

Scope Out Hidden Judging Criteria

Move over, Sherlock Holmes. Take a seat, Sam Spade. In this section, you will become an “application detective.” Instead of investigating crime scenes, however, you will sift through scholarship applications. You’ll learn how to search for clues about the selection process, dust for judges’ fingerprints, and establish the motives of scholarship sponsors.

By applying these techniques, you will gain a better understanding of each scholarship application and be able to custom-tailor your material to best fit the underlying emphasis—both the visible and the more hidden parts—of each scholarship program. That’s the essence of the “hidden” judging criteria. Regardless of the *official* judging criteria that is part of the application literature, there is always additional criteria used to select winners based on the underlying mission and agenda of the organization sponsoring or administering the award.

In this action step, we are going to investigate both the published and hidden judging criteria of your chosen award.

Collect Some Clues

So are you ready to become an application detective? Like any good detective, one of the first things you’ll want to do is to gather a few clues. A good place to start is by carefully collecting and reading all



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

the scholarship program materials—including ones that may be separate from the application form itself—as well as checking out the websites, newsletters, and descriptive literature of the organizations that administer or sponsor the scholarship program. You may then want to call, e-mail, or write the organizations' offices, and try to gather any additional information you can.

Ask for samples of past winning entries, as scholarship organizations will often release these examples upon request—especially for contest-type scholarships based around things like essays, orations, art, or science projects. If it's possible to ask some questions of the organization responsible for managing the scholarship, seize the opportunity.

If there are students in your school or community who have experience with the particular scholarship program (such as past winners of the scholarship), ask them for their insights. Many times, past scholarship winners gain useful knowledge about a particular scholarship program that goes far beyond the published judging criteria. (I certainly did!)

Many scholarship administrators

and sponsors will release the names and descriptions of past scholarship winners upon request or else feature articles about the winners in organization publications. This is especially true of scholarships from organizations that wish to publicize the accomplishments of their recipients.

Once you have obtained such a winners' list, it may be possible to locate e-mail addresses or Web pages for these scholarship recipients (especially for those you know are attending a particular college), and if you've got the time and are feeling proactive, you may wish to contact them and tap their brains as well.

Get an Overall Impression

After you have collected some of these clues, you will want to think strategically about the scholarship program in some key ways. The savvy scholarship seeker knows the importance of first taking a step back and assessing the overall tone of a scholarship program.

What is the mission and agenda of the organization awarding the scholarship? What personal qualities or traits does the scholarship program seem to value? What is the definition of the scholarship's ideal

applicant and what qualities do you have that fit this definition?

Asking yourself (and trying to answer) questions such as these helps broaden your understanding of the type of applicant the scholarship judges seek to recognize.

Pay Attention to Details

The great Sherlock Holmes, of course, was renowned for his ability to notice, synthesize, and learn from seemingly insignificant details. Show good ol' Sherlock a morsel of dried dough, a lock of gray hair, and a pair of suspicious-looking oven mitts, and he'll show you the balding pastry chef who committed the dastardly deed.

Likewise, when investigating a scholarship application for clues, it's essential to pay attention to all the details. Here's a case in point from my own scholarship quest: At first glance, the judging criteria for the Milky Way/AAU High-School All-American scholarship appeared to be fairly straightforward. The application materials stated that judging would be based on "academic, athletic, and community service achievements."

A closer examination of official rules (shown in eye-straining type on the back of the application form), however, revealed additional details. Specifically, it stated the following:

Academic excellence is not always reflected by such objective measures as grades, test scores, or class rankings... School activities considered in this area [academic achievement] include such things as band, debate, and student government.

If a particular scholarship contains a judging criterion that seems especially personal, specific, or unconventional, you should take special notice: It can provide valuable insights about how the judging works.

What this passage told me was that the scholarship program was employing a very broad definition of "academics," one that included many types of extracurricular activities. This suggested to me that I should make sure to include descriptions of my extracurricular endeavors in the application and that in such descriptions I should take special care to highlight the academic value and educational benefit of each activity (because the academic component was the fundamental criterion I was being judged upon).

Because of this observation, I expanded my discussion of extracurricular activities and emphasized the academic lessons being learned through them—something I wouldn't have done if I literally hadn't read the fine print. Paying attention to these details helped me net a \$10,000 scholarship from the program. Score!

Look for the Unusual

Another investigative technique to employ is the practice of looking for anything in an application that strikes you as out of the ordinary. Because most scholarship applications are created from similar molds, any deviations from the usual boilerplate requirements provide you with valuable information about the objectives of particular scholarship

programs.

Start your detective work with the published judging criteria listed in any application. If a particular scholarship contains a judging criterion that seems especially personal, specific, or unconventional, you should take special notice: It can provide valuable insights about how the judging works.

For instance, in the Discover Card Tribute Awards, students were asked to have their applications address four out of five categories: special talents, leadership, obstacles overcome, community service, and unique endeavors. In the preceding list, the category that seems to stand out from the rest is "obstacles overcome." Although we've discussed overcoming obstacles in the context of an application theme, it's somewhat unusual that a scholarship program of this type would single out this particular character trait as an entire judging category.

Whereas the other four categories deal with traditional areas such as extracurricular activities, hobbies, and individual projects, this out-of-the-ordinary category is much more personal and specific. Discover Card's decision to highlight this aspect of a student's background demonstrated its importance to the scholarship application process. Sure enough, when the national winners

of the Discover Card awards were announced, nearly all the winners had chosen to write about obstacles they had overcome in their lives.

Another place to look for the unusual is in the application requirements. In the Century III Leaders scholarship contest, for example, all applicants were required to take an examination on current events.

Such a requirement highlighted the organization's emphasis on societal issues. Students who demonstrated a broad awareness of social problems and showed how, in their small way, they had tried to find solutions to such problems generally did well in the overall competition.

An unusual essay question can also help you understand the type of winner a program is seeking. On the application form of the National Honor Society Scholarship, for instance, I was asked to respond to a hypothetical situation in which I observed a classmate cheating. The inclusion of such an unconventional essay question suggested the program's emphasis on character, integrity, and other personal qualities.

As a result, I tried to emphasize those character traits in other portions of my application, as well as in the essay itself. When the dust settled, I had again taken home the scholarship prize.

Consider the Competition

Back in elementary school, when choosing kickball teams, the kid serving as team captain would look over the prospective players, consider their abilities at booting a red rubber ball, and make a selection. Likewise, part of how a scholarship judge evaluates you is based on how you compare to others in the

application pile. For this reason, it can be useful to anticipate who your competitors will be and to consider what points they will emphasize, so that you can take steps to distinguish yourself.

If a scholarship is only for students interested in becoming lawyers, for instance, you might expect that a good number of applicants might have had some type of work or extracurricular experience in a law firm or courtroom, and they would likely include such credentials in their applications. If a scholarship targets members of an organization like the Future Farmers of America, you would expect applicants to highlight agriculture-related experiences.

Once you've anticipated what your competitors will highlight, there are two strategies you should follow. First, if you have activities and credentials in your record that others are likely to include, consider these areas as key battleground: Spend extra time on making sure that your descriptions of those activities and credentials are specific and detailed, and that you present them in a way that helps you stand out.

For the student interested in law school, for instance, she may wish to describe the specific case law research she helped conduct, the leadership role she played in helping direct other interns, and the impact on the outcome of the case.

Second, make yourself stand out even further by playing up those aspects of your record that others in the application pool are unlikely to include, but that still fit in with the underlying mission of the scholarship program. The member of the Future Farmers of America may wish to highlight the laboratory

research he did on seed cultivation techniques (probably not every FFA member has done independent scientific research) or give samples of the poetry he writes about nature and life on the farm (another more unusual agriculture-related activity).

The key is to forecast what your competitors will include, and figure out how you can go one or two steps beyond to distinguish yourself from everyone else.

Customize Your Materials

Using these application detective techniques will help you to clearly define each scholarship program's ideal applicant. Once you've come up with this definition, it's simply a matter of positioning and packaging your record in such a way as to emphasize personal attributes consistent with this definition.

If, for example, your detective work tells you that a scholarship program places a high premium on community service, then bring any service activities you've done to the forefront of your application—highlighting any service projects that fit especially well with the mission and goals of the sponsoring organization.

Furthermore, if community service is something that is especially important to you, then consider choosing service as your overall application theme.

So don't be afraid to embrace your inner Sherlock Holmes. You may not be a world-famous detective, but you might just bring home the scholarship bucks.

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.

Judging Criteria Analysis Form

This worksheet is designed to help you strategically analyze the published and “hidden” judging criteria of any scholarship program. Once you’ve determined the type of scholarship candidate the program is looking for, you can custom-tailor your application materials to match.

PART I: GET AN OVERALL IMPRESSION

In order to become an application detective, you must begin by collecting clues about the program. Ask yourself the following ten questions about your chosen scholarship's focus:

1. What is the mission and agenda of the organization awarding the scholarship?
2. What personal qualities or traits does the scholarship seem to value?
3. Does the scholarship emphasize depth of involvement in a particular area or breadth of involvement in many areas?
4. Do all the activities and credentials appear to be weighted evenly, or are some more emphasized than others?
5. Is the scholarship focused more on the future (what you want to do) or on the past (what you have done)?
6. Does the program emphasize traditional achievement metrics (GPA, standardized tests, etc.) or nontraditional measures?
7. Does the program categorize applicants in any special way (such as by career interest or geographic region)?
8. Does the program sponsor have any type of social agenda or political leanings?
9. What are the common threads among past winners? Who will be your likely competition for the scholarship?
10. Who will specifically evaluate your application? Do these judges have similar perspectives or views of the world?

PART II: PAY ATTENTION TO DETAILS

When investigating a scholarship application for "clues," it is essential to pay attention to all of the details. Examine the scholarship program's official rules for any of the following. Place a check mark next to any details you uncover.

- ☐ The importance of GPA in judging.
- ☐ The organization's focus (such as community service or academic achievement).
- ☐ Specific school activities deemed important.
- ☐ Recognition of unusual traits and characteristics.

PART III: LOOK FOR THE UNUSUAL

Because most scholarship applications are created from similar molds, any deviations from the usual boilerplate requirements can provide you with valuable information about the objectives of particular scholarship programs. Scan each application for the following items and place a check mark next to any of these items that you locate.

- ☐ Unconventional application components.
- ☐ Quirky judging criteria (anything that seems notably personal, specific, or unusual).
- ☐ Odd application requirements (for example, the taking of special tests).
- ☐ Unique essay questions (such as a hypothetical situation, questions about ethics, etc.).

PART IV: CONSIDER THE COMPETITION

Part of how a scholarship judge will evaluate you is based on how you compare to others in the application pile. For this reason, it can be useful to anticipate who your competitors will be and what points they will emphasize, so you can take steps to distinguish yourself.

- ☐ What are some activities and credentials in your record that others are likely to include?

- ☐ How might you present these activities and credentials in a way that will make you stand out?
Try pointing out special research you may have done or any leadership positions you've held:

- ☐ List some aspects of your record that others in the applicant pool are unlikely to include, but still fit in with the underlying message of the scholarship program:
