



## Writing & Language Development Center

# Writing for Scholarships & College Admission

Writing personal statements for scholarships and college applications is a lot like writing a resume: you have to demonstrate that you understand and meet the criteria, and you have to do it clearly and persuasively in as few words as possible.

### **Read directions/prompts attentively**

Start by reading the writing prompt closely. Here are some common prompts:

- What are your personal and academic achievements?
- What are your academic plans and career goals?
- How did you become interested in your major or career?
- What are your extracurricular activities?
- What contributions have you made to your community?
- What personal characteristics make you a good choice for admission or scholarship money?
- What obstacles have you overcome, especially in your education?

Think about your audience as you brainstorm and write. They will read many of these responses, so don't go over the word limit. Avoid generalities like "achieve my goals in life." (Yawn.) Remember that the people who read your application may not know a lot about your major or career choice, so avoid highly specialized language. You may be trying to impress, but you may instead confuse or annoy them. Don't give them an excuse to set aside your application.

### **Tell your story**

The personal statement required for Yuba College Foundation Scholarships, for example, asks you for the following:

- Personal and academic achievements
- Academic plans and career goals
- Extracurricular activities
- Contributions to the community
- Why you are a good candidate for a scholarship.

*Achievements* are things you accomplish with effort. Choose achievements that make you proud, even if you don't think they are "as good" as someone else's. Ask yourself, what achievement makes me proud? Explain why you are proud.

*Academic plans* and *career goals* can change. Even if you are not 100 percent certain of yours, do your best to map out one coherent plan. No one will try to hold you to it later if you change your mind.

Choose *extracurricular activities* that show that you do more than sit around putting in screen time on your phone. Think of things that involve you with others face-to-face. (If you don't do things like that, start doing them.) Ask yourself, what do I do that demands some level of commitment, knowledge or skill, and is positive and social?

You may not be a volunteer in a structured program, but you may still *contribute to the community*. Do you supervise younger brothers and sisters while your parents work or help your elderly neighbor take out the trash weekly? Do you coach youth soccer? Those all represent positive contributions to your family, neighborhood, and community. Ask yourself, what do I do consistently (possibly without pay) that has positive effects on those around me?

Those who read your statement are interested in giving you an opportunity to succeed. But they also want to know that their candidates will reflect well on *them*—eventually your career success becomes part of their success and is aggregated into the success of the university. Give them something to brag about.

### **Omit *some* things...**

Omit things that make you appear insulated and disengaged from a wider community (like, “My hobby is watching late night sitcoms alone in my room”). However, solitary activities may actually connect to a wider community of aficionados—for example, if you restore old cars, you are probably part of a wider community of old-car enthusiasts. You maintain standards of restoration that come from that community, read restoration magazines, bookmark restoration websites, and engage in online conversations about car restoration. Ask yourself, which of my interests and activities actively involve me in a larger community of like-minded people?

Omit physical traits like height, weight, and complexion. Omit health issues unless they pertain specifically to obstacles you have overcome. Omit anything personal that doesn’t directly and specifically support the questions you are being asked. Ask yourself, does this clearly support a point I am trying to make?

Omit random complaints about teachers, family members, society, or your life in general.

However, if your academic record shows big gaps, don’t omit an explanation. For instance, if you attended college for year and then came back three years later, you might want to account for the gap (“I had to take a full-time job when my dad died to help support my family”). Similarly, if your grade record shows sudden changes (like your GPA dropping from 3.7 to 1.7), you might need to explain (“I left school at 19 to take a full-time job but never bothered to formally drop my classes”).

### **Tell who you are: your strengths & motivations**

Tell what makes you unique. Tell what motivates you and what is important to you. Tell where you came from and how your character was formed. Tell what sets you apart from other people. Here are some examples of strengths that might matter to a scholarship or college app committee:

- I am curious and learn new things quickly.
- I can work effectively in groups; I encourage others to do their best and not give up.
- I want to honor the sacrifices my family have made for me.
- I understand the struggles other people have with depression.

### **Ask for recommendations**

You probably need to provide several letters of recommendation, usually submitted electronically. Don’t ask family members and friends. Instructors and employers are a better source of recommendations if you have a good (and recent) relationship.

Plan ahead to ask instructors for recommendations. Most instructors take your request seriously and try to write recommendations crafted just for you. At the same time, they have many workplace obligations and little free time. They cannot write you a recommendation on the spot, or the day before you need it, or even, sometimes, within the week. Ask as far ahead as you can, and give instructors as much information as you can to make the process easier for them:

- Your name, which class you took, which semester you took it, and what grade you earned
- Any outstanding work you did in the class that you want mentioned
- Your intended major and specific career plans
- The name and type of scholarship (or college) you are applying for
- Characteristics and personal qualities you think the selection committee will be looking for.

*Contributed by Rosemary McKeever*



# Brainstorming Worksheet

## Writing for Scholarships & College Admission

Complete the brainstorming below. Highlight your strongest idea in each category. Then decide which of the categories is most interesting and start there. You will probably not (and should not) write a personal statement by listing answers in the order they appear in the writing prompt. Instead, group your ideas into paragraph chunks that fit together logically and present you in the best possible light.

### Personal and academic achievements

Make a list of several personal and academic achievements, but only choose your strongest ones to write about.

What did I achieve?	When? How?	Why am I proud of this?

### Academic plans and career goals

Even if you haven't settled on a career path yet, visualize and map one out here. No one will care if you change your mind.

What major? What degree? What school?	What steps will you have to take?	How long will it take?
What industry? What job title?	Who besides yourself will benefit from your career choice?	What personal satisfaction will you gain from this career?

### Extracurricular activities

List some things you do outside of work and school that demonstrate your best character traits.

What do I like to do and why?	What positive character traits does it show?					
	I have empathy.	I have persistence.	I enjoy a challenge.	I have mental focus.	I am socially involved.	Other?


Browse this list of positive character traits (these examples are in adjective form) to get ideas and think about your own personal strengths. If you don't know the meaning of a word, look it up before trying to use it!

*Adaptable*  
*Ambitious*  
*Balanced*  
*Confident*  
*Curious*  
*Diligent*  
*Disciplined*  
*Empathetic*  
*Energetic*

*Enthusiastic*  
*Ethical*  
*Flexible*  
*Focused*  
*Imaginative*  
*Independent*  
*Innovative*  
*Open-minded*  
*Optimistic*

*Organized*  
*Outgoing*  
*Persistent*  
*Practical*  
*Productive*  
*Realistic*  
*Resourceful*  
*Social*  
*Systematic*

**Contributions to the community**

List some things you do consistently that have positive effects in the community. Then choose your strongest ones.

What I do	Where and when?	Who benefits?

**Obstacles you have overcome, especially in education**

Think of challenges or even failures you have successfully moved past in your education. List some, but choose one that makes you look inventive, hard-working, and persistent.

What was the obstacle?	How did I overcome it?	What does that say about me?

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