THE ESSAY WRITING PROCESS

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Students may find writing the essays for major scholarship applications less daunting if they break the process up into the following stages:

STAGE 1: Brainstorming. Free associate about your past, present, and future.

STAGE 2: Development. Pull out promising ideas from your brainstorming session and develop the ideas as paragraphs.

STAGE 3: Bucket time! Organize your paragraphs according to the essay prompts on the scholarship application.

STAGE 4: Essay crafting. Turn your collection of paragraphs into an essay.

STAGE 5: Polishing. Make the writing pop!

STAGE I: Brainstorming.

Look at each question below in all-caps and write down whatever comes to your mind. If you need more ideas to get you started, look at the bulleted list of related questions just underneath it. Set a timer for 20-30 minutes, and go for it. Don’t edit as you write. The goal is to activate your creative faculties and get lots of different ideas down on paper that you can later draw from. Many students find they are more creative when they hand write rather than type, but you should do what is most comfortable for you.

1. WHO ARE YOU?

1. What is your life story?
2. What makes you unique?
3. What do you have to offer that is unlike anyone else?
4. What values guide everything you do?

2. WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?

1. What are your main intellectual interests? Why are you interested in those things? How have you pursued them? What have you learned from pursuing them?
2. What are the highlights of your life as a student (favorite courses, assignments, books)?
3. What projects have you completed that you are most proud of?
4. What extra-curricular interests and accomplishments are you most proud of?

3. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

1. What are your professional/educational goals in the next few years?
2. What are your long-term professional/educational goals?
3. What questions do you want to answer in your life? What values do you want to uphold?
4. At the end of your life, what do you want to be able to say that you accomplished?

STAGE 2: Development

Look over what you wrote during the brainstorming stage. Pull out individual ideas from your brainstormed material that seem particularly promising or relevant to the opportunity you are applying for. Develop each idea into a full paragraph; tell the story of the idea or provide commentary so that the idea is fully expressed.

STAGE 3: Bucket time!

Find the essay prompts on the scholarship application. Many applications include both long essays (1-2 pages) and short essays (1-2 paragraphs). I recommend that you include both in this writing process. Copy and paste the essay prompts into a blank document (and note any page, word count, or character limitations). Copy paragraphs you developed in the previous stage and paste them under the essay prompt(s) they most relate to. It’s ok to paste some of the paragraphs multiple times.

Note that taken together, the essay questions for most major scholarship competitions ask you for the following information:

1. WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? (sound familiar?)
2. WHERE ARE YOU GOING? (also, should sound familiar)
3. FIT. How do your goals and values align with those of the funding organization? Review information about the funding organization’s mission and values (this should be available on their website) and the purpose of the scholarship. Why will funding you help the organization achieve its mission? Why is the scholarship you are applying for the opportunity that best aligns with your goals?
4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION. This is only included if the scholarship funds a period of research or a research degree. To address this, draw on your brainstormed material for the “where are you going” question. At this stage, expand your description to include the specific research question you will address, what methods you will use, what kinds of data you will gather, and what you will do with the data after gathering them (write an article? Give a presentation?). If the scholarship funds a research degree, provide this information about your thesis project.

STAGE 4: Essay crafting

Once you have several paragraphs that address one of your essay prompts, work on crafting them into a coherent essay. Experiment! Rearrange paragraphs and sentences until the essay progresses logically. Add topic sentences and transitions so that you tell a compelling story that explains why you deserve to win the scholarship. Periodically go back to the essay prompt to ensure that you are answering the question the organization actually wants answered.

STAGE 5: Polishing

This stage is about editing for grammar and style and getting the essays to the right length. A good guide to fine writing style is Richard Lanham’s *Revising Prose*, available at Helmke library (OMSA can provide a sample chapter).

OTHER WRITING EXERCISES FOR WHEN YOU ARE STUCK

1. Some short questions to get you thinking:
   1. What are 5 formative events that made you who you are?
   2. Who are 5 influential people in you life?
   3. What are 5 ideas or principles that have shaped you?
   4. What are 5 things that make you unique?
   5. What errors or regrets have taught you important things about yourself?
   6. When have you been so immersed in an activity that you were completely absorbed and lost track of time?
   7. What books, theories, or movements have had the greatest impact on you?
   8. Where or how do you waste the most time?
   9. How does your life now reflect your strongest held values?
   10. How are you typical of your generation or culture? How do you deviate from the norm?

Last revised 12/2024