It's not always possible, but it's a great strategy when it can work. The above paragraph could have been written in past tense, e.g., "Dad drove me both ways." It's still a powerful sentence, but it's already over. When Dad "drives," we're right there in the car.

Kill the Adjectives and Adverbs

In Noah Lukeman's marvelous book about writing, *The First Five Pages*, he suggests that you go through your first page of writing (your whole essay, in this case) and circle every adjective and adverb. Then see if you can use a more descriptive noun or verb to make your writing crisper. He uses examples like substituting "he was a tyrant" for "he was a brutal man" or "he was sprinting" for "he was running quickly." Try it. Your writing will be immediately refreshed by using fewer words to do the job efficiently.

Make the Introduction Inviting

The introduction invites your reader to keep going. This is not the place to summarize - why read the rest if you get the picture in the first paragraph? Instead, tantalize and encourage the next step. How? Use emotion, raise a question, and create surprise with a surprising fact.

Here is a possible opening for a discussion of a student's work with a literacy program.

I am a literacy volunteer. I did not decide to do this work because studies report that 21 percent of adults (over 40 million) in this country are functionally illiterate or because 43 percent of people with reading deficiencies live in poverty or even because 70 percent of people with reading deficiencies have no job or only a part-time job. My reason for becoming a literacy volunteer was much simpler. My Dad couldn't read.

Okay, I'm hooked. I didn't really know how bad the literacy problem is, but, even more, now I need to know if this person was able to teach her Dad to read, and how this person, with an illiterate parent, made it to the point of applying for a scholarship and heading for college.

Create Workable Transitions

Transitions are hard whether you are writing a speech, composing an essay, or trying to get your little brother to go to bed. The trick is to show your reader where they are going next and why it's a logical next step. Try not to use standard transitional phrases like "Secondly" or "As a consequence." Try repeating the prior thought and

connecting to the next task. For example, "Once I learned how to scale rocks on the artificial rock face, I needed to try out my skills on a real mountain."

A Compelling Conclusion

As in the introduction, don't summarize. Essays are too short to need a review at the conclusion. Instead, reemphasize the main point or circle back to the beginning and tie the loop. Consider the literacy introduction. The body of the essay should have been about the student, her efforts as a volunteer, her feelings about the difficulties faced by those who can't read, her recognition of the gift that reading is, and her decision to pursue a teaching career as a result of her experience. This story begs for a conclusion that answers the question, "Did her Dad learn to read?"

Some possibilities:

Dad may never read Dostoyevsky, but we are both thrilled that he can now read his sister's letters from his hometown in Romania and doesn't have to pretend to read the newspaper anymore.

Dad never did learn to read. But through his struggle, I learned that I want to give the gift of literacy to others, the gift that no one has been able to give to my Dad.

Very different endings, but in each, we hear the effect that the experience has had on the writer. That's the point. We gained insight into this woman's life through her writing.

Take a Breather

After you write and revise your essay, you need to take a break from it so that you can return with a fresh set of eyes. It's amazing how the sparkling prose you thought you wrote turns out to need a lot more work once you've gotten a little distance. Even more amazing is the realization that some of your writing is actually much better than you expected, now that you've followed some very standard writing rules.

Use Outside Readers

Ask people to read your essay and help you with honest feedback. Ask them what they liked most and least. Ask if the essay is written in a logical fashion with reasoning that is supported by examples or other proof. Ask your readers to correct typos and grammar. Every new pair of eyes helps.

I'm Not That Interesting!

You don't need to have an illiterate father or wage a battle against cancer to write an interesting essay. The guy who is working at Walmart probably feels that he doesn't have time to be interesting - he's too busy working! Everybody's life has interest, and every essay topic can be made compelling by looking at how that topic affects the human condition and how you fit into that human condition.

Congratulate Yourself

The scholarship essay is by far the most difficult part of the application. You have overcome the biggest obstacle to applying for a scholarship.