

# Campus Academic Resource Program

## Scholarship Writing

This handout will:

- Offer tips on how to select scholarships strategically
- Discuss the importance of writing to the scholarship application process
- Offer pre-writing strategies for scholarship writing
- Provide techniques for balancing personalization and professionalism
- Suggest effective organization methods

### I. Selecting Scholarships

- During the research process, it might be helpful to ask yourself how many scholarships you want to apply for. If the time is available, feel free to apply to every scholarship possible. But, when time is scarce, it is important to allocate your efforts to the scholarships that will return the most for your efforts. This does not necessarily mean applying to scholarships with the highest awards or most valuable prizes. Instead, scatter your efforts to a variety of opportunities that range in competitiveness and demand.

There are three main tiers of scholarships you will encounter. How many you apply to will depend on your own schedule and qualifications, but generally you should apply to three levels of scholarships:

- i. Local and small-scale (e.g. departmental scholarships, local city scholarships, scholarships that require membership to an organization)
- ii. Regional and competitive (e.g. school-wide scholarships)
- iii. National and international scholarships and fellowships (e.g. Fulbright Fellowships, Ford Foundation Scholarships, Rhodes Scholarship)

It is important to remember that almost every scholarship is competitive. This is not a reason to stop applying to scholarships, but instead you should be motivated to write the best essays possible, apply to a variety of opportunities, and continue the writing process throughout your collegiate career to better your chances of being awarded for your hard work.

Because fellowships require different and unique writing, for questions and help on specific competitive *fellowships* and the application process for *fellowships*, please visit the San Francisco State Fellowships Office website:  
<http://www.sfsu.edu/~fellows1/>

### II. The Importance of Scholarship Writing:

- Prove Yourself: Scholarship application writing is important, because it gives you the chance to prove that you are a deserving recipient of the award. The other parts of the application are most likely numbers and lists of things you have done or can do, whereas the essay portions of applications give you the chance to show how those things have made you into a strong candidate for the scholarship.
- The Importance of Strong Writing: Remember, essay-writing is valuable in all fields, because it showcases strong writing, critical thinking, and persuasion skills. This makes it a very persuasive factor in the selection process.

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Most likely, you will be competing with hundreds, if not thousands of other candidates. Since you are all applying for the same scholarship, chances are you all have similar qualifications, which makes it difficult to stand out; and one skill that you do or do not have can positively or negatively impact your chances of receiving the award. However, in a strong essay you can prove that you are passionate and full of potential and experience, which may make up for a skill or experience you do not have.

### III. Pre-Writing Strategies:

- **Prompt-Deconstruction:** Prompt-deconstruction is when you break down the prompt into parts to understand exactly what it is asking you to write about. Usually, one scholarship prompt will ask you to write about multiple things.

- i. Consider this example prompt from the University of Arkansas:

*“Describe a time you took a creative or intellectual risk. What did you learn from it?”*

The following strategies (doing multiple readings, identifying key elements, and breaking the prompt into sections) will show how to deconstruct this prompt.

- **Do Multiple Readings:** Start by reading the prompt multiple times to make sure you understand what it is asking for.

*University of Arkansas Prompt:* This prompt asks you to relate a risk-taking situation you have already encountered to your future.

- **Identify Key Elements:** Look for question words (who, what, where, why, and how) to know how many questions you need to answer in your essay. Also, look for direct commands (discuss, explain, relate, compare, contrast) to identify what the subject of your essay should be. You might even call both the questions and commands “leading questions,” because they usually point to what the donor wants you to write about.

*University of Arkansas Prompt:* The prompt gives you one command and one question, the first telling you to talk about an experience and the second telling you to describe what happened as a result of it. So, that tells you that you need to provide a cause and effect relationship on this idea of risk-taking.

You could stop identifying key elements here, but a little more thought into the non-explicit parts of the prompt may be helpful in developing your essay. This involves asking: to whom are you writing and how does this prompt relate to their interests? That said, be careful not to overanalyze and get off topic.

*Example Prompt:* Keeping in mind that this is a prompt for a university, it follows that the university is interested in how you might apply the risk-taking strategy you described to your education at their facility.

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- Break It Down: Breaking the prompt into sections helps you to start organizing your essay. Usually the order of the prompt's questions will tell you what form the donor expects the essay to take.

University of Arkansas Prompt:

Paragraph 1: Describe your risk-taking experience.

Paragraph 2: What did you learn from it?

- Free-Writing: “Free-writing” or “stream-of-consciousness writing” is writing anything and everything you want to say onto a page.

i. For example, consider:

- Why do you want this scholarship?
- What could you do with it?
- How will this scholarship contribute to your ultimate goal?
- What kinds of experiences do you have that relate to the prompt?

Write until you run out of things to say. Free-writing is helpful because at the end, you can pick through what you have written to find the points that are most important to you and build your essay around those points.

- Research: Doing research on the donor of a scholarship is helpful, because it can give you an idea of what they are looking for in a recipient and thus what things you should include in your scholarship essay.

i. Things to consider when researching:

- Who is the donor?
- Why did they sponsor the scholarship?
- Who do they work with?
- Who do they work for?
- What is their goal as a foundation or donor?

At the end of your research always ask yourself: How do I fit in here? List-Making: List-making is one of the best ways to begin writing scholarship essays. List-making turns scholarship-writing into a big mix-‘n-match game where you match the things on your list to the topics in the prompt. This can then be used to develop an outline for your essay. When you are applying to multiple scholarships, you can refer back to your lists and play the game all over again.

ii. Beneficial lists to make:

- Accomplishments/Awards/Honors
- Work Experience/Internships/Volunteer Experience
- Extracurricular Activities
- Academic Achievements
- Skills

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### Pre-Writing Exercise:

Read the following prompt and use the skills listed above to practice your pre-writing strategies.

Prompt: *Describe an instance when you encountered institutional difficulty and how you reacted to it. What did your reaction teach you about this particular difficulty or the institution it stemmed from?*

1. Prompt-Deconstruction: Like the above sample, this prompt is asking you to write about multiple things.

a. Do Multiple Readings: What is this prompt asking you to write about?

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b. Identify Key Elements: What are the questions words in this prompt?

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What are the direct commands in this prompt?

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Based on these “leading questions,” what does the donor want you to write about?

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What should the subject of your essay be?

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c. Break it down: Break the prompt down into sections. Please note that you may not have to have four paragraphs.

Paragraph 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph 4: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Free-Writing: Practice free-writing (or, stream-of-consciousness writing) in the space allotted below. Think about the questions listed above under the “Free-Writing” section.

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#### IV. **Balancing Personalization and Professionalism:**

- **Formality:** Typically, scholarship essays are read by professionals and representatives of foundations and institutions. Although you are discussing personal experiences, it is important to write with the same level of respect that you would use if speaking to these kinds of people. Therefore, a formal, dignified tone is usually the safest tone to use in your essay. (for more information see Clichés and Idioms handout at <http://carp.sfsu.edu/content/helpful-handouts>)
- **The Use of First-Person:** This essay is you writing about yourself, so it is stylistically acceptable to use “I” as your subject and pronoun.
- **Personalization:** One of the best ways to set yourself apart from other scholarship candidates is to personalize your essay—but you do not want to take it too far. There is a fine line between too much and just enough personalization. The goal is to show how your potential and experiences make you the best candidate—not to tell the donor your life’s story. Remember to be professional but personable: use formal language and only relevant anecdotes and experiences.

- i. One way to ensure that you remain professional throughout your personal anecdotes is to be sure to maintain a formal tone while discussing your experiences and to always relate the experience back to the prompt. For example, separating contractions (such as *can’t*, *didn’t*, *couldn’t*) into two words helps create a more professional, direct tone.

*Example:*

Conversational Tone: I can’t imagine how people could’ve lived like that.

Professional Tone: I cannot imagine how people could have lived like that.

Another way to attain a professional tone is through word choice. More sophisticated or precise word choice gives readers a chance to see how well you articulate ideas, which is an essential component of successful persuasion.

*Example:*

Conversational Tone: I had a hard time learning math.

Professional Tone: I had a difficult time understanding quadratics.

- ii. The most effective way to personalize your scholarship essay is to include personal anecdotes, experiences, and talents. Be careful to be concise and not to spend too much time talking about your stories. Although they make the essay more entertaining and emotional, long stories may distract from other parts of your essay.

*Example:* The student below wants to describe his experiences as a trombone section leader in high school and relate how the experience contributed to his leadership skills.

This first writing sample is what to try to avoid, because certain elements of the story, such as unnecessary information, distract from the writer’s accomplishments.

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*For three years in high school, I was the trombone section leader. It was an amazing experience because I assumed more responsibilities and began to learn how to be a functional team leader. It was my responsibility to look after freshmen and make sure my section did everything it needed to do, precisely and on time. One time, the whole section was going to be late to a competition because the bus got a flat tire. People were panicking and the band director was very angry. Even my mother was upset, although more out of frustration than anything else. But I was able to organize a series of carpools to ensure that everyone arrived -in uniform and equipped with their instruments- to the competition with a few minutes to spare.*

Overall, the ideas presented in this paragraph are strong, but the inclusion of excessive detail, such as the writer's mother's frustration and the band director's anger, draws attention to the anecdote and takes it away from the writer's accomplishments. Additionally, the tone is not quite formal enough.

This second version is a more effective way to approach personalization because it highlights the writer's skills.

*For three years in high school, I was the trombone section leader; it was an amazing experience that gave me opportunities to exercise and acquire leadership skills, especially those of responsibility, level-headedness, and punctuality. My abilities were put to the test in the middle of the marching band season when an unfortunate flat tire put the trombone section at risk for being late for the competition and causing the whole band to forfeit. Despite the panic, I was able to calm everyone down and organize a carpool to ensure their safe, punctual arrival to the competition.*

This paragraph conveys the same idea as the previous one, but places the focus on the writer's skill development. Concision and an increase in the level of vocabulary help make the tone more formal and gives the writer more space to speak about their other experiences. And finally, the inclusion of the idea that the entire band might have had to forfeit the competition implies that the writer is aware of the significance of his role within his small group, but also within a larger organization.

#### V. **Effective Organization Methods**

- **Formatting:** Although this is not an assignment for you to hand in to your professor, a good rule of thumb is to follow standard formatting. That means: Times New Roman, 12-point font, double-spaced, with 1 inch to 1.5 inch margins.

When it comes to the number of paragraphs, the length of the paragraphs, or whether your essay is written in an argument-style format or a narrative-style format, the choice is yours. There is no set format for the structure of your scholarship essay. The only guidelines to be sure to take into consideration are word and page limits.

- **Risk-Taking:** Risk-taking is one of the most exciting parts about writing scholarship essays. As long as you sufficiently answer the prompt, you can write your essay in any style you want.

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As with any other gamble, taking a risk may pay off and get you the scholarship, but it can just as easily fail, so choose wisely!

i. Risks that may be beneficial:

- *Using a very personal anecdote, struggle, or controversial topic.* The death of a relative or a chronic illness or personal struggle or any kind of controversial topic, although difficult to talk about, may give your essay more of an emotional impact than it would have if you selected an anecdote about your academic interests or a vacation. It could make your essay stand out and portray you as the kind of person who overcomes extreme difficulties.

When it comes to deciding whether it would be effective to use a personal or controversial story, it may help to ask the following questions:

- How does this anecdote/topic relate to the prompt?
  - Will this experience or topic demonstrate my skills/abilities?
  - How might my audience react negatively to this, and will the overarching message balance that reaction?
  - Will my story be featured on any websites or events?
- *Using a creative structure.* Using the standard “five-paragraph-essay” structure is perfectly acceptable, but a more creative structure, such as the narrative structure, may be a better fit for your personality or the information you wish to convey. Narrative-style is very useful for smoothly describing anecdotes and experiences and their impact on you. Be careful of becoming too wordy, however, since you still have a prompt to answer and page limits to meet. When ensuring that your structure is successful and not too complicated ask yourself the following questions:
    - a. Can you clearly identify the purpose of each section of writing?
    - b. How does each section relate to the next and to the overall goal of answering the prompt?
    - c. Did you answer the prompt? Identify where you answered it specifically.

ii. Risks that may not be beneficial:

- *Complicated structure.* An overly complicated sentence or essay structure, such as in literary-style, where points may not be fully explained until the end or end abruptly, may detract from the content of your essay. Although extremely creative, a complicated structure may confuse a reader, such that they spend more time figuring out *how* you are saying something than *what* you are saying.
- *Asking for the award.* Sometimes directly asking for an award can come across as begging or overconfidence, neither of which are professional. If you feel that directly asking for the award would benefit your essay, then it may be better to find a way to phrase the request so that it sounds professional. For example, “I desperately need this award in order to continue my studies.” vs. “This award would be extremely beneficial for my academic success.”

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