

# Create Winning Scholarship Applications

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At first glance, scholarship applications look easy—most are only a single page in length. Piece of cake, right? Don't let their diminutive size fool you. The application is a vital part of winning any scholarship. Scholarship judges must sift through hundreds or even thousands of applications, and the application form is what they use to determine which applicants continue to the next stage. It's crucial that you ace your application to make this first cut.

In this guide, we'll look at strategies you can use to transform an ordinary scholarship application form into a screaming testament of why you deserve to win free cash for college.



## Be a neat freak.

You may have dirty laundry strewn across your room and a pile of papers large enough to be classified as its own life form, but you don't want the scholarship judges to know that. When it comes to applications, neatness does count.

We would not ordinarily be neatness zealots—we admit to having our own mountains of life-imbibed papers—but submitting an application with globs of correction fluid, scratched out words or illegible hieroglyphics severely diminishes your message.



## Know when to leave a space blank.

An official mom rule from childhood is this: "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it." While this is a good lesson on self-restraint, it does not always hold true for scholarship applications. In general, it is not a good idea to leave any area blank. You don't need to fill the entire space, but you should make an effort to list something in every section. However, before you try to explain how the handmade certificate that your mom presented you for being *offspring of the Year* qualifies as an "award", realize that there are limits. If you've never held a job, don't list anything under work experience. If, however, you painted your grandmother's house one summer and got paid for it, consider listing it if you don't have any other options.



## Nip and tuck every sentence.

Succinct and terse, scholarship application forms bear the well-earned reputation for having less space than you need. Often only a page or less, scholarship applications leave little room for much more than just the facts. As you are completing your applications, remember to abbreviate where appropriate and keep your sentences short. Often judges are scanning the application form. If they want an essay, they will ask for one.



## Keep in mind that instructions do not have to be taken literally.

Even though the instructions say to list your awards, don't feel that you can't add an explanation if you need to. If you have three great awards, it is better to use your space to list those three with short explanations rather than cram in all 15 awards that you've won in your life. (No argument can be made for the timeliness of your *Perfect Attendance Award* from kindergarten.) You are trying to present the most relevant information that shows the scholarship judges why you deserve their money. Use the space to explain how each award, job or activity relates to the scholarship.

Also, feel free to interpret some instructions. Work experience does not have to be limited to traditional jobs. Maybe you started your own freelance design business or cut lawns on the weekends. The same goes for leadership positions. Who said that leadership has to be an elected position within an organization? Just be sure to explain the entry if the relationship is not totally clear.



## Use "Spin" to "Wow" your audience.

Politicians are notorious for telling their constituents what they want to hear. Good politicians never lie, but they do put a flattering "spin" on their words depending on whom they're addressing. While you must never lie on your application forms, you do want to present yourself in the best possible way and appeal to your audience. In other words, employ a little spin.

Let's say you are applying for a scholarship that rewards students who are interested in promoting literacy. You have been a volunteer at your local library where each week one of your responsibilities was to read stories to a dozen children. Here are three ways you could describe this activity on your application:

Non-spin description:  
Library volunteer.

Lie:  
Library reading program founder. Started a national program that reaches thousands of children every day to promote literacy.

Spin:  
Library volunteer. Promoted literacy among children through weekly after-school reading program at public library.

At one extreme, you can see that a lie exaggerates well beyond the truth. At the other extreme, the non-spin description is not very impressive because it does not explain how the activity relates to the purpose of the scholarship. The spin version does not stretch the truth, but it does make clear how this activity fits within the context of the goal of the scholarship. It focuses on what is important to the judges while at the same time it ignores other aspects of your job that are not relevant—such as shelving books.



## Know your audience.

To be able to spin effectively, you need to know your audience. Remember that in most cases the scholarship judges want to give their money to students who are the best reflections of themselves. For example, the Future Teachers of America judges will want to fund students who seem the most committed to pursuing a teaching career. The American Congress of Surveying and Mapping judges, on the other hand, want to award money to students who have the strongest interest in cartography.

To determine your audience, ask the following two questions and use your answers to guide your decisions regarding how much detail to provide, what to include or omit and how to prioritize your achievements.

- What is the mission of the organization giving away the scholarship? Why do they want to give money to students?
- Who is going to read your scholarship application? What kind of people make up the organization that is giving away the money?

It should now be clear why you can't use the same list of activities and accomplishments for every scholarship. Take the time to craft a unique list that matches what each of the scholarships is intended to reward.



## List important accomplishments first.

In movies, the most dare-devilish car chase, the most harrowing showdown and the most poignant romantic revelations are usually saved until the end. While this works for Hollywood, it does not for scholarship applications. Since scholarship judges review so many applications and the space on the form is limited, you need to highlight your most impressive points first.

If you have listed four extracurricular activities, assume that some judges won't read beyond the first two. This doesn't mean that all judges will be this rushed, but there are always some who are. It's extremely important that you prioritize the information that you present and rank your accomplishments in the following order:

- Fit with the purpose of the scholarship
- Scope (e.g. impact)
- Uniqueness
- Timeliness (e.g. most recent info first)

You want your application to be as unforgettable as the best Hollywood movies. The only difference between your work and Spielberg's—besides millions of dollars—is that you need to place the grand finale first.



### **Showcase your "smarts".**

There's a reason why your parents wanted you to study and do well in school. In addition to the correlation between studying and success in college, almost all scholarships (even those that are athletic in nature) require some level of academic achievement. College is, after all, about learning (at least that's what you want your parents to believe).

As you are completing your applications, keep in mind that while you may be applying for a public service scholarship, you should also include at least a few academic achievements. For example, it does not hurt to list on an athletic scholarship form that you also came in second place at the science fair. This should not be the first thing you note, but it should be included somewhere to show the committee that you have brains in addition to brawn.



### **Remember that leadership is always better than membership.**

If you've ever tried to motivate a group of peers to do anything without taking the easy way out—bribery—you know that it takes courage, intelligence and creativity to be a leader. Because of this, many scholarships give extra points to reward leadership. Scholarship judges want to know that their dollars will be awarded to someone who will not only make a difference in the future but who will also be a leader and motivate others to do the same. Think of it this way: If you were a successful businessperson trying to encourage entrepreneurship, wouldn't you want to give your money to a young person who is not only an entrepreneur but who also motivates others to become entrepreneurs? Scholarship providers believe the return on their investment will be higher when they put their money behind leaders rather than followers.

Remember that you don't need to be an elected officer to be a leader. Many students have organized special projects, led teams or helped run events. Even if you didn't have an official title, you can include these experiences. They are definitely examples of leadership.



### **Make the most of any honors and awards you've received.**

There's a reason that all trophies are gold and gaudy. They shout to the world in a deafening roar, "Yes, this glittery gold miniature figure means I am the best!" For applications that ask for your honors and awards, impart some of that victorious roar and attitude. In no way are we recommending that you ship your golden statuettes off with your applications. We are saying that you should highlight honors and awards in a way that gets the scholarship committee to pay attention to your application. What makes an award impressive is scope. Not a minty mouthwash, scope in this case is the impact and influence of the award. You need to describe not only what you won but also what it means—its significance. After all, you worked hard for the award and earned every golden inch of it. Show the committee that they don't just hand these statuettes out to anybody.



### **Final Thoughts ...**

A scholarship application is more than a piece of paper. In the eyes of the scholarship judges, it represents you. It may not be fair, but in many cases the application is the only thing that the judges will have to know who you are. The last thing you want to be is a dry list of academic and extracurricular achievements. You are a living, breathing person. Throughout the application, take every opportunity—no matter how small—to show the judges who you really are. Use descriptions and vocabulary that reveal your passion and commitment. Always remember that the application is a reflection of you.