

Scholarship Essay Dos and Don'ts

Do not address a currently trending, controversial topic and take a stance on it unless the essay prompt explicitly asks you for this. These essays are about you. Based on the prompt and your personal experiences, perhaps you'll discuss a "hot topic," but don't do so just to make your essay stand out. You'll risk alienating your reader(s). We definitely encourage you to be yourself, and to be open and honest about your life experiences, but "hot takes" are better left for social media, rather than used in scholarship essays. To be clear: we're NOT suggesting that you sanitize your beliefs or your writing, or dampen your beliefs to cater to specific readers. Standing behind a cause you can convincingly argue for is the mark of critical thinker.

Do take firm stances on causes that you believe in and articulate how winning this scholarship will help you advocate for them. For example, you can certainly discuss your commitment to advocating for gender equality or against wage inequality. The key is to be mindful of the prompt and to avoid unnecessary detours or tangents that tread into "hot take" territory unrelated to the prompt.

Do not use emojis, photos, and funky fonts. We love emojis too, but they shouldn't make their way into your scholarship essay (and yes, we've seen it happen plenty of times). Unless for any reason you're asked to creatively use an emoji in your response, just resist the urge. The same goes for photos, fun fonts, or anything that isn't straightforward typeface. Unless, again, you're given the green light.

Do not turn your scholarship essay into an art project. It may seem like a good idea, but keep it professional. More importantly, you want your essay to be as easy to read as possible, without overwhelming the readers.

Do stick to the standard: Times New Roman font, size 12 if you're attaching your essay as a Google or Word document. If you're pasting your essay into the text box

on a website, this will format your content automatically. And of course, follow all formatting directions to a tee when it comes to things like single vs double spacing, margins, headers/footers, etc.

Do not use extreme declarations. It's almost always a good idea to avoid extreme, either-or perspectives, and this is definitely true when it comes to scholarship essays. An extreme declaration involves only seeing one side of a situation (and often the negative side) and presenting it as fact.

Do not make fatalistic declarations about the future and take unnecessarily strong stances on topics. For example: "If I don't get this scholarship I won't go to college and I'll never get a good job to support myself." Or, "The education system in the United States is entirely broken and there's no way to turn it around." See how both of these statements can give the reader a feeling that the writer is not seeing the full picture?

Do replace extreme declarations with hopeful and open-minded approaches to the future. This is not to say that you can't take a firm and realistic stance on a topic, but try to reflect a generally optimistic and proactive mindset. For example, if the prompt asks you about an issue facing the world today, you may say something like: "While there has undeniably been immense damage done to the planet, I'm excited to pursue a degree in environmental science as a means of taking action to reverse these toxic effects of climate change." Much more dynamic and compelling, right?

Do not put-down other applicants. Speaking ill of anyone or saying why others are *less* deserving of scholarship money isn't a good look. You can absolutely articulate why you're deserving without putting anyone else down!

Do not speak unkindly about *anyone*, yourself, past friends and especially hypothetical applicants who you see yourself as more deserving than. This may be well-intentioned, but it's sure to come across as distasteful no matter how well it's

written.

Do “stay in your own lane,” as they say, and don’t let the essay wander to focus on and nitpick others. Feel free to provide compelling reasons for why *you are* a great candidate to receive scholarship money without bringing others into it!

Do not write your autobiography. As discussed, most scholarship essays have pretty tight word or character limits, so you won’t have a lot of room to tell your whole life story. When talking about yourself, it can be easy to get on a roll and include more details than necessary, but try to stay focused. It can be easy to believe that going beyond the stated word limit will come across as working harder or putting in more of an effort. In reality, essay readers actually put a lot of weight into your ability to follow directions. So while your autobiography may be incredible, it’s unlikely you’ll be able to do it justice in 500 words or less (or whatever the requirement is).

Do choose and focus on a central incident, challenge, personality trait, hobby, or aspiration. For example, discuss *only* your love of animals, your passion for modern dance *or* your memory of the day your younger sister was born, etc.