

4 Steps to an Effective Scholarship Essay

Typically speaking, the scholarship essays which students turn in are, well, to put it mildly, not that good. I'm going to generalize, but you should know this. They're typically boring, underdeveloped without sufficient details, and very unpersuasive. Remember, the scholarship essay is a piece of persuasion. The people reviewing your essay will be going through a bunch of applications, and you need to distinguish yourself. You need to make the reader care.

You might be saying to yourself, "I'm not the best writer" and "There are certainly better writers out there." You might be right but that doesn't mean that you can't win the scholarship and it doesn't mean you can't write a more persuasive scholarship essay even though your sentences might not be as perfect and pretty as the next person.

How to be persuasive? Be real. Adopt a voice which is true to who you are. Does this mean that you should lapse into swear words and misspellings? No, of course not, but be truthful and real in your essay. It might be helpful to do a little freewriting to create material easily and rapidly for your essay. What is freewriting?

Freewriting

Freewriting means writing privately and writing without stopping. Just write whatever words come to your mind or whatever you want to explore at this moment. Don't worry about whether your writing is any good or even whether it makes sense. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you can't think of the word you want, just put in a squiggle. Keep on writing and see what comes. Changing topics is fine. Follow your mind or the words wherever they want to go. If you run out of something to say, just write "I have nothing to say," or write about how you feel at the moment, or keep repeating the last word or the last sentence. Or write swear words. More will come.

Don't worry about trying to write fast and capture everything that comes to mind. The main thing in freewriting is trusting yourself and your words: taking a spirit of adventure. The no stopping doesn't mean you have to hurry or be tense. You can write slowly and take your time to breathe and keep your hand or arm from tensing up. Since you don't have to worry about whether there are any mistakes or whether someone else would like or dislike what you write, try to pour your full attention on the feelings and thoughts in your mind. Invite risks. Remember you don't have to show freewriting to anyone except to me at the end of the semester in your generative writings, and you may edit out anything with which you're uncomfortable.

Focused freewriting

This is writing where you stay on one topic, but you harness your "freewriting muscle"—the muscle that enables you to pour words down on paper without planning or worrying about quality. You are harnessing that muscle for the sake of exploring one subject. Focused freewriting is especially useful for the hardest thing about writing: getting started.

Focused freewriting is a tremendously powerful technique to help you in writing your essay, but you need to have topics or, better yet, questions which stimulate effective writing. We're all smart as whips if we're asked interesting questions. Ask a boring question and we're dumb as posts. So, you're welcome to make up your own questions, but here are a few which might help. Now, your scholarship may have a particular topic and you'll have to gear your responses appropriately, but here are some which I found useful for all scholarship essays:

Step 1: Generating Writing Easily

1. (10 minute freewrite) What would make the reader care enough about you to pay attention and keep reading. Relate a brief event in descriptive terms: Do you have an experience which symbolizes, in a fashion, why you deserve this scholarship?
2. (10 minute freewrite) What other reasons can you think of why you deserve this scholarship? What do you want the reader to know?
3. (10 minute freewrite) What are you proud of in your life, school, work, family? (Show don't tell. Immerse the reader in the experience)
4. (10 minute freewrite) Why are you more deserving than someone else? What makes you special?
5. (10 minute freewrite) Generate 5 more writing topics which you think would be helpful. The crazier the better!

Step 2: Negative Revision

To continue, we're going to do a little of what I like to call "negative composition." This may seem a bit strange, but I want you to look through your writing and cut out those sentences and paragraphs that you don't like. We're going to make a writer's "collage" of sorts. I imagine that, if you did the assignment properly, a good amount of your focused freewrites consists of phrases like "I'm hungry, and I need to get this done, I don't get this whole focused freewrite thing, but I need to get back to the topic...." Yes, that's right. Those types of sentences need to be cut out, but don't get to crazy with your selection of phrases and passages at this stage. Oftentimes, the best lines are ones that you might feel uncomfortable turning in.

Step 3: Easy Organization

Okay so, now that you've cut out all the unnecessary phrases in your generative writing, you've got most of the material you will need to complete this assignment. Congratulations. Now, before we proceed, take a few deep breaths and don't stress about what this end product is going to look like. Basically, you're going to take those phrases and passages that remain– the good ones– and arrange them intuitively. What do I mean? Well, classical essay structure dictates that the introduction introduces the ideas to be covered in the essay, and each body paragraph then supports and advances the ideas put forth in the introduction, but we're going to be a more free in this assignment. We're not trying to escape from understanding or implementing formal essay organization, but I'm trying to rattle you out of the notion that you already don't know how to organize your thoughts.

Basically, I'm leaving it up to you what passages you want to put first, which ones second, third, and so on. But what about paragraph breaks, introductions, transitions, and conclusions? Those are great and your essay could end up resembling a formal type of essay. I think that paragraphs should be at least 5 sentences long and no more than 10. Each should develop a single idea.

I'm asking you to arrange things intuitively. Drag things, cut and paste, move lines here or there in your essay. Put those bits of writing that you think would grab the reader first. You decide what you want second, third, and so on.

Step 4: Fine Polishing

What other considerations are there? There are a couple of others. After you've done a bit of organizing, you should start working on making each sentence as complete and grammatically correct as possible. You can also add in a few sentences here or there or make your language more vivid, but do not go overboard in revising. Instead, I want this to be a purely "negative" assignment. Like Michaelangelo chipping away at a giant slab of limestone, you are removing the excess of your writing to reveal the quality within. If you feel the need to do a bit more writing, fine, but I want you to experience how quality writing and organization can be accomplished very easily.

At any stage of this process, seriously consider working with an English tutor, available on the Carson, Douglas, and Fallon campuses. In Carson, they are located at 330 Bristlecone and are available typically from 9-8 p.m., M-Th, 9-4 Fri; and 9-3 Saturday. They are trained to help you in writing scholarship essays and are a valuable resource. You may drop by anytime!

Good luck!

Sincerely,

Josh Fleming, ASC Coordinator/English Professor

*******If you don't find these suggestions useful—or even if you do—check out the following site or Google “How to write a scholarship essay” for additional resources:**
http://www.supercollege.com/guide/guide.cfm?t_id=2&g_id=21&step=1