APPLYING FOR SCHOLARSHIPS

OBTAINING INFORMATION

If you can get a form or routine information by telephone or on the web, do so, and save valuable time. If you are requesting information by mail, include a self-addressed stamped envelope with your request.

READ THE FINE PRINT

As soon as you receive the application, read the instructions carefully. Pay attention to the information required. If the application requires a transcript from all schools you have attended, request this information as soon as possible. After a few weeks have passed, call the schools to be sure that the transcripts have been sent to the proper addresses. If you hand-deliver a transcript, do not tamper with the seal; the transcript may not be accepted if you do.

THE REASONS MOST APPLICATIONS COME WITH A PHONE NUMBER

If you find that some instructions on an application are unclear, seek advice either from the scholarship provider, high school guidance counselor or a financial aid advisor. Don't be afraid to call the scholarship provider! Undoubtedly, you're one of many asking the same question!

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Ask for letters of recommendation well in advance and discuss the kind of information needed in the letter. A concrete, detailed letter from someone, usually a professor, who knows you and your work well is usually worth more than three or four letters from people who don't know you well. Find that person and give him or her time to write a strong letter.

To assist the people who write the letters, it is helpful to provide a copy of your resume and/or something written about yourself. Let the writer know what sorts of things you would like the letter to say. The more information that you provide to your reference may result in a more substantial and persuasive letter.

Be sure the writer knows the deadline. To ensure that the letter is sent on time, ask the writer once or twice, before it is due, whether it is finished, as a "friendly reminder." If the letter is delayed, ask whether more information is needed. You will be reminding the writer about your letter as well as giving him or her about the necessary information.

WRITING SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS

Personal statements are the most common type of scholarship essay. Many students find that writing a good personal statement helps them clarify who they are and where they are going. This is inherently good. These tips are written with that format in mind. Here are three ideas to help you keep the task in perspective:

- Space constraints are often frustrating . . . but your competitors face them, too.
- Scholarship essays can pave the road for graduate school essays and cover letter in the future.
GET STARTED

Two mildly contradictory and equally valid bits of advice:

- Think about what to say about yourself before you start writing.
  - Scribble down a list of experiences and accomplishments.
  - Do not limit yourself to resume items. What stories do you share with friends? What events from the past still linger in your thoughts today? What has changed you recently?
  - Talk to other people. What would they include in your biography? Simply reflect. What is important to you? What gets you excited or moves you to act? What threads form patterns in your life? What do you hope to accomplish?

- Use the writing process as a vehicle for discovery.
  - Consider writing several different drafts.
  - Experiment.
  - Some students start by outlining the points they intend to make. Try banging out a draft within some set time limit (like thirty minutes).
  - Read it later to look for gems twinkling amid the rocks. Writing is recursive. The fifteenth paragraph may suddenly suggest a better direction for the third sentence.

READ THE INSTRUCTIONS

Surely a step that top students would never skip. Right? Adhere to the minimum font size and maximum number of words. Only pare down to the word limit late in the process though.

Different awards want different things. Make sure you answer the right questions. Make sure you fit the award. Quit writing and find a different scholarship if you are distorting or contorting yourself to fit their criteria.

ADDRESS FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Regardless of what they ask you . . . readers typically want answers to the following questions:

- What are your goals?
- Why are you dedicated to them?
- What in your life reflects that commitment?
- What matters to you?
- How do you see the world?
- What makes you a good fit for this award?
- What makes you stand out from other applicants?
CONTENT

What belongs in a good personal statement is unique to each individual. Nevertheless . . . here are some ideas that might help.

- Talk about things that you would enjoy discussing at length.
- Choose a few key points to develop . . . three or four perhaps.
- Include concrete examples to illustrate larger themes.
- Avoid braggy generalizations. Share specific incidents to show your strengths instead.
- Ask yourself what readers might find memorable and/or unique about you.
- Have any books or classes or artistic encounters profoundly shaped or shaken your outlook?
- Write from a positive perspective.
- Consider how your essay fits with everything else you submit.

Package Carefully

- All scholarships value good writing.
- Scrutinize every word as you near the final draft. Edit like they cost twenty dollars each.
- Avoid technical jargon when possible.
- Get to the point.
- Elaborate similes and other forms of narrative artifice generally fail.
- Establish clear relationships between your paragraphs. Write explicit transitions.
- Including quotes from others is typically cliché.

Your essay should read quickly and easily. Creating an ornate garden of fancy phrases and showy words is not the goal here. The purpose of eloquence is to magnify the power of the idea.

AFTER DRAFTING

Here are some thoughts regarding the revision process:

- The best essays will get revised and reworked. Get input from mentors and friends.
- Stay objective.
- Try not to fall madly in love with your first draft.
- Set your latest draft aside if time permits.
- Read it later with fresh eyes.

They say that a picture equals a thousand words. Reverse that idea as you read your essay. Does your thousand words add up to one good picture of you?