

Craft an Essay Rough Draft

What do hairy spiders, slithering snakes, and scholarship essays have in common? Quite simply, they are all things known for intimidating otherwise fearless students.

In this section, however, I will show you how to put to rest any of your essay phobias and lay the smack down on even the toughest scholarship essay questions. (Sorry, you're on your own for the spiders and snakes. Yikes!)

Essays are critical components of many scholarship applications because they represent an applicant's best opportunity to directly communicate interests, passions, beliefs, and values. Essays may be the part of your application in which you have the greatest opportunity to paint a wonderfully vivid self-portrait.

One misconception about the scholarship essay is that you need to be a naturally gifted writer to craft a strong one. While writing skills can prove useful, you don't have to be a prolific writer to create an effective scholarship essay. More than writing ability, the key is understanding and properly applying a few simple, strategic principles.

These principles are outlined below. As is the case with any set of rules, there are times when it may be appropriate to break them. But before we can even consider breaking the rules, we first need to thoroughly master them.



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

1. Show, Don't Tell

Here's the scenario: It's precisely 8:47 p.m. on a Saturday night, and you find yourself seated at a candlelit corner table at a pretentious French restaurant—one of those restaurants where there are more kinds of forks, knives, and spoons placed in front of you than any one human could possibly need.

Your date sits across from you, looking especially inviting in the soft candle glow. It's safe to say you're eager to make a good impression. Being the dating maestro that you are, you know that a sense of humor is a personal quality that most people find attractive in a date.

So here's the question: To convince your date that you are funny, which of the following do you do?

(1) Say something like, "You know, I am really, really funny. Some people even consider me hilarious, in a knee-slapping, sidesplitting sort of way. In fact, if you wanted to utter the words comic genius, I wouldn't stop you."

OR

(2) Crack a funny joke or two and make witty conversation.

Well, unless you happen to be Jim Carrey, you would probably do the latter. (If you actually *are* Jim Carrey, please skip to the next section.) You would choose the second option because you know instinctively that just telling your date that you are funny forces him or her to take your word for it. Why should anyone believe you? Chances are, instead of coming across as funny, you'll come across as a bit pompous and arrogant.

But if you tell a few jokes and partake in witty conversation, you show your date your great sense of humor. He or she doesn't have to take your word for it because you've just *demonstrated* it to be true.

Just as in the realm of dating, one of the most prevalent mistakes committed in weak scholarship essays is that applicants *tell* rather than *show*. What's the distinction? Telling occurs when the applicant makes broad (often self-congratulatory) statements without backing them up with specific examples. Showing, on the other hand, involves describing a situation or activity or

telling a story that powerfully illustrates your point.

So don't just *tell* application judges that you are "exceptionally trustworthy and responsible." Instead, *show* them your trustworthiness and sense of responsibility by describing an activity, event, or scene in which you demonstrated these admirable personal qualities. Don't just *tell* your readers that a particular reform will improve the educational system. *Show* them by describing the dramatic educational benefits of a pilot project you helped to initiate. Taking this approach captures the reader's attention and adds credibility to what you say.

2. Keep Things Personal

Regardless of the specific question posed, most scholarship essays are designed to provide judges with a better sense of who you are, what you believe in, and how you think. As a result, making your essay intensely personal—by relating the essay question to your unique experiences and perspectives—goes a long way in making your composition more compelling.

Adding personal details to your scholarship essays also serves the important purpose of making your materials stand out from those of other applicants. When you add this personal touch—and truly own your essay—no one else in the state, nation, continent, world, galaxy, or universe (let alone, the application pile) could have written your words in quite the same way. This is the case because no one else has lived through your unique experiences and shared your personal feelings and perspectives.

Such a strategy is not limited to

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essay questions that are personal in nature. Some of the best essays I've seen on issue-oriented topics still relate the subject matter to personal experiences. A winning scholarship essay discussing the issue of homelessness was built around an applicant's eye-opening experiences working in a homeless shelter. In one of my own scholarship submissions, I connected an analysis of our public education system to my experiences in setting up a telephone-based peer-tutoring system called the Homework Helpline.

If the essay question deals with an area in which you don't have direct experience, try relating the topic to someone you know, such as a relative or family friend. If an essay question, for instance, asks you about cultures in other countries, you could discuss personal experiences your mom or dad had when traveling around the world after college. To frame the story in terms of your own experience, you could describe a memorable conversation you've had with your parents about their travel adventures.

Taking this approach also enhances the credibility and believability of your applications. Application judges view applications with a skeptical eye: They recognize that applicants have strong incentives to tell them what they want to hear. But essays deeply rooted in personal experience seem less likely to be con-

trived by the writer simply for the sake of appearances.

3. Organize Effectively

Effective organization provides judges with a detailed road map that helps them navigate through the key points in your essay. Your organization demonstrates the thought you put into the essay and enhances the underlying logic of the main ideas you are trying to drive home.

A standard organizational framework for a scholarship essay—or any essay for that matter—is a three-part format. In the first part of the essay, the introduction, you frame the subject matter to be covered in the piece. In the introduction, you are trying to achieve two main goals. First, you want to give the reader some idea of where you're headed. This can be done formally with a thesis statement that summarizes the main point of the essay or more casually, by giving the reader a general sense of the terrain the essay will cover.

Second, your introduction should draw readers into the subject matter by grabbing their attention in an interesting way. Many scholarship winners have done this by telling an interesting story or anecdote or through vivid description. Whether the focus of your introduction should be more on summarizing the argument in the essay or grabbing the reader's attention depends upon

the subject matter and the tone of your essay.

Many issue-oriented essays focus more on summarizing the main argument, while many personal essays focus more on engaging the reader. Some of the best scholarship essays I've seen, however, utilize a two-paragraph introduction to emphasize both these elements in equal measure—with the first paragraph “hooking” the reader and the second providing a blueprint for the remainder of the essay.

The body of the essay is where the action happens, the place where you develop your main points and ideas. The body structure itself can vary significantly. The main effect you should be aiming for is a logical development of your points and a natural progression of thought, as if your ideas were moving along a clear path. To do this, it's often convenient to organize the body of your essay into a series of paragraphs, with each paragraph developing a major idea and building upon the previous one.

You will hear from many people that the conclusion is the place to restate and summarize your main points. For me, however, merely revisiting ground you've already covered is a bit boring—and a waste of space in applications where each word is a precious commodity. I think of the conclusion as an opportunity to reference key points in an essay in an original way that extends the concepts even further. In a personal essay, for instance, you may want to comment upon how the personal qualities you've described will help you in your future career. In an essay focused on a particular societal problem, you may want to project your vision for what the world

ASK THE COACH

How should I approach scholarship essays that deal with my career goals and aspirations?



In career aspiration essays, seek to demonstrate four main points. First, you want to show why you're interested in a particular career. For the most part, it doesn't matter which career you choose; scholarship judges want to know what is motivating you to follow this path.

Next, you want to demonstrate that you've taken the time to consider how you're going to reach this career goal. Building a successful career takes patience and hard work. Judges want to see that you understand what's involved in accomplishing your goals.

Third, you should demonstrate any steps you've already taken to pursue the particular career. This provides added credibility to your career aspirations and shows that the interest is more than just a passing fad.

Finally, you want to illustrate your potential to excel in the field. Demonstrating this potential often involves showing that you have already begun to exhibit the skills and abilities necessary to succeed in that specific field.

will look like once the problem is solved. If you've opened with a story, consider revisiting that story and extending the connections between the significance of the anecdote and the points you've covered.

The basic structure I've outlined, of course, is just *one* approach. I've seen many other organizational structures that work well, too. If you're struggling to come up with a good organizational format for your essay, however, the basic format described here is a proven way to go.

4. Make Each Sentence Count

Because of word limits and space limitations, a big part of writing a

strong scholarship essay is learning how to explain and fully develop all your points, ideas, and concepts in a limited amount of space. To do this, it's essential to make each sentence count toward the development of your main idea.

You should be able to explain to yourself the purpose of every sentence you write. Avoid long transitional phrases and sentences that eat up plenty of space without accomplishing anything in particular. Don't be redundant. Again, don't be redundant. Make your point and move on.

To keep your essay tight and to eliminate spots that drag, try the following technique: Write the first draft of your essay moderately long—perhaps 25 percent longer

than the word limit. Then force yourself to pare down the verbiage. The best way to create a concise, powerful writing style is through careful editing.

5. Make Your Essay Unique and Memorable

For a moment, pretend you are judging a large scholarship program. As a judge, you may be responsible for reviewing hundreds of essays, and you're supposed to keep track of each applicant and rank him or her according to some objective criteria.

A thick stack of applications sits on the desk in front of you, and because each entry in the pile addresses the same set of questions over and over and over and over and over again (often in a similar manner), judging can indeed be a monotonous task.

To avoid having a judge just skim through your essay, you need to make it unique and memorable. The first way to do this is by taking to heart Principle #2 ("Keep Things Personal"). By adding vivid personal details to an essay, you make the essay uniquely yours. And by choosing details and stories that engage the reader, you make your essay memorable.

Second, you can make your essay unique and memorable through your

intellectual approach. If you can, try to come up with your own original, unconventional, or thought-provoking idea on the topic. If you're stuck, try to redefine the question in an interesting way. For instance, if the question asks you the importance of art in our society, turn the question on its head by vividly describing a world completely devoid of art. You can make content memorable by including some interesting research, references, or facts that your readers aren't likely to already know or fully appreciate.

Third, you can take traditional ideas and express them in novel ways. One effective technique that I have employed on several occasions is the use of an extended metaphor—a metaphor that permeates your entire essay. The use of a metaphor is a powerful technique because it allows you to transform well-worn ideas into fresh-feeling concepts.

Metaphors allow you to simplify complex ideas and create vivid imagery in a judge's mind. Furthermore, a well-developed extended metaphor brings a sense of cohesion to a scholarship essay and can contribute to an attention-grabbing introduction and conclusion.

The types of metaphors are without limit. One winner of a prestigious national scholarship wrote an essay looking back at different points

in American history as if they were different rooms in a house. In one of my own winning essays, I used a clipper ship to describe the importance of freedom to our nation:

As a proud vessel of freedom, America has been crafted from the resilient planks of democracy. Our heritage of justice provides a firm rudder—holding this Yankee clipper on a steady course, while allowing for necessary corrections at critical way points on our voyage. . . . But no matter how seaworthy the craft, how adept the captain, or how friendly the waters, even a great sailing ship can become paralyzed: Without the winds of freedom to drive her forward, America would find herself shackled in irons.

In case you haven't already noticed, there are an infinite number of ways to make your essay unique and memorable. Find what works for you and go for it!

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 Brainstorm Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to assist you when brainstorming material for scholarship essays—helping you to get noticed, stand out from the pack, and ultimately bring home the college cash. To begin this process, *write a one-sentence summary of the essay topic or question you wish to answer in the box below:*

MY ESSAY TOPIC OR QUESTION

PART I: BRAINSTORMING ESSAY IDEAS

1. In the next five minutes, brainstorm at least five main points you could make that address the essay topic or question above. Don't worry about complete sentences or dumb ideas. The main thing is just to get down anything. You can start now!

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

2. So you want to write an essay that is a bit more compelling than the average submission? Let's start thinking like your competition. Given the essay topic or question, as well as the type of individuals likely to enter the contest, what are three points that you expect other applicants to make in their compositions? (Some of these may be the same as the points you just brainstormed.)

A.

B.

C.

3. Now that we know that many essay writers will likely make the three points you've mentioned above, what are three specific ways you could make the above points in an original way?

- A.
- B.
- C.

4. Let's take this one step further: Can you come up with three new ideas that you think other applicants are *unlikely* to make?

- A.
- B.
- C.

PART II: ADDRESSING THE JUDGING CRITERIA

5. In addition to brainstorming new ideas and anticipating our competitors' responses, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the scholarship judges. After examining the scholarship's judging criteria and researching the agenda of the program's sponsor (including an analysis of past winning essays, if possible) what do you think are the top three qualities of the ideal essay submission?

- A.
- B.
- C.

6. What are three specific ways you can try to meet the judges' criteria and incorporate these qualities into your own essay?

- A.
- B.
- C.

PART III: MAKING IT PERSONAL

7. Including personal stories or examples make your essay stand out because no one else has shared your exact life. What are three personal anecdotes or experiences that you could include in your essay?

- A.
- B.
- C.

8. For some essay topics, it’s not always easy to think of personal anecdotes. Drawing upon situations you’ve observed or heard about from your family or friends, what other stories might be relevant?

- A.
- B.
- C.

PART IV: DEVELOPING YOUR IDEAS

9. Let’s put it all together. Look over the questions you’ve answered, and come up with five main ideas that you would like to communicate and an example or anecdote you could use to demonstrate each.

TELL YOUR MAIN IDEA	SHOW WITH AN EXAMPLE OR ANECDOTE
A.	
B.	
C.	
D.	
E.	

10. To flesh out your ideas even further, take a moment to brainstorm some supporting evidence for each of the five main points and anecdotes you described above. Don't worry about complete sentences. Just jot them down in bullet-point format in the space below.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE A

A.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE B

B.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE C

C.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE D

D.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE E

E.

11. Of course, for you to be able to communicate these points, you need to grab the essay judge's interest from the beginning, so that he or she will read the essay all the way through. In the space below, brainstorm three original ways—possibly including stories, metaphors, rhetorical questions, interesting quotes, and other devices—to begin your essay.

A.

B.

C.

Congratulations! You now have the building blocks of a successful scholarship essay. You'll be able to consult your answers to the above questions when putting together a more formal outline and writing your first draft. As you write, remember to consider your competitors, the judging criteria, and how you will demonstrate and support your ideas in an original and personal way. Happy writing!