



How to Write a Killer Scholarship Personal Statement: Definitive Guide With Examples

The Importance of an Effective Personal Statement

Whether you're coming straight out of high school, are a transfer student, or an adult student returning to college after a long absence, one of the first things you'll want to do when preparing for college is to look for scholarships.

At all levels, college is expensive. Winning scholarships that cut down on costs is a priority for most of us, and writing an effective scholarship personal statement can help you do that.

There are many important parts of the process when it comes to scholarship applications. Locating the scholarships and gathering all the relevant information are key components, but your scholarship personal statement is arguably [the most important part of a scholarship application](#).

Writing a powerful and memorable personal statement can really make your application stand out among the hundreds of other submissions.

What Exactly Is a Scholarship Personal Statement?

A personal statement is pretty much exactly what it sounds like. It's a statement, paragraph, or essay about yourself. It should tell who you are, where you came from, what your dreams, goals, and aspirations are, and more. It should **focus on your strengths** and tell scholarship committees why you deserve their money.

Sometimes, personal statements can be written in response to an open-ended question such as, "Tell us about yourself." More often, though, scholarship applications have a very specific prompt that you're supposed to follow when writing your personal statement.

A prompt is something that many colleges or other types of scholarship committees will give you to help guide your writing. Some essays won't have a prompt. We'll discuss those later on in the article. For now, let's focus on the applications that provide you with prompts.

When given a prompt, it's important that you stick to and answer it fully. You don't want to trail off onto some other tangent or write your statement how you want to write it simply because it sounds better or because you already have a standard scholarship personal statement you like to use. Answer the prompt that is given, and answer it honestly and completely.

Knowing about some common prompts beforehand will help prepare you for what you may be asked and will keep you from being blindsided. Knowing some common prompts early on can also help you be a little more prepared about what to write.

Both [CollegeRaptor](#) and [Fastweb](#) are great resources for finding common scholarship prompts.

Common College Scholarship Personal Statement Prompts

1. Why do you deserve this scholarship?

This is probably the most commonly asked prompt for any scholarship personal statement. Most organizations that give scholarships know why you want the scholarship. What they don't know is why exactly they should give it to you. Your answer to this prompt should be one that fully answers the question by telling the scholarship committee not only why you deserve the money but also why you need it at all.

Why you deserve something and why you need it are two totally different questions. This prompt, though, requires you to answer both. The reasons you need the scholarship money could involve a number of factors, including: ^

- Financial hardship in your family
- Coming from a single-parent or foster parent home
- Older siblings already at college
- Parent(s) is disabled, out of work or incarcerated
- Coming from a low-income family, neighborhood or Title I school
- Receiving government assistance (housing, food stamps, etc.)
- Being a ward of the state with no support system

All of these reasons – and more – are why you might need the money. Tell the committee that in your scholarship personal statement.

Telling them these things should not be seen as “feeling sorry for yourself” or begging for help. These are all legitimate reasons you could potentially need help paying for college. As long as you’re being honest, these are definitely things that should be included in your personal statement.

Telling the committee why you deserve the scholarship is a little different. While all those reasons are why you need the money, they don’t explain why you deserve it. This is the part of the scholarship personal statement where you sell the committee on YOU.

Tell them about all the great things you’ve done. If you were an honor roll student, a member of the BETA Club or National Honor Society, or a National Merit Scholar, put that in your statement.

Other reasons you could cite as to why you deserve a scholarship include:

- Exceptional athletic ability or talent
- Many hours of documented community service
- Having served your country honorably in the military
- Impressive personal stories of overcoming adversity
- Exceptional ACT/SAT scores
- A schedule that shows an impressive balance of grades, sports, community service, etc.

Just as listing the reasons you need the scholarship isn't begging, listing these reasons for deserving the scholarship isn't bragging. There are hundreds, possibly even thousands, of people trying to get the same scholarships you're trying to get. You need to stand out above the crowd.

2. Tell us about overcoming your greatest challenge.

Although this prompt is worded quite differently from the first prompt, in essence, you can answer them both in a similar way. All of those reasons you might have for needing the money are also challenges you've had to overcome to succeed in life.

Other possible challenges could include the loss of parents, a physical or mental disability you've had to learn to cope with throughout your life, or a dangerous, scary, or upsetting life event you've lived through in your past.

For this type of prompt, you'll want to start with the challenge you faced. Be as honest and descriptive as possible about what it was. Then be equally honest and descriptive about the steps you took to overcome it. If, after overcoming the challenge, you received some kind of recognition or award, make sure you mention that as well.

3. Why do you want to attend college?/Why is education important?

This is another very popular question that's asked on scholarship applications. A scholarship committee wants to know that you have actual, obtainable goals for your education and your future before they give you money to use for college.

If you can't effectively explain why college – and education in general – is important to your future goals, most committees won't want to take a chance on you.

There are different ways to approach this particular prompt. If you fit into a category of people who have notoriously been excluded from higher education in the past, such as African Americans, women, or other minority groups, talking about that can help your case.

You can discuss how hard the generations that came before you fought for you to be able to attend college and how you want to honor that.

You can also take a wholly personal approach to answering this question. Mention any relevant struggles you've been through, and don't be afraid to talk about your family. Did they go to college?

If not, discuss what an honor it'll be to be the first in your family to graduate from college. Those types of things are all relevant reasons you might want to attend college.

No matter which way you decide to go with your answer to this question, don't forget to talk about your goals and how college is the only way for you to achieve them in your scholarship personal statement.

Be specific. Talk about your intended major and how that major and the classes you'll take for it will help you become what you want to become. If you're applying for a college-specific scholarship, talk about why you want to go to that specific college.

4. Random and Unique Essay Prompts

Sometimes, no matter how hard you study and prep in order to write a good essay, a scholarship committee comes up with a personal statement essay prompt that seems like it's entirely out of left field. These types of prompts can be anything.

For example, the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) asks students seeking scholarships, "What do you hope to find over the rainbow?" [Lehigh University](#) wants to know, "What's your favorite riddle? And why?"

[Yale](#) asks its prospective students how they would spend a free weekend if given one. There really isn't a way to prepare for these types of prompts, but knowing they exist and that you might run across one is a good start.

For many people, these are the best kinds of prompts to receive. They give you a chance to let your imagination run wild, and they're a nice change from the same old "Why do you deserve this scholarship?" type of questions. So if you do happen to run across one of these, don't immediately dismiss it. These types of prompts give you a chance to have a little fun.

Writing Scholarship Personal Statements for Applications without Prompts

If you're asked to write a personal statement but aren't really given a prompt, simply tell the college a mixture of all those things listed above. Talk about your achievements, accomplishments, and instances of overcoming obstacles. Talk about your history, and tell them why you need the scholarship and why you deserve it.

There are also a few other [Do's and Don'ts](#) to remember. Do be specific, but don't get too complicated. Keep things simple and light, while also being thorough. Your personal statement is like a mini autobiography.

You want to highlight all the key points while putting a heavy emphasis on your strengths. You can mention a weakness, especially if you've learned to overcome that weakness, but don't focus too much attention there.

Arrange your essay in a logical order that makes sense and flows well. Also, try to keep to one or two central themes throughout the entirety of the statement. Clear, concise personal statements are easily read and extremely memorable. Don't be afraid to tell a story, though.

You never want to lie or exaggerate in your personal statement, but you should make it as interesting and as entertaining as possible while sticking to the facts.

Be very clear and precise about your goals and dreams. Don't add in a lot of hypotheticals, maybes, or uncertainties. Scholarship committees want to know that you have a solid goal for your future.

They don't want to give money to someone who might want to be an engineer and thinks botany is great but also really loves the idea of cosmetology and is just going to "stay undeclared until I figure it all out." That's an extreme example of course, but you get the idea.

Don't add in a lot of unnecessarily long words. Your personal statement should read like an actual story of your life, not a poorly written thesaurus. Trust us on this.

Scholarship committees will be much more impressed if you write an honest, well-organized, and coherent essay about yourself than they will if you find a way to use the words "platitudinous," "audacity" and "impecunious" in your personal statement.

Also, avoid cliches and extremely long and wordy sentences.

Standard Scholarship Essay Format

The first thing you want to do when writing your scholarship personal statement is to set the formatting up correctly. Some scholarship applications will provide you with specific formatting requirements.

If not, the standard formatting requirements of a scholarship essay or personal statement are usually as follows:

- One-inch margins on all sides
- Double-spaced
- No additional line spaces between paragraphs
- Typed in Times New Roman
- Typed with 12-point font

Specific guidelines given in the scholarship instructions always supersede these formatting guidelines. You should also utilize this awesome [spellcheck and online grammar check tool](#), or use any other that works for you.

Be sure to use proper grammar and punctuation. If these aren't your strong points, ask a teacher, mentor, or friend to look over your essay for any errors.

After you've gotten the formatting correct, the next thing you want to do is put together your outline. This can be done on paper, on the computer, or just inside your head, but it does need to be done. You need at least a loose outline to make sure your essay flows smoothly and makes sense as written. While the exact structure of your essay will depend largely on your own writing style and the essay prompt, here's the general structure for most essays.

Step 1: Introduction

Your introduction should be no more than two paragraphs long, and you want to catch the reader with a very interesting and engaging first sentence. You should also outline the key points you're going to be making in the remainder of your essay. If you were writing an English paper, this would be your thesis.

Step 2: Body Paragraphs

You should always have at least two body paragraphs, preferably three. Remember, long paragraphs of text running together can be hard for readers to wade through and absorb, so try to keep your paragraphs to no more than five sentences if possible.

If you change topics, such as moving from talking about your family into talking about your strengths, you should also change paragraphs.

Your body paragraphs are where you really sell yourself as a great student with a lot of potential to the scholarship committee. Remember, be specific but simple.

Don't get bogged down in big, thesaurus-like words, and avoid cliches. Just be honest about your life experiences, your accomplishments, and your future goals.

Step 3: Conclusion

In this last paragraph, you'll want to sum up everything. This is also the paragraph where you talk about how much being awarded this particular scholarship would benefit you and what you would do with the money that will help you achieve your goals.

It's also nice to thank the scholarship committee for taking the time to read through your application and consider you for the scholarship.

Scholarship Personal Statement Examples

Below you'll find some examples of actual scholarship essays that were written by actual college students seeking scholarships. Some are examples of what to do, while others are examples of what not to do.

If you're stuck and don't know where to begin, hopefully, these will give you a little inspiration.

Sample Essay 1

“The day was May 28, 2014. My doctor told my parents that I would need Spinal Fusion Surgery with rods and screws, and it had to happen quickly. Before surgery, the doctor suggested strength training for the muscles in my back so that I’d recover faster. I immediately went to the local gym and began working with a personal trainer, Justin. I learned so much from him including how the body works and how surgery takes time to heal. After surgery, I knew that I wanted to use my experience to help others, just like Justin helped me.”

– Read the rest [here](#).

This is an excellent example of an introductory paragraph for a scholarship personal statement. With the author’s first two sentences, I was hooked. This student knows how to immediately capture the reader’s attention and pull him into his story.

He’s relating a true story in response to a prompt asking him about his after-college plans, but he’s doing it in such a way that it’s instantly interesting, engaging, and makes us want to read more.

The student also has a great transition sentence. Although we only provided a portion of the essay that stops just before he tells us exactly what his goals are, it's obvious by the last displayed sentence that that's exactly what he's about to do.

He's about to tell us his plans for his future, after already telling us why he chose those plans.

In just a few short sentences, this student catches our attention, tells us about a horrible thing that happened to him that he had to overcome, explains how that situation shaped what he wants to do with his future, and transitions into telling us his goals.

This is a masterfully crafted introductory paragraph.

Sample Essay 2

“Unlike other teenagers, I’m not concerned about money, or partying, or what others think of me. Unlike other eighteen-year-olds, I think about my future and haven’t become totally materialistic and acquisitive. My whole outlook on life changed after I realized that my life was just being handed to me on a silver spoon, and yet there were those in the world who didn’t have enough food to eat or place to live. I realized that the one thing that this world needed more than anything was compassion; compassion for those less fortunate than us.”

– Read the rest [here](#).

In contrast to example one, this sample section is an example of what not to do when writing your personal statement. It starts off badly and just keeps

ongoing.

The first couple of sentences of this student's essay don't paint her in a great light because of how they're written. It's fine to tell the scholarship committee that you aren't a partier and that you care about your future, but it's not okay to do it while sitting in judgment of other people.

The very first words of this essay are "Unlike other teenagers." This automatically sets the writer apart, which would be fine if she were going on to say something positive about "other teenagers."

For instance, if she were to say that she didn't grow up getting to socialize and spend time with friends because she was homeschooled her whole life or that she didn't learn about the advantages of technology because she grew up in a rural community, her opening words would've been fine.

Instead, she immediately jumps into saying harsh, degrading things about "other teenagers." She lumps all teenagers into a stereotypical group of irresponsible partiers who care only about their appearances and material things.

Casting other people in a bad light is never a great way to let your light shine in any arena, but this is especially true when trying to craft a strong college personal essay.

The transition to her revolutionary life moment didn't make a lot of sense either. She says her "whole outlook on life changed" after realizing there were poor people in the world. This is off-putting for two reasons.

The first is that most people, including children, know there are poor people in the world. It isn't really a secret and doesn't usually come as a life-changing shock.



Secondly, the way her essay is written, she says she never did those bad things that other teens did. Then she says her whole life changed when she realized there were poor people in the world.

As written, this makes it sound like she changed and started doing these things after her revelation, which is certainly not what she meant at all, but because of the chronology of her essay, that's how it sounds.

Sample Essay 3

“And, that strength was something that came not only from knowing how to cook my own food, lug armfuls of wood three or four times a day, and make my own safe and cozy place in the world, no matter where. It came from an inner sense of seeing things as they are. Life isn't just out of a magazine with the best appliances and the nicest furniture. There are other things in life, like dirty floors, and relationships that don't always work, and meals that have to be made. But, that's not all bad.”

– Read the rest [here](#).

This is another example of an essay Don't. The whole essay, which isn't listed here, isn't bad as a whole, but it also isn't clear and precise. The sentences are long and wordy, and he uses conjunctions, like “and” and “but,” to start sentences.

Grammatically, that isn't the best way to write. This is an example of an essay that could have been quite good if only he'd spent some time editing it, proofreading it, and perhaps handing it over to someone else to look over it before he submitted it.

Never underestimate the power of revision and constructive criticism when writing your own scholarship essay.

Sample Essay 4

“Through the successes of my efforts, I also realized that poverty was just a societal limitation. I was low-income, not poor. I was still flourishing in school, leading faith-based activities, and taking an active role in community service. My low-income status was not a barrier but a launching pad to motivate and propel my success.

[...]

Success is triumphing over hardships — willing yourself over anything and everything to achieve the best for yourself and your family. With this scholarship, I will use it to continue focusing on my studies in math and engineering, instead of worrying about making money and sending more back home. It will be an investment into myself for my family.”

– Read the rest [here](#).

These are two paragraphs from the same essay, both excellently written. This student came from a very poor background and had to begin making money to help out his family at a very early age.

In this essay, he does a great job of discussing the hardships in his past in an honest, straightforward way that allows the reader to admire him rather than pity him.

The way he spends a brief amount of time talking about his hardships and then moving swiftly into how those hardships motivated him to want more from life is very well-done.

His conclusion paragraph is also spot-on. He acknowledges that the only way to overcome hardship is “willing yourself” to achieve. This shows that he has a willingness to work hard and experience to back it up.

He then goes on to tell how he’ll use the scholarship money if he receives it. He says that he’ll “invest into [him]self” and take this opportunity to work hard, even if it means he has to suffer financially for a few years, in order to achieve what he needs to achieve to ensure future financial success for both himself and his family.

This shows him to be a hard worker, someone caring and empathetic enough to put family first, and intelligent and enterprising.

These are all great things colleges want from prospective students, and he showcases these traits in himself without being overt or in-your-face about it.

Sample Essay 5

“To be able to hold onto your money you have to know how to manage it. Money management is a complicated process. As teenagers, we often have no idea how to manage money and we end up wasting a lot of it. But in a bad economy, most of us have had a crash course in what happens when you don’t manage your money properly. We have had to delve into a world foreign and unfamiliar to us and solve our own money problems. The most successful of us have managed to still have some semblance of a social life without going over our small budgets. The keys to doing this successfully are actually quite simple.”

– Read the rest [here](#).

The prompt for this particular essay was about managing money. In terms of staying on topic and having a good opening sentence, this writer did a really nice job.

The writer also makes the article very relatable because being a teenager and not knowing how to manage money is something most of us can remember quite easily.

In addition to being relatable, the first paragraph also holds our interest because it is easily read, not packed full of synonyms from the thesaurus, or written loftily.

The writer also does a great job with his "thesis" sentence. The last sentence of the paragraph is simple and straight to the point.

It lets us know what's coming next; he's about to list the keys to managing money successfully. This is a very well-organized introductory paragraph.

Where the writer falls short, though, is with his grammar. There are obvious run-on sentences and missing commas in that first paragraph. He also starts a sentence with a conjunction, which isn't great as a general rule. The bad grammar and poor editing/proofreading take away from his entire paragraph, which otherwise would have been really good.

We've said it once, and we're saying it again: Don't skip the proofreading/editing stage (*fyi, we have great packages here for this*). If that ^x

isn't something you're good at doing, ask a teacher, mentor, friend, or loved one.

Grammar is important. You can have the best idea in the world, and bad grammar will keep people from hearing it because they'll be too distracted by the errors.

When proofreading or editing for grammar, here are [the most common questions](#) to ask yourself:

- Did you write in complete sentences? (No fragments, run-ons or comma splices)
- Did you run the paper through spellcheck and grammar check?
- Is all of your punctuation correct?
- Is it clear to whom or what your pronouns are referring?
- Are there any [misplaced or dangling modifiers](#) in your essay?
- Did you write in an [active voice](#)?
- Are you being repetitive?
- Did you use the right word between [commonly confused words](#)?
- Did you use proper subject/verb and noun/pronoun agreement throughout?
- Does your essay make logical, organized sense?

Before submitting your essay, edit through it using these questions as a guide.

The importance of writing a great, moving and memorable scholarship personal statement cannot be overstated. Scholarship applications are uniform for all students.

Scholarship committee members are forced to read through the same types of information for all the students who apply. The one place you're able to stand out and be creative is in your personal essay. That's why it's so important that you make it count.

A strong personal scholarship essay can be the tipping point between no money and lots and lots of money, so plan for it. Make time to do it right and edit it properly.

Consider it the most important part of your application process, and set aside the appropriate amount of time for drafting it, writing it, and editing it before the submission due date.

Finally, never be afraid to ask for help. Whether it's an educator, parent, spouse, or friend, there is someone out there who wants to see you succeed. That person will be happy to help you craft the best possible scholarship personal statement.