

How to Win Scholarships

How to Write a Winning Essay:

The essay is the most critical part to any scholarship application. Your ability to paint a clear picture of who you are, what you've been through, and what you've done will be key in helping you stand out in application pools. In this guide, I hope to break down the type of essays you need to write and how to write them.

There are two essays that you are going to want to write. These two essays should be essays you can recycle and reuse to answer any scholarship prompt.

- Essay 1:

Career/Major:

What is your major and what do you want to become? What experiences influenced your choice? How do you plan to impact your community in the future with your education?

- Essay 2:

Community Service/Leadership:

What challenges/adversity (personal, academic, professional) have you faced? What lessons have you learned? What have you done in your community to create an impact in response to this?

Most scholarship prompts are the same or slightly twisted but ultimately ask the same sorts of questions: What has influenced who you are today? What have you done? What do you plan to do? Why are you worthy of xyz scholarship? These essays when written well should be able to answer any of these questions and any

scholarship prompt with little to no editing. This will help you save time so you don't have to write a unique essay for the hundreds of scholarships that you apply to.

Writing a good Introduction:

Both essays should begin by immersing the reader in a meaningful moment or experience that has shaped you. Start with a personal experience, a recurring theme in your life, a challenge you've faced, or a turning point that helped shape who you are. This opening should not only introduce your story but also reveal something deeper about your character, values, or perspective.

Choose a moment that feels authentic and significant—whether it was dramatic or quiet, sudden or gradual. It might be an observation that changed the way you think, a personal struggle that pushed you to grow, or a passion that has steadily shaped your identity. Whatever it is, write with vivid detail and intentional focus. Let the reader see what you saw, feel what you felt, and understand what made the moment matter.

The introduction sets the tone for the reflection that follows, so it should be written with lots of detail and description:

Below is one example I wrote for my own "Community Leadership Essay 2." While the topic is specific, the essay zooms in on a meaningful experience that frames the rest of the narrative in a compelling and focused way.

Personal information has been redacted for obvious privacy reasons:

DO NOT copy any writing I've shared. Use your own experiences to create your essays, I share these examples to give you a better understanding of what is

effective as you share YOUR story.

Notes:	Community/Leadership Essay 2 <i>Introduction:</i>
1. Describe the experience in detail and in a captivating way:	Growing up in Brazil, some of my most vivid memories as a kid come from going on morning walks with my Grandma to the city market. These walks were long as we would start our walk outside my Grandma's modest apartment on the outskirts of the city. From there, the city would unfold like a storybook. I became captivated by contrasts of wealth between streets. One moment we would walk past grand and pristine mansions with sprawling lawns and beautiful architecture. Expensive cars like Range Rovers and BMWs were parked in the driveway and heavily armed security guarded the neighborhoods. But just a few streets down everything changed. An opposite world took shape and we would find ourselves passing a large slum community with homes stacked on top of each other. Hungry children played in the streets and the homeless slept withering away on the ground. The roads were made of dirt and the air smelled of sewage and smoke. From an early age I was fascinated with how some could have so much and others could have so little, how just a single street could divide those who could barely afford to survive from those living in lavish luxury. These morning walks to the market kept flaming a deeply intense curiosity within me for years—a need to understand injustice and the lives of the most marginalized.
2. End with beginning to describe how it influenced you:	

How to write the body paragraphs:

- **Career/Major Essay 1:**

1. Add More Experiences to Build a Bigger Picture

You might choose to introduce other important moments from your life that shaped your values, beliefs, or sense of purpose. These additional experiences should build upon the first one and show personal growth over time. Each can spotlight different lessons you've learned or values that matter deeply to you—such as empathy, resilience, leadership, or commitment to your community.

This approach also gives you space to highlight extracurricular activities, volunteer work, or leadership roles you've taken on. These examples don't just show what you've done—they reveal how your actions reflect your character and how your values have driven your choices.

2. Expand Deeply on One Transformative Experience

If the first experience you shared is especially powerful and layered, you can center your entire essay around it. Rather than jumping to other examples, slow down and explore this single story in greater depth. Break it into smaller moments—what you felt, how others reacted, what shifted in your thinking, and how it shaped your identity. Through this deeper dive, you can highlight the values and insights you gained along the way. Sometimes, going deeper into one moment is more compelling than skimming over several.

A Note on Mentioning Careers and Majors

No matter which direction you take, try not to overemphasize your major or the specific job you hope to pursue. In fact, it's best to mention your

career aspirations just once, near the end of your essay. Why? Because scholarship reviewers (and admissions officers) aren't only selecting students based on career plans—they're choosing people. If this were about your résumé or job goals alone, it would just be a form with checkboxes.

But it's not. It's an essay. And that means they want to hear your voice, understand your background, and see what makes you unique. Your story—your identity, your values, your why—is what will make your essay stand out. Let that be the heart of your writing.

Continue to talk about YOU and what has shaped your interests. Continue to build upon the essential question which is who are you and what motivates you?

- **Community/Leadership Essay 2:**

After you've introduced a powerful experience in your essay, the next important step is to show how you responded to it. This is where your voice, initiative, and personal growth take center stage.

Rather than just describing what happened to you, shift the focus to what you chose to do in response. Maybe you started a project, took on a meaningful volunteer role, helped someone in need, or stood up for a cause that mattered to you. The specifics can vary, but the key is to demonstrate that you took meaningful action—something that reflected your values and sense of purpose.

How did it start?

Start by explaining what the experience sparked in you. What emotions, questions, or realizations did it bring up? Why did it push you to act? Give the reader a sense of the internal motivation that drove you from reflection to action.

What did you do?

Then, walk us through what you actually did. Describe the work involved, the steps you took, and the decisions you had to make. Be specific—let the reader understand what that effort looked like in real life. If it connects to a club, community effort, or leadership role, now is the time to explain how those activities tied into the original experience.

As you share your story, reflect on why this response mattered to you. What bigger goal or belief did it align with? How did it challenge or inspire you? And what did you learn from it—about yourself, others, or the kind of impact you hope to make?

By the end of this section, aim to clearly show how the experience you introduced shaped your actions, how those actions reflected your values, and what they reveal about your character. These personal insights will give your essay depth, purpose, and heart.

Here’s how I did it in my essay 2, the same one from earlier:

Notes:	Community/Leadership Essay 2:
How my leadership	But I quickly realized that curiosity alone wasn’t enough, instead bold leadership was needed to solve these issues and as I bared

started: Go on to describe work more closely...	witness to these incredible contrasts of wealth and society I held a deep hope that one day I could help lead a system that created dignity and opportunity for everyone. As I got older I became passionate about finding solutions to the problems in my community. Looking through data, maps, and most importantly talking to people in poverty in my community I saw how it was not that people were incapable of maintaining financial health or that they didn't "work hard enough", but rather the massively underdeveloped welfare system in Latin America. I treated the women I was researching as if they were family. Calling them, talking to them, inviting them to my home. I did whatever I could to learn the real roots of poverty in these communities. I listened to them, and when I came home I knew I was excited to do something about it and I knew I could create space for other youth to be changemakers with me too. I made connections that led me to realize how poverty was systemically trapping women in poorly connected areas if they had no financial resources. That's when I came up with One Loan Fund! (goes on to explain what my project was and the impact we created...)
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Writing your Conclusion:

The conclusion of your essay is your final opportunity to leave a lasting impression. Just like a strong introduction draws readers in, a thoughtful conclusion should bring everything full circle. For both essays, your final paragraph should reflect on the deeper meaning of your story and clearly communicate what you hope the reader takes away.

Rather than simply summarizing, use this space to synthesize the ideas you’ve explored. What is the central insight behind your journey? What have these experiences taught you about who you are, what matters to you, or how you hope to make a difference?

Your conclusion should respond to the main purpose of your essay—whether you’re explaining why you chose your major or career path, or illustrating how you’ve shown leadership in your community. Let your final words answer that question with clarity and heart.

Like the final scene of a great film or the closing paragraph of a novel, a strong ending ties together the key moments, themes, and emotions you’ve shared. It offers resolution and resonance.

Below is an example of the conclusion I used for my “career/major” Essay:

Notes:	Career/Major Essay 1: <i>Conclusion:</i>
Incorporates powerful lines that focus on who I am. Not a subject or other people. Make it about YOU.	As the son of immigrants and an active member of my community, inclusion is more than just a buzz word to me, it is the cornerstone of who I am. I am the student who speaks up for those whose voices are not loud enough. I am the community member that builds a more equitable space. While not all care is accessible for our most marginalized communities I’m appreciative of the opportunity to learn what is missing so that one day I might fill the gaps.

Pro Tip: You may want to make a 500 word and 250 word of these two different essays for each one as word limits vary per scholarship application and typically are capped somewhere around 500 words or 250 words depending on the application.

Other than essays, what is important?

- **Extracurriculars/Awards:** scholarship organizations care a lot about what you've done throughout high school. Successful applicants will have extracurriculars that show leadership in school and outside of school. You can include activities like leading a project outside of school, leading a club in school, conducting research or assisting with research at a local university, volunteering in your community, shadowing or internships with an organization or doctor, etc... Often times they will ask you to share your extracurriculars or you can save and share your extracurriculars using a template like the one I created for you here:
 - Activities list template for scholarships:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Rp3zSr6tE58q_1ZBby6eaNOqbkeGnicpJORYTubx3eQ/edit?usp=sharing
- **Academics:** grades are important as per most applications. They will usually ask for a copy of your transcript. Obtain a signed copy of your most recent transcript from your counselor and scan/save to your computer so you can easily send it out and make copies to send out to scholarships.
- **Recommendations:** Unfortunately, this can be a major challenge for students—especially if you're applying to a large number of scholarships. Many scholarship programs require recommendation letters, but it's not realistic to ask your teachers to write dozens (or even hundreds) of individualized letters.

To make things easier, I ask my recommenders to write a general letter that I can reuse throughout the year. When I come across scholarships that require a recommender's email for a direct request, I usually enter a placeholder or alternative email so I can move forward with submitting the application. Then, I follow up with the scholarship organization directly by email, attaching the general recommendation letter and a short note explaining the situation.

It can be helpful to save a file on your computer with the following documents to help you apply to scholarships quickly:

- FAFSA Summary
- College acceptance letter
- College enrollment certificate
- 2 Recommendation letters
- Signed official transcript pdf
- Activities list template I mentioned above
- Most recent tax returns copy with SSN blacked out

You can also use this scholarship tracking template to keep track of scholarships throughout the year:

- https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JNKC00dNb30tzDvuOnQp_o2tR0qGrx7RHm-5JFHSpH4/edit?tab=t.0
 - Make sure to do file > make a copy > to edit your own version.

Finding Scholarships:

Easily this is the most difficult part of the process. Searching for scholarships is hard because many are small and there are thousands. You have to comb through an enormous amount to find out what's due soon, what are you eligible for, and more. This section gives you some tips to help find scholarships.

Refining your google searches can be helpful. By attaching characteristics about a scholarship that incorporate demographics you might share like

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Language
- Sexual orientation
- Location/geography/region
- Field of interest
- Religion
- Disability status
- First Generation status
- Rural/Urban focus
- Athletics/Arts

You can also follow scholarship “gurus” on instagram and tiktok. I have surprisingly found many scholarships this way. Sign up for their newsletters to receive weekly or monthly scholarship updates or free lists they may have published in their bios.

I’m against many of the scholarship websites like CollegeExpress or Bold.org because they seem very scammy and the scholarships are poor quality. I’ve applied to many websites like those and similar and have never won anything, never heard a response back, and instead just get a bunch of junk mail from sending my email to them. Some websites I would recommend are:

- Scholarships for America
- Kaleidoscope
- Scholarships.com

Also PRO TIP: go search up the guidance counselor office websites of neighboring schools or private/more wealthy schools in your area or state. These guidance counselor websites often contain a scholarship list or you can even directly search “scholarship list from xyz high school guidance” to see if you can find spreadsheets that other counselors put together for their students. You’ll find lots of good local and smaller scholarships in these lists that you would not be able to know about otherwise. I used the scholarship spreadsheets of 4 other schools in Connecticut to help me find local CT scholarships:

- [Conard High School Scholarship List](#)
- [Hall High School Scholarship List](#)
- [Farmington High School’s List](#)
- [Greenwich Scholarship database](#)

I also recommend PRASE’s list:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qFi2yIH3JU2l1qPiakpuXUkhAyaoChQXgRY_BmJ3f3w/edit?gid=1862795180#gid=1862795180

Here is my personal list of scholarships that I’ve been able to gather from my own records:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fCXu_ibntksnVqSXfYUDkzNI0tgimq2_SZ8CiXrF1Ao/edit?usp=sharing

My best recommendation for finding scholarships is to look local! I got most of the scholarships from local foundations and organizations so don’t sleep on small scholarships in your area. These can add up quickly and be a lot less competitive.

Conclusion:

Affording college is possible! You WILL find a way. There is so much money out there that becomes available every month for you to compete for. Stay organized and keep applying! You got this!

With love,

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