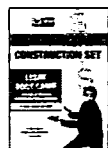


Revise Your Essay Draft

There's a saying that some of the best writers are, in fact, not particularly great at writing—they're just good at rewriting. In my experience, a good scholarship essay is usually drawn out from a process of first reevaluating your concepts and ideas, then reassessing how to communicate those points.

To illustrate how to do this, I've included an excerpt from an intermediate draft of an essay I wrote for the Century III Leaders scholarship program. The application materials requested that I propose a solution to a problem facing America. I chose the topic of reforming our public education system:

Current solutions often throw money at problems in education, but don't look to harness already-present resources. In looking to the future, we must find solutions to this educational crisis in three steps. First, we need to make a strong commitment to deliver a quality product. School must make sure that basic areas are covered before expanding the curriculum. We first need to improve the building blocks of learning—reading, writing, and math. Next, we must motivate and inspire students to go far beyond minimum expectations. America was built on the principle that with hard work and



ATTENTION STUDENTS AND PARENTS: This article is designed to work together with Ben Kaplan's *Scholarship Starter Kit* CD. If you haven't received a CD, contact your college planner or counselor, or let us know at www.ScholarshipCoach.com/needkit

perseverance, anything is possible. We need to reaffirm this belief by encouraging students to pursue learning outside what is spoon-fed in class. Last, we must find new ways to customize education to help students adapt to the rapidly changing world of the future. We need to train students how to maximize resources, share information, and work cooperatively. These abilities will be the new measure of success.

This draft wasn't bad, but the passage still had some glaring weaknesses. It mentioned some important reform concepts, but didn't really take the time to fully develop the ideas. As a result, it seemed to be more a conglomeration of catch phrases for educational reform than something that had a lot of real substance. The passage made only passing reference to alternatives to my point of view. Failing to recognize and make my case against differing views was a big omission.

The passage also lacked a sound organizational structure; all my ideas had been lumped into one big paragraph, even though each idea

merited its own organizational unit. Furthermore, I wasn't making every sentence count. The second sentence of the passage was largely a transitional one that didn't accomplish much of anything. The sentence beginning "America was built on the principle" was tangential to the topic at hand.

In short, both my ideas and my expression of those ideas had to be fleshed out. I tried to address these weak points in a subsequent version:

Lowering standards so as to get more high school students through the system and into college each year is not the panacea for this debilitation in learning. Today, businesses rightly complain that they must reeducate even college graduates in basic academic skills. Some policy makers would have us believe that simply bolstering programs with more money will solve our problems. Unfortunately, money isn't the panacea either: Positive change demands wisdom and discipline, and a lack of money often becomes a convenient scapegoat for failure. In fact,

as an active student government member. I've learned how workable solutions are achievable without always allocating new funds—by harnessing underutilized resources, such as the students themselves.

Educators must make the commitment to deliver a quality product. Schools must refocus their energies to ensure that basic core subjects are adequately covered before expanding content. By minimizing distractions, we can increase the critical time allotted to developing the building blocks of learning—reading, writing, and math.

Next, we must motivate and inspire students to go far beyond minimum expectations. And in the process, we must raise the expectations of students as well as their parents. Furthermore, we need to emphasize and teach how to learn, not merely what to learn. We should encourage students to pursue learning outside of what is covered in class.

Last, we must find new ways to customize education to help students better prepare for the 21st century. The communications and computer revolutions have forever changed our lives. We need to train students and teachers to maximize resources by sharing information over electronic networks.

We should create lower-tech programs that will act as supplementary “training wheels” for the interactive, multimedia resources of tomorrow. The dif-

ference between present practicalities and future possibilities is only a matter of the technological level of the networking links.

In this revision, I developed each of my points more fully and revised my organizational structure to put each point in its own paragraph. The passage begins by addressing two alternative ways of addressing the problem and showing why such “solutions” won't work.

At the end of the first paragraph, I've made the essay more personal by referencing a lesson learned from my own student government experience. The phrase I used at the end of the paragraph—“the students themselves”—was meant to foreshadow a discussion of a service program I created called the Homework Helpline. I fully described this project in a later section of the essay. In addition, notice that I was more careful with my word choice and sentence structure. Overall, the persuasiveness of this essay was enhanced significantly.

Finding Your Own Voice

Although winning scholarship essays have certain common characteristics, unlike a multiple-choice exam, there is no such thing as a “right” answer to a scholarship essay question. In fact, two winning essays for the same scholarship program

may very well approach the subject matter in entirely different ways.

To see this in action, let's examine two winning essays from the prestigious *Optimist International Essay Contest*. In this scholarship program, students wrote on the topic “If I Could Give Freedom Away” and were asked to respond in an essay of no more than 500 words.

Winning Essay #1

If I could give freedom away, I would have to be a god for it is impossible to freely distribute liberty as one would a gift. Freedom lies in every individual, whether it only dwells in the solemn soul or is exercised daily in an open-minded society. One cannot give freedom away for the simple reason that every human being cannot merely receive such an intangibly magnificent gift, rather each must find this liberty inside himself or herself.

Each man and woman possesses freedom to a certain degree. While some enjoy more liberties than others such as the cherished rights to free speech or religion, every person does experience some level of freedom. John Milton once wrote, “Thou canst touch the freedom of my mind.” Freedom of thought is often looked

upon as insignificant, yet it is as precious a natural right as any.

Often times, man finds that he must free himself from an oppressive government, but even this freedom could not possibly be a present hastily bestowed. It must be fought for, believed in, and supported to be prized. As Thomas Paine masterfully concluded in *The Crisis*, Number One, "What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value." Yes, the blessings of life such as liberty are much more treasured and appreciated when they are obtained through one's personal hard work, commitment, and dedication.

Any physical suppression is often viewed as the depletion of all liberty, yet is it not an axiomatic right of man to be free? During the time of tyranny by Great Britain, the American colonies were incessantly taxed and deprived of legal freedom. However, in actuality, these colonies could have rebelled at any time and followed their own will as they finally realized and strongly declared in the seditious Boston Tea Party. They had freedom all along, maybe not legally, but they did own the liberty of choice, which was a "gift" they had to find the strength to exercise.

Perhaps the gift of freedom cannot be found by solely lifting political oppression. Are not the chains of society and its priorities just as heavy and enslaving? Is not the pursuit

of money, success, fame, and glory equally oppressing? Just as in political suppression, freedom cannot be dealt to deliver one from the clutches of these worldly, oppressive desires. One must personally liberate oneself from these societal values, and how much more exhilarating it is to discover individual independence rather than receiving it, were it possible, on a silver platter.

Liberty must be realized and applied so that it may be cherished and truly appreciated. Each individual possesses this freedom to some extent, and for some, it is only a matter of discovering this inner

quality. Liberty and independence are axiomatic rights that free one from political as well as societal oppression, and they are much more treasured when they are personally discovered instead of being simply given.

Winning Essay #2

I came to this country when I was eight or nine years old. I'm Hispanic and now I am 17 years old. I was living in a small city full of gangs, violence, and drugs, before I got arrested.

After seeing all this for a long time, I got used to it; I even got involved with it and liked it. I did not see that I was not free

ASK THE COACH

How should I approach scholarship essays that deal with personal growth experiences?



Essay questions focused on growth experiences ask you to write about an episode or event that has had a significant influence on the type of person you've become. The experience itself can be either positive or negative, but the key factor is describing what you've learned from the situation.

A particular experience need not necessarily be dramatic to be an effective growth experience. Don't make the mistake of trying to attach some huge symbolic significance to everyday events that seem pretty mundane. (Avoid sentences like "By eating that ham sandwich, I suddenly felt a heartfelt need to explore my spirituality.") Growth experiences, by their very nature, deal with personal qualities and characteristics, so try to work in references to some positive character traits such as determination, hard work, individual initiative, and enthusiasm.

If your growth experience is an obstacle you've overcome, don't dwell on the obstacle itself for too long. The focus should not be on the problem you faced, but on the steps you have taken to overcome it.

at all: I was in slavery to my surroundings. I didn't have the freedom that a gangster is supposed to have. I was a follower of people who did not have any future and were in the same low place as I was. I didn't realize that or I just didn't care. Everything was fun for me and that was all I lived for. I thought freedom was just like that, but I was dead wrong. Nothing I was involved in freed me.

Being foolish and not wanting to accept the reality of my captivity cost me much of my life and I'm still paying. In March, 1998, I committed a crime for reasons that I could easily forget, put them aside, and keep on going with my life. But I didn't. I plunged ahead in my crazy life. I got caught, and I lost what I once considered freedom.

I never thought people could take my freedom away in just a few minutes. I'm not talking about the freedom to get drunk or high: what I lost was much more valuable than that. Now I am incarcerated and can never forget how much I have lost that I never paid attention to in the past. Real, authentic freedom was taken from me and I didn't even know I had it.

I see now that genuine freedom has to do with making your own decisions—good decisions. It's practicing your own religion and letting God have His way in your life.

It is going where you choose and doing it when you feel it is right. Most importantly, freedom that I lost was all about

**The key, therefore, is not to waste time
searching for that mythical perfect essay
answer or copying someone else's writing style.
Instead focus your efforts on developing your
own unique voice, the one that's right for you.**

not being controlled by anything or anybody. I knew that drugs once controlled me, but I didn't realize how all the gang members and wrong attitudes also had a grip on my soul.

Now I'm locked up and I can only plan for a free future; but if I could give my potential freedom to a group of people, I would try to find those who could appreciate what a gift it is, people who were truly alive in their hearts and would use their freedom to help heal a sick society.

I believe that all the people in the world were born with the potential to love freedom. Unfortunately, few of them ever find it. Shame on individuals like me who had it and threw it away so carelessly. Please don't throw your freedom away; it is a piece of your life.

Wow, what a difference. While the first essay was written from an intellectual, philosophical, and analytical perspective, the second essay was actually written from behind bars!

The first essay is interesting because of its unique intellectual approach: The writer takes issue with the very essay topic itself and turns the topic on its head by challenging

the notion that freedom can be given away at all.

She argues that freedom, at its core, must come from within. The writer develops this argument with a thoughtful and organized progression of ideas.

The second essay is compelling in its intensely personal nature. The writer describes quite a few negative things from his past (including the fact that he's in jail), but skillfully keeps the focus on what these experiences have taught him about the meaning of true freedom. The writer is credible and the essay powerful because of the heartfelt way he approaches the topic.

These two examples illustrate how even among winning submissions, essay questions and topics can be interpreted and answered in very different ways.

Imagine, however, if the first essay writer had tried to write in the style of the second essay, or if the second writer (the one in prison) had tried to write in a more academic style. Neither essay probably would have been successful.

The key, therefore, is not to waste time searching for that mythical perfect essay answer or copying someone else's writing style. Instead focus your efforts on developing your own unique voice, the one that's right for you.

Tips for Revising Essays

Before revising an essay, try to distance yourself from the material. If possible, take a day or two off from working on the essay and allow it to simmer in the back of your mind.

When revising your own work, get in the habit of reading your essay out loud. Essay writers frequently skip over trouble areas when reading silently, because their minds fill in gaps in the text and gloss over confusing areas: They read more into the words than what is actually there.

Reading aloud, however, gives your ears a chance to catch what your eyes miss. If something is awkwardly phrased or out of place, you'll hear it right away. You can even tape-record yourself reading the essay, so that you can play back the tape and focus on the words.

Better yet, have a friend or family member read your essay out loud. When we read our own writing, we have a tendency to think, "Man, that sounds a lot like Ernest Hemingway!" When others read to us, however, we can tell that the passage is more reminiscent of the movie *Ernest Goes to Camp*.

When others read your work, keep a notepad in front of you and listen for places in which phrases are out of sequence or poorly worded. Take note of where the reader

fumbles over words, has to reread sentences, or seems to get lost. Such occurrences can clue you in to sections that may need more work.

To help you determine which aspects of your essay need to be improved, I have attached to this article an *Essay Revision Checklist*. The form is designed to help you double-check that the key attributes of winning scholarship essays have been incorporated into your work.

Getting Quality Feedback

In general, you never want to craft your scholarship applications all on your own. Instead, draw upon the suggestions of family members, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, and others you respect.

After all, several brains—and several different perspectives that might mirror different members of the judging panel—are better than one.

To help you get *quality* feedback on your essay, you need to provide others with a framework for offering you tangible advice. To create this framework, you can employ my *Mock Judging Ballot*, which I've also attached to this article. You will simply hand your essay and this ballot to anyone who will serve as your make-believe scholarship judge. They will help you rate and score

your essay according to the most important principles of effective scholarship essay writing.

So your job is to find three people whose opinion you value to read your essay and fill out the form. If you wind up racking your brain to come up with these three people, consider trying one English or journalism instructor, one guidance counselor, and one friend or family member. Encourage your mock judges to be tough on your essay... Sugar-coating your essay ratings to make you feel better doesn't help anyone in the end.

And when you are reviewing their responses, listen carefully to what your mock judges say, and heed their advice as best you can. At the same time, stay confident in the principles of effective essay writing that you have learned so far.

Recognize that even though your three editors might not know how to solve a problem in your essay, they will likely be able to red-flag areas that are problematic or confusing. And remember: Never take criticism personally.

The author of this article, Ben Kaplan, is the publisher of ScholarshipCoach.com and the winner of more than two dozen scholarships worth \$90,000—enough to cover virtually the entire cost of his Harvard education.



For more information on crafting scholarship and college admissions essays that really bring home the college cash, see Ben Kaplan's *Essay Boot Camp* CD-ROM. Learn more at: www.ScholarshipCoach.com/products/bootcampcd

Essay Revision Checklist

This checklist is a quick way to determine which aspects of your essay need a bit more work. For each item on the list, check "yes" if that statement is true about your essay, or "no" if the essay could use some help in that area. When you can check "yes" to all the statements, your essay rewrite should be complete!

YES NO

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | CLOSE INSPECTION: I have not relied solely on my computer's spell checker to edit my essay. I have visually inspected the essay on my own, and have read the essay out loud to listen for trouble areas. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | FOCUS: I have not turned my essay into a "laundry list" of my activities and accolades. Rather, I have focused on my most compelling credentials and have added specific examples and anecdotes to back them up. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | QUOTE ORIGINALITY: If I used a quote in my essay, it was original and thought provoking. If possible, I have tried to refrain from using a quote if I could better describe its sentiments in my own words. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | ADDRESSING THE TOPIC: I have answered the specific essay question and directly addressed all suggested sub-topics. A second party reading my essay would be able to clearly understand my main point. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | EMPHASIS: I have chosen a few important ideas to emphasize in my essay and I have fully explored these ideas. I have avoided introducing more topics than I can adequately support in the space provided. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | WORD CHOICE: I have refrained from abusing my thesaurus in an attempt to sound more intelligent. My essay is conversational in tone. I am using words that I truly understand. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES: My essay is very personal in nature. I have included personal examples and anecdotes that make my response unique from other applicants. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | HOOK: My essay grabs the reader's attention in the first four lines. The introduction to the essay is unique and memorable. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | ORGANIZATION: My essay is well organized and has a clear structure. Each sequential paragraph provides readers with a detailed road map that helps them navigate through the key points of my essay. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | SENTENCE ECONOMY: Each sentence in my essay really adds to what precedes it. I have avoided stating in many words what could have been said in a few. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | ADHERENCE TO RULES: My essay adheres strictly to the word limitations and other guidelines set forth by the scholarship organization. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | JUDGING CRITERIA: I have closely reviewed the scholarship provider's published judging criteria. I have taken care to address this criteria in my essay. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | FACTUAL ACCURACY: I have double checked the accuracy of all facts included in my essay. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | RHYTHM AND TEMPO: I have created a good "flow" in my essay, using a variety of short and long sentences. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | CUSTOMIZATION: I have custom tailored my essay to fit the agenda of the scholarship provider or sponsor. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | TOPIC CHOICE: I have chosen essay subject matter that enables me to highlight my best attributes. |

Mock Judging Ballot

One of the best ways to learn how to improve a scholarship essay is to get feedback from others. Hand this form to those you would like to rate and score your essay. Instruct them to grade your essay on a five-point scale for each evaluation category (with a "5" being the top grade). Note that a total of 50 points is a perfect score.

Principle #1: Show, Don't Tell

A. SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

- ☐ 5. The writer has provided examples so real that you feel as though you actually "know" the writer.
- ☐ 4. The examples provided are clear and fitting for the piece and provide illuminating insights.
- ☐ 3. The writer has provided some examples, but has not fully fleshed out these examples.
- ☐ 2. The examples provided by the writer do not fit the subject matter of the essay.
- ☐ 1. The writer has provided no examples whatsoever.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

B. CREDIBILITY

- ☐ 5. This essay is rooted deeply in the writer's own personal experience and is entirely authentic.
- ☐ 4. It is clear that the writer has framed the essay in terms of personal experience, or the experience of an acquaintance; the writing is believable.
- ☐ 3. The writer is beginning to grasp the concept of credibility, but has not yet mastered the skills of creating authenticity in written work.
- ☐ 2. It seems as though the writer is dealing with an area in which experience is lacking; the essay seems contrived.
- ☐ 1. The writer has not attempted to explore the essay topic on a personal level at all, resulting in the writing being unconvincing.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

COMMENTS

Principle #2: Keep It Personal**A. SENSE OF SELF**

- ☐ 5. The writer has firm ideas, beliefs, and convictions and displays them courageously in the essay.
- ☐ 4. The writer seems very comfortable sharing his or her beliefs in writing, and backs them up with details.
- ☐ 3. The writer shares some personal beliefs.
- ☐ 2. The writer is unsure of himself or herself, or displays conflicting beliefs.
- ☐ 1. The writer has not exhibited any personal beliefs or ideas in the essay.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

COMMENTS**B. PERSONAL DETAILS**

- ☐ 5. The writer employs personal details that are perfect for this essay, and reveals a unique side of his or her personality. You can practically taste, touch, see, smell, and hear the descriptions the writer provides. No one else could have written the essay in quite the same way.
- ☐ 4. The essay includes adequate personal details that are fitting for the essay.
- ☐ 3. The writer uses some details, but relies too much on broad generalizations.
- ☐ 2. The writer uses only one or two personal details that are not colorful or concrete.
- ☐ 1. No personal details have been used at all.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

Principle #3: Use Effective Organization**A. STRUCTURE**

- ☐ 5. The essay is arranged perfectly. The writer's thoughts flow with a logical rhythm and progression—making the essay easy and enjoyable to read, and providing a detailed road map of key points.
- ☐ 4. The organizational framework employed by the writer is strong, with no obvious mistakes.
- ☐ 3. Although the content is strong, the point of the essay is somewhat difficult to find.
- ☐ 2. The organization of the essay does not enhance the underlying logic or main ideas of the writer.
- ☐ 1. The essay has little or no organization, making it impossible to determine the writer's thesis.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

COMMENTS**B. INTRODUCTORY HOOK**

- ☐ 5. The essay's introduction grabs your attention right away, drawing you into the subject matter with an interesting story, vivid anecdote, or colorful story.
- ☐ 4. The writer's introduction introduces the tone of the essay in an engaging way.
- ☐ 3. The writer has summarized the main point, but has not done so in an evocative way.
- ☐ 2. It is unclear from the introduction what the essay will cover.
- ☐ 1. Booorrrring!
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

Principle #4: Make Each Sentence Count**A. SENTENCE ECONOMY**

- ☐ 5. Each sentence has a purpose and contributes to the main idea of the essay. There are no sentences that could be omitted—each one is a necessary part of the overall framework.
- ☐ 4. There are a few sentences that could be rewritten or eliminated, but the other sentences are tight.
- ☐ 3. The sentences are a little long or drag on too long without really accomplishing anything.
- ☐ 2. The essay is filled with long, transitional phrases and sentences that don't belong in an essay of this length.
- ☐ 1. The sentences do not accomplish anything and are redundant.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

COMMENTS**B. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

- ☐ 5. The writer's main ideas are communicated clearly and concisely. If you had to, you could easily restate each point in your own words.
- ☐ 4. The writer communicates effectively, although part of the essay strays a little from the overall main points being made.
- ☐ 3. It is clear that the writer has a good point, although the way of expressing it is not clearly and efficiently developed.
- ☐ 2. It is difficult to understand what the writer is trying to communicate.
- ☐ 1. This essay might as well be written in a language I don't read or speak.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

Principle #5: Make It Unique and Memorable**A. CREATIVITY**

- ☐ 5. The writer has taken a conventional topic and breathed new life into it by using personal touches, a unique writing style, or a novel approach. The concept feels fresh.
- ☐ 4. The essay's effect stays with the reader a long time because of the powerful picture that was painted.
- ☐ 3. The essay is, overall, a "good" essay—but needs a dose of imagination.
- ☐ 2. There is nothing unexpected or special in this essay. This essay almost feels like I've read it before.
- ☐ 1. The writer hasn't provided any personal details, nor taken a novel approach with any of his or her ideas.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.

COMMENTS**B. INSIGHT**

- ☐ 5. The essay reveals that the writer has thought about the topic in a new and interesting way. The writer has developed these thoughts effectively, yielding new insights on both the topic and the writer.
- ☐ 4. The writer makes some astute statements about the topic not typically found in essays of this type.
- ☐ 3. It is a competent essay, but the writer offers very little in the way of new insights to the subject matter.
- ☐ 2. The writer restates common, everyday thoughts and ideas about the essay topic.
- ☐ 1. There was little of interest in this essay.
- ☐ No basis for judgment.