



Scholarship Application Tips From Judges

For more than 40 years, the Mensa Foundation has awarded scholarships to college-bound students across the country. Applicants are asked to submit just one thing: a 550-word essay about their academic and professional goals—and the personal experiences that have shaped their path. This year, our judges read and scored over 50,000 application essays. We asked them to share their best advice on what makes a scholarship essay stand out. Here's what they had to say.

Address the essay prompt clearly and early

Make sure your essay actually answers the question you're being asked. Don't make the reader dig for it. Spell it out early and directly, ideally by the end of your introduction. You can always build from there, but your goal and your answer should be crystal clear right away. "Great writing can't save an essay that doesn't answer the question."

Be specific about your goals and accomplishments

"Everyone wants to save the world. Be specific." Tell us how, where, and why. If your goal is to be a Special Education teacher, mention the child development classes you've taken, your volunteer work with the adaptive swim lessons at your local YMCA, and how you've already joined the Best Buddies club at your college. Not only does this show you've given serious thought to your area of study, but it also makes for a more compelling read as well.

Make your essay personal and authentic

Scholarship judges read a lot of essays, and the ones that feel human are the ones that stand out. We're not looking for a laundry list of accomplishments or a dramatic life story. "We want to know the real you, not your resume in disguise." Think about moments, big or small, that helped shape how you see your future and include them in your essay. Let your voice and personality shine through. Don't just write what you think a "smart" essay *should* sound like—write like yourself (but your best, clearest self)!

Think deeply, and reflect that in your writing

"Help me understand your thought process, not just your accomplishments." Judges want to see not just what you've done, but why it mattered to you. What did you learn from that volunteer experience, leadership role, or challenge you faced? How did it shape your thinking or confirm your career plans? Strong essays connect actions to meaning and show that you've taken time to reflect. That depth of thought is powerful *and* memorable.

Use a clear structure

You don't need to be fancy, but you *should* be organized. The five-paragraph essay is a classic for a reason – start with an introduction that addresses the essay prompt, use the body to tell your story, and finish with a conclusion that ties it all together. Make sure each part supports your main idea. And definitely use paragraphs – "a wall of text is an automatic red flag."

Follow every instruction, every time

“Brilliant essays get tossed simply because they don’t follow the rules.” It sounds basic, but it’s critical. A strong essay that breaks a rule, even a small one, can be disqualified. Our scholarship program, for example, requires all essays to be anonymous, and our judges reject hundreds of essays every year because the writer included their name or other identifying information. Stick to the word limit, answer all parts of the prompt, and follow every instruction exactly.

Proofread (then proofread again)

Even a single typo or grammar slip can distract from your message. Clean, polished writing makes a strong impression and shows you take this seriously. Remember, spellcheck won’t catch everything (true story: I once reviewed an essay where the writer said their goal was to *immolate* Gandhi). Print your essay out. Read it out loud. “Have 3 people proofread your essay - an English teacher who likes you, an English teacher who hates you, and a complete stranger.”

Keep it focused

“Trying to cram your whole life story into one page usually means none of it sticks.” Limit yourself to one clear goal and one main story or theme that supports it. Rambling essays lose impact. Stay on message, and make every sentence earn its place. If something you’ve included doesn’t connect to your goal or show us something important about you, it probably doesn’t belong in the essay. If you’re struggling to identify threads or themes to use in your essays, try brainstorming with tools like the College Essay Guy’s [Values Exercise](#), [Essence Objects](#), [Feelings and Needs](#), [21 Details](#), or [100 Brave and Interesting Questions](#).

Exercise caution when reusing an essay

It’s common to see similar prompts across scholarships and college applications, and it can be tempting to reuse the same essay. It may save you time to recycle an essay you’ve already written, but you’ll be wasting your time if you don’t edit your paper to fit the requirements for each scholarship. Recycling without revision is a mistake! If your essay doesn’t clearly match the prompt, skips required information, or feels too generic, it sends a message: you didn’t take the submission seriously. Always read the instructions closely. Reflect on what’s being asked, review what you’ve written, and revise accordingly. If it’s not a great fit, write something new.

Show you’re serious (but not desperate)

“Confidence is more compelling than desperation.” Explain how the scholarship will help you, *not* why you’re hopeless without it. Judges want to support students with a plan, a purpose, and the drive to follow through, whether they win or not. Focus on what you’ve done, where you’re headed, and how this scholarship will support your journey.

Don’t use AI to write your essay

If you can’t be bothered to write something, don’t expect judges to read it. And when you read hundreds or thousands of essays, it becomes clear pretty quickly which ones were actually written by humans. “AI writing feels like CGI,” one of our judges wrote. “It looks right, but it has no soul.” Worse, unedited AI content can include errors, weird phrasing, and leftover prompts. Scholarship essays are supposed to be personal and reflective, so use your own thoughts and words.

If you've made it this far, you care about doing this well, and that already sets you apart. As you get ready to write (or revise) your scholarship essay, keep these essentials in mind:

- **Start early.** You'll write a better essay when you're not racing the clock.
- **Prepare diligently.** Read the prompt. Outline your thoughts. Know your message.
- **Write honestly.** Be real. Tell your story in your voice. Help your reader feel great about awarding you.
- **Proofread relentlessly.** Then have someone else proofread. And maybe one or two more people a
- **Follow every instruction.** Every detail matters. Don't lose points over something avoidable.
- **Don't give up.** As one judge put it:
"Even if you didn't win this year, you're building the skills that will carry you far. Keep trying. We're rooting for you."