

Brainstorm Your Application Themes

In my work, I've had the opportunity to inspect many scholarship applications that ultimately brought home the scholarship bucks—as well as plenty of others that didn't. What I learned from this process is that the winning scholarship applications don't look anything like the ones that aren't successful.

Unsuccessful scholarship applications, more often than not, resemble laundry lists of activities, awards, and accomplishments. Although such credentials can be impressive, reading the application can feel like inhaling a random conglomeration of facts.

After I've skimmed just a few of these applications, I find everything starts to blend together; it's difficult to remember which accomplishments and credentials go with which applicant.

When reading a *winning* application, on the other hand, I usually feel as though I am actually getting to know the person who submitted it. I typically come away from each one feeling that I understand the person's core character, motivation, and values.

Why do winning applications leave such strong impressions? Quite simply, great scholarship applications create vivid portraits of the applicants: They don't just recite accomplishments—they *depict the person behind all the credentials, interests, and goals*. Clearly defining who you



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

are creates a powerful emotional connection with those who evaluate you. And if a judge feels as though he or she knows you, it's much harder to pass you by when it's time to award the college cash.

So think of yourself as a Monet or Michelangelo of scholarship applications: The written application form is your canvas, and your commission is to paint a vivid self-portrait.

Identifying Your Theme

If application judges were to shadow your every move for a week, they could probably get a pretty good sense of who you are and what you're like. But because your evaluators are judges, not stalkers, you'll have to convey a great deal about yourself using just ink on a pristine white page.

So how exactly does one paint a winning self-portrait? First, you must treat each component of the application (such as the essay, activity list, and recommendation letter) as part of a unified whole that contributes to the overall impression that you make.

To understand this concept, consider the world of popular music. Suppose you took the hardcore

lyrics of gangsta rap (say, a song by Snoop Dogg) and combined it with the syrupy melody of a romantic ballad (like one by Bryan Adams or Michael Bolton). The result would be utter musical chaos—neither rap fans nor ballad lovers would be pleased. To avoid performing this scary song on the stage of your application, strive to make each part of your application work together toward a common idea.

This common idea is what I call the *application theme*—the framework and structure that puts all your activities, interests, and credentials in the proper context. Application themes are frequently created around activities that you are passionate about, interests that fascinate you, life challenges that you've faced, or career goals that you're striving toward.

In general, the typical scholarship application should have no more than one or two major themes. Any more than this dilutes the communicative power of your message. If you want an application to have two themes, make one of them the primary theme and the other the secondary theme. The primary theme should be the main message

you are trying to communicate. The secondary theme supplements this message by illustrating another important aspect of your life, your interests, and your personality.

No matter how complex you are as a human being, or how little space a scholarship application form gives you to explain yourself, your theme should convey something truly important about who you are and what you care about. The goal is not to explain all of the facets of your life, but rather to focus on a couple of key areas.

Which activities do you most enjoy? What types of disciplines and skills come naturally to you? What events have had the most impact on your life? What perspectives and opinions are distinctly your own? What do you dream of doing 20 years from now? These are a few of the underlying questions that help you to define a theme. Your goal should be to make this theme resonate throughout all parts of your application.

Building a cohesive theme in an application serves another important purpose. Given the competitive nature of the merit-based scholarship application process, judges recognize that all applicants are more or less trying to say what they think the judges want to hear. This is understandable, but judges are on the lookout for scholarship applicants who aren't just paying lip service to lofty ideals.

Primary and secondary themes enhance an applicant's believability by communicating, and continually reinforcing, a consistent message. *The applicants who seem the most credible are the ones who manage to communicate the strongest themes.*

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Themes in Action

Perhaps the best way to understand how to use primary and secondary themes is to view them in action—as part of an actual scholarship application. The following excerpts are taken from my winning entry in the Discover Card Tribute Awards scholarship program.

For this application, my primary theme was my passion for writing and my deep appreciation for all forms of communication as tools for solving problems. My secondary theme focused on how I had already exhibited, and would continue to exhibit, a high level of leadership.

First, let's examine an excerpt from the "Goals Paragraph" that I submitted. The application requested that I submit a paragraph of no more than 200 words in which I was to describe my future career goals and how continuing my education would help me achieve those goals:

Because of a strong interest in writing and communication, an aptitude for analysis and problem-solving, and a fascination with the inner workings of government, I plan to pursue a career in print and broadcast journalism as a political columnist and commentator. A well-rounded education will unlock the gates of opportunity—not

only helping to clarify complex issues and providing skills for becoming a more persuasive writer and effective speaker, but also preparing me to be a responsible contributor in this world of infinite possibilities... As a well-educated journalist, I will strive to broaden minds and uncover truth—thus doing my part to make a difference in the world.

Notice that both my primary and secondary themes are supported in this statement. My strong passion for writing and oral communication is reinforced both in my career goal itself and in how I describe that goal. My secondary theme of empowering leadership is demonstrated by the description of how I plan to contribute to society through my journalistic endeavors.

Next, let's examine an excerpt from the first section of a "criteria statement" that I also wrote for the Discover Card application. In this statement, among other things, I was asked to describe any special talents I possessed:

As far back as I can remember, a love for language and a passion for ideas have been integral parts of who I am. I have expressed this through

the creation of poetry and short stories, active involvement in debate and public speaking, and by working in journalism and documentary filmmaking. . . . Eventually, my fascination with the power of words led to positions as editor-in-chief of my middle school newspaper; news editor of my high school newspaper, *The Axe*, as a sophomore; and presently, editor-in-chief of this nationally acclaimed publication. In these roles I have received recognition for both my writing and design and have had excerpts of my political commentary on the Senator Packwood sexual harassment scandal reprinted in my local newspaper, *The Register-Guard*.


In the excerpt, I bolstered my primary theme by discussing different manifestations of my love of writing. I illustrated that this isn't just a transitory interest by showing how the interest can be traced back to my childhood. The description of the journalism-related leadership positions I have held strengthens my secondary theme.

In choosing letters of recommendation to include with these application materials, I picked recommendations that further enhanced my two main application themes. Shown below is an excerpt from a letter that was written by my faculty adviser on the school newspaper:

Conscientious, dedicated, and persistent, Ben is the kind of individual so greatly needed in journalism. He works

ASK THE COACH

Should all of my scholarship applications have the same personal theme?



On the contrary, the specific primary and secondary themes used in a scholarship application should be chosen to best appeal to the scholarship program's official judging criteria.

Let's say, for instance, that a student has identified three potential application themes: (1) a fascination with science, (2) extensive participation in community service, and (3) a dream of one day dancing on Broadway.

For applications focused on quantitative skills, her theme could be science related. For scholarships emphasizing contributions to society, the theme could be built around extensive community service experience. For awards based on artistic achievement, the hard work and sacrifice while developing dancing skills could be showcased.

equally well as part of a group or independently, he is concerned about others and his community, and he is keenly interested in current affairs... In addition to being one of the top writers and analysts I have seen in 15 years of advising the journalism program, he is also an adept, articulate public speaker. Ben would make an outstanding journalist, a leader in his field.

A second letter of recommendation included in the application was written by my student government adviser and emphasized my leadership skills:

Ben has organized school elections, played a leading role in school-wide assemblies, is a part of the budgeting process

for school clubs and activities, and has worked on projects to provide for indigent people in our community. . . . Ben is confident and comfortable in a small social group or speaking to a very large audience. He learns well from each situation in which he takes part.

The Discover Card application also allowed me to attach supplementary materials. To further bolster my primary theme (and to show that I had the necessary skills to reach my career goals), I chose to include with the application some articles that I had written for my high school newspaper. Among them, I included my political column about the Senator Packwood scandal I had mentioned in my criteria statement. I also included an article on the pressing need for an important

school reform; this reinforced my secondary theme by highlighting my "leadership through journalism" approach.

This example illustrates how a well-thought-out theme is implemented by reinforcing it in each component of an application. More specifically, this is done by placing activities, credentials, and ideas that support your theme in prominent places and addressing the theme in essays and personal statements.

Seven Winning Themes

In this section, I describe seven application themes that have been successfully employed by many scholarship winners. These descriptions are meant to stimulate your thinking and provide you with a sampling of the wide range of possible themes.

Keep in mind that these themes represent only seven popular ones that I've chosen to profile: Winning themes come in all shapes and sizes, and yours should be specific to your unique qualities.

In each of the profiled themes, I discuss the characteristics of the typical student using the theme, as well as analyze the tactical advantages and disadvantages of that specific theme (every theme has its pluses and minuses). I also describe strategies that scholarship winners have used to flesh out each theme and make their thematic portraits especially persuasive, compelling, and effective.

Such strategies are designed to spark your own strategic thinking, not replace it altogether. If you can come up with your own creative ways to develop these themes, it will only help your scholarship chances.

#1: THE DO-GOODER

Characteristics: You volunteer for several community organizations. You may have even created your own service program. Community service is your passion; it dominates your extracurricular activities.

Advantages: Service to others is an important criterion in many scholarship programs. If scholarship money is awarded to you, society eventually receives a benefit many times greater than its investment. Your commitment to others is refreshing and admirable.

Disadvantages: Service to others is a fine theme, but it's still a pretty broad one—and one that many competing applicants may use. If you don't develop your theme carefully, you could be overshadowed by applicants who have other areas of expertise but also fit in volunteer work on the side.

The key for this type of applicant is to demonstrate a core purpose behind the services performed. Because you need to make your commitment to community service credible, your service theme needs to be specific.

You can accomplish this by crafting your theme around particular types of service programs and projects that you especially care about.

Whenever possible, use personal experiences to illustrate why you are so passionate about the particular type of service. Perhaps you are especially close to your grandmother and find it rewarding to volunteer to help the elderly through the Meals on Wheels food delivery program. Or maybe you helped raise your younger siblings and, as a result of that experience, enjoy working with young children.

#2: THE CREATIVE TALENT

Characteristics: You are unusually skilled in a particular creative discipline—visual arts, dance, music, drama, or some other field. You spend countless hours practicing the discipline, derive great enjoyment from it, and hope to pursue it in the future.

Advantages: Your special talent helps make your scholarship applications stand out. Achieving distinction in a creative discipline illustrates that you possess many character traits (focus, determination, and work ethic) that are ingredients of success—and worthy of financial support.

Disadvantages: Judges are looking for well-rounded applicants. The danger here is that you could appear too focused on your special talent to the exclusion of everything else. If application judges don't have much aesthetic appreciation for your particular discipline, they might not fully appreciate your talent.

Creativity is highly valued in scholarship applications. By passionately discussing significant milestones on the long road to proficiency and mastery, you can make your application memorable.

But you don't want to look too one-dimensional, suggesting that the particular discipline you excel in is the only thing you do. Some applicants get around this by demonstrating that they are skilled in a wide range of creative disciplines; others balance their special talent with solid academics, service involvement, or other extracurricular activities.

It is important to demonstrate your ability when employing a creative talent theme. If applications permit it, try to send a portfolio or samples of your work.

#3: THE SURVIVOR

Characteristics: You have overcome significant obstacles in your life—economic hardships, family problems, medical conditions, or personal issues. Overcoming such challenges has played an important role in shaping who you have become.

Advantages: Stories of obstacles overcome can create applications of compelling human emotion and drama. Some of the most powerful scholarship applications I've seen have been submitted by students who have described, in dramatic fashion, how they triumphed over tough challenges through sheer will and determination.

Disadvantages: Depending on the obstacle overcome, it could involve private matters that are difficult (or painful) to discuss in an application.

Merely describing a tough situation you've faced is not enough. Judges are more interested in how you've dealt with the challenge. The focus of your application should not be on the obstacle itself, but on how you have responded to it. As Booker T. Washington eloquently put it, "Success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life as by the obstacles he has overcome trying to succeed."

Some types of obstacles (for example, drug abuse) may be things that initially put a negative image in the minds of judges. If the obstacle you've overcome is an obstacle created by your own doing, you'll want to clearly show how you've learned from your mistakes and now are an entirely different person.

This is an especially effective strategy if there's a blemish on your record that you wish to explain.

#4: THE ACTIVIST

Characteristics: You devote considerable time to supporting and promoting various social causes that you believe in. You have helped organize rallies, petition drives, awareness campaigns, and other projects. Your first words as a baby were, "Heck no, we won't go!"

Advantages: Your devotion to making society a better place is very admirable. Judges will like the fact that you are not content to just sit on your laurels, but rather are someone who takes action and has strong convictions.

Disadvantages: Those who review your scholarship application might not be sympathetic to particular causes you support. You can alienate application judges by taking a controversial position.

These days we hear that fewer young people are active in social causes than in past generations. Since you work hard to better society, your efforts will definitely stand out from other applicants.

Students who use this theme should be cautious about too heavily emphasizing controversial opinions in an application. In general, a scholarship application is *not* the place to make bold political statements—especially ones that may alienate some of your readers.

You should research potential political leanings of the organization sponsoring or administering the scholarship; you wouldn't want to focus on a cause that is adamantly opposed by the organization. In general, focusing on controversial topics (abortion, for instance) is almost always a risky proposition.

#5: THE ENTREPRENEUR

Characteristics: While in school, you started your own business. You're constantly coming up with ideas for products, value-added services, and other entrepreneurial projects. As a toddler, you franchised your lemonade stand to neighborhood kids and made a handsome profit.

Advantages: Starting your own business demonstrates a great deal of self-initiative and vision. If your business is a success, it's quite an achievement for a full-time student. The story of how you built your business makes interesting essay fodder.

Disadvantages: You could come across as overly concerned about making a quick buck. Given that scholarships fund education, you don't want to seem as though you've neglected your education to pursue your latest business plan.

Starting a business (especially a shoestring operation) requires that you wear many hats—those of innovator, problem solver, marketer, customer service representative, and manager. Because of this, entrepreneurial endeavors provide you with fertile ground to demonstrate your varied abilities.

What businesses have winning scholarship applicants started? Everything from Internet sales operations and web page design firms to jewelry-making outfits and investment advising companies. Many students have assumed significant responsibilities in the family business, too.

Some applicants who have used this theme have stressed that they are saving money generated from their business to help pay for college.

#6: THE SCIENTIST

Characteristics: You enjoy learning about science in your spare time—whether it's building model rockets, competing in science fairs, or conducting independent scientific research. You get excellent grades in science-related classes. You have a curious fondness for Bunsen burners.

Advantages: Quite a few scholarship programs are geared toward students who excel in science. Laboratory research can lead to impressive individual projects. Science projects outside the school curriculum demonstrate a commitment to learning and a fascination with knowledge.

Disadvantages: Scientific jargon used too liberally can pass over the heads of application judges who don't have a strong background in science. Competition for science-related awards, credentials, and opportunities can be intense. Developing a quality science project is time-consuming, and can take years of hard work.

Scientific ability can be a powerful application theme, but it's also important to recognize that science-minded scholarship winners frequently have done significant laboratory research and scientific study outside the normal classroom environment.

If science is going to be the focal point of your application, be prepared to demonstrate your interest and ability through science contests, fairs, research projects, apprenticeships, and internships that extend beyond the classroom.

Good science research projects often depend on finding a mentor who is willing to take you under his or her wing.

#7: THE ATHLETE

Characteristics: You have exceptional skill in a particular sport (and are good enough to play college athletics), or you have accumulated an impressive record in several sports.

Advantages: Describing athletic competition can add welcome drama to an otherwise average profile. Because sports represent a microcosm of life, recounting some poignant lessons learned on the court or playing field can make you stand out from the pack.

Disadvantages: Many students are good at sports; it can be difficult to distinguish yourself. Some judges might not want to award high school athletes any money if the judges believe that such students will likely receive an athletic scholarship.

Being a good athlete is a nice attribute to have, but to translate this into a powerful theme, you need to extend what you've learned from your sport to other areas beyond the world of athletics. A good way to do this is to think about qualities and abilities you've developed on the court or playing field that have impacted other areas of your life—things like determination, hard work, perseverance, grace under pressure, and teamwork.

Perhaps the lessons you learned about teamwork on the basketball court have helped you manage your staff as sports editor on the school newspaper. Or maybe all those early morning swim practices taught you the importance of discipline—which, in turn, has helped you get better grades. There's a lot more to learn through sports than just how to catch a pass, sink a basketball, or run down a backhand.

Finding Your Theme

Now that you understand what themes are and how scholarship winners have employed them, it's time to think about developing your own. Keep in mind that even two applications with identical themes can have a very different look and feel. The substance of a theme is derived from all of the supporting details; the details that are unique to *you*.

In any event, your job is to develop application themes that best reflect your individuality. If a theme doesn't come to mind immediately, that's perfectly fine. Part of this process involves taking a closer look at your life and searching for subtle patterns that might be nurtured and developed.

What if no patterns seem to exist whatsoever? No worries. All this means is that it's time to do a bit more personal exploration.

And make no mistake about it, developing the right personal theme can be powerful. At various scholarship award ceremonies, for instance, I frequently heard comments from the scholarship judges such as, "I already feel as though I know you."

They would then ask me how the tennis season was going or how a certain writing project was coming along—specifics that they remembered from my application.

Sometimes, I would run into these judges years later and they still would remember milestones of my teenage years. Now that's what I call making an impression.

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.

Personal Theme Brainstorm Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to help you develop a personal application theme—the one or two key ideas about yourself that you want to communicate to scholarship judges. To do this, we will draw upon the *Scholarship Coach Personal Inventory Log* and *Community Service Log* you already completed, as well as pose additional questions that require you to consider the common links and connections between various experiences in your life.

PART I: IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL ELEMENTS OF YOUR THEME

A. EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES: Using your completed *Scholarship Coach Personal Inventory Log* and *Community Service Log*, list below up to eight of your activities (including jobs and hobbies) in which you have demonstrated the greatest time commitment and leadership.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Of the activities you listed above, if you had to select your top three favorite activities, which three would you choose?

▶ **Activity #1:**

▶ **Activity #2:**

▶ **Activity #3:**

B. SPECIFIC TASKS: After assessing your extracurricular activities, it is now time to dig a little deeper and consider what specific tasks you may have performed during those activities. Using your *Scholarship Coach Personal Inventory Log*, list below up to eight of the most notable specific tasks that you performed as part of each activity. (For example, if you listed Drama Club as an activity, you might list here "designing costumes for the school musical" as a specific task.)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Of the specific tasks above, which three did you find to be the most interesting and worthwhile?

▶ Task #1:

▶ Task #2:

▶ Task #3:

C. PERSONAL CHARACTER QUALITIES: Let's expand our brainstorming work by examining your demonstrated personal character traits. Using your completed *Scholarship Coach Personal Inventory Log*, list below up to eight of the top character qualities that you demonstrated as part of each activity. (To use our Drama Club example, you might list "Organizational and team-building skills.")

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Of the character qualities listed above, which three are your *strongest* ones?

▶ Quality #1:

▶ Quality #2:

▶ Quality #3:

D. ACADEMIC INTERESTS: Was there a certain class you took that really captured your interest and imagination? Thinking back over the past three years, list below up to eight specific classes you have taken as part of school or otherwise that you found most interesting and enjoyable.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Of the classes listed above, which three academic subject areas do you find the most interesting?

▶ **Interest #1:**▶ **Interest #2:**▶ **Interest #3:**

E. GOALS: Let's broaden our exploration from the present to the future. List below up to eight possible college, career, or life goals that you would like to realize in coming years. If you can't think of any off the top of your head, what might be possible goals you would consider?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

Looking at the goals and potential goals listed above, which would you identify as your top three?

▶ **Goal #1:**▶ **Goal #2:**▶ **Goal #3:**

F. EXPERIENCES: Finally, let's take a moment to think about key experiences in your life—those related to your life as a student and otherwise. List below up to eight important experiences you have had that have helped shape who you are as a person.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

If you had to select the three experiences that give the most insight into your personality and values, which three would you choose?

▶ **Experience #1:**▶ **Experience #2:**▶ **Experience #3:**

PART II: FINDING PATTERNS IN YOUR LIFE

Now it's time to move on to Part II of this process. In the space below, list the items you selected in Part I as your top three extracurricular activities, specific tasks, personal character qualities, academic interests, goals, and experiences. Instead of writing out each item in full, use one or two words to summarize the item. Then use colored pencils or pens (following the line types in the key shown below) to draw lines between items from each of the six columns that seem to be related in some way and fit together under a common category or theme. Use the same line type for items in a single category or theme.

ACTIVITIES

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

SPECIFIC TASKS

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

CHARACTER QUALITIES

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

ACADEMIC INTERESTS

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

GOALS

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

EXPERIENCES

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

 = CATEGORY / THEME #1

 = CATEGORY / THEME #2

 = CATEGORY / THEME #3







 = CATEGORY / THEME #4

 = CATEGORY / THEME #5

 = CATEGORY / THEME #6

PART III: DEFINING YOUR THEMES

The final step in the process is to transform the patterns you've observed into defined themes that you can communicate in future scholarship applications. For each category/theme that you identified in Part II (by connecting color-coded lines), try to name and describe the common threads that connect the related items. Then, you can use your best judgment to choose among these definitions for the primary and secondary themes that best fit each upcoming application.

| | |
|---|------------------------|
|  = | Definition of Theme #1 |
|  = | Definition of Theme #2 |
|  = | Definition of Theme #3 |
|  = | Definition of Theme #4 |
|  = | Definition of Theme #5 |
|  = | Definition of Theme #6 |