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How to Write a Personal Statement for a Scholarship + Examples

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Either before or after you've gotten into your dream school, you'll have to figure out how to pay for it. For most students, this involves a combination of financial aid, parent contributions, self-contributions, student loans, and scholarships/grants. Because scholarships are money out of someone else's pocket that you never have to pay back, they are a great place to start!

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Scholarships come in two forms: merit-based and need-based. Need-based scholarships are also often called grants. These designations tell you whether an organization looks at your financial situation when deciding about your scholarship.

Additionally, different scholarships fall under different categories based on the mission of the organization or person providing the scholarship's financing. These missions typically emphasize different things like academic achievement, specific career goals, community service, leadership, family background, skill in the arts, or having overcome hardship. As you select scholarships to apply for and complete your applications, you should keep these missions in mind.

No matter what type of scholarship you are applying for, you will be asked to provide the review committee with standard materials. This includes your transcript, GPA, and resume/extracurriculars, but also, importantly, your personal statement. A scholarship personal statement is a bit different from your normal college essay, so we've put together this guide and some examples to help you get started!

What is the Purpose of the Scholarship Personal Statement?

The purpose of your personal statement is to help a review committee learn more about your personality, values, goals, and what makes you special. Ultimately, like with your college essays, you are trying to humanize your profile beyond your transcript, GPA, and test scores.

College essays all have one goal in mind (which is why you can apply to multiple schools at once through applications like the Common App or Coalition App): convince admissions officers that you would be a valuable addition to the university environment. The goal of your scholarship personal statement is different and differs more from one scholarship to the next. Rather than convincing various review committees that you are a generally good candidate for extra funding for college, you need to convince each review committee that your values have historically aligned with their organization's mission and will continue to align with their organization's mission.

Common missions amongst those who give scholarships include:

- Providing opportunities for students with career ambitions in a particular field
- Helping students who have experienced unexpected hardship
- Supporting students who show outstanding academic achievement
- Funding the arts through investing in young artists with strong technical skill
- Supporting the development of civic-minded community service leaders of the future
- Providing opportunities for historically underrepresented ethnic communities

If a specific mission like this is outlined on an organization's website or in the promotional material for its scholarship, the purpose of your personal statement is to show how you exemplify that mission.

What to Include in Your Personal Statement

Some scholarships ask for your personal statement to be guided by a prompt, while others leave things open for interpretation. When you are provided a prompt, it is obvious what you must do: answer the prompt. When you are not provided a prompt, you want to write a personal statement that is essentially a small-scale autobiography

where you position yourself as a good investment. In either case, you should identify a focus or theme for what you are trying to say about yourself so that your application does not get lost in the shuffle.

Prompts include questions like:

1. Why do you deserve this scholarship?
2. How have you shown your commitment to (leadership/community service/diversity) in your community?
3. When did you overcome adversity?
4. Why is attending college important to you?

If you are provided a prompt, develop a theme for your response that showcases both your values and your achievements. This will help your essay feel focused and will subsequently help the review committee to remember which candidate you were as they deliberate.

Themes include things like:

- I deserve this community service scholarship because my compassion for intergenerational trauma has inspired me to volunteer with a local after-school program. I didn't just sympathize. I did something about my sympathy because that's the type of person I am. Within the program, I have identified avenues for improvement and worked alongside full-time staff to develop new strategies for increasing attendance.
- I overcame adversity when my mother had to have a major surgery two months after giving birth to my younger brother. I was just a kid but was thrown into a situation where I had to raise another kid. It was hard, but I'm the kind of person who tries to grow from hard times and, through my experience taking care of a baby, I learned the importance of listening to body language and nonverbal cues to understand the needs of others (baby and nonbaby, alike).

Without a prompt, clarity can be harder to achieve. That said, it is of the utmost importance that you find a focus. First, think about both your goals and your values.

Types of goals include:

- Career goals
- Goals for personal growth
- The type of friend you want to be
- The change you want to make in the world

Values could include:

- Authenticity
- Justice
- Community
- Equity
- Education
- Compassion
- Safety
- Integrity
- And many more!

After you write out your goals/values, write out your achievements to see what goals/values you have “proof” of your commitment to. Your essay will ultimately be an exploration of your goal/value, what you have done about your goal/value in the past, and what you aspire to in the future.

You might be tempted to reflect on areas for improvement, but scholarships care about you living out your values. It is not enough to aspire to be exemplary in leadership, community service, or your academic field. For scholarships, you have to already be exemplary.

Finally, keep in mind that the review committee likely already has a copy of your extracurricular activities and involvement. Pick one or two accomplishments, then strive for depth, not breadth as you explore them.

Personal Statement Example: Breakdown + Analysis

Example 1

My interest in the field of neuroscience began at a young age. When I was twelve years old, my sister developed a condition called Pseudotumor Cerebri following multiple concussions during a basketball game. It took the doctors over six months to make a proper diagnosis, followed by three years of treatment before she recovered. During this time, my love for neuroscience was sparked as I began to research her condition and, then, other neurocognitive conditions. Later, my love of neuroscience was amplified when my mother began to suffer from brain-related health issues. My mother had been a practicing attorney in Dallas for over twenty years. She was a determined litigator who relentlessly tried difficult cases that changed people's lives. Now, she suffers from a cognitive impairment and is no longer able to practice law. Oftentimes, she has headaches, she gets “cloudy,” her executive functioning slows down, she feels overwhelmed, and she forgets things. My mother has gone from being the strong, confident, emotional and financial caretaker of our family to needing significant help on a daily basis. Once again, with this illness came a lot of research on my part — research that encouraged me to pursue my dreams of exploring neuroscience.

Due to my experiences with my mother and sister when I was in middle school, I knew that I wanted to make a difference in the field of neuroscience. I also knew that, to obtain this goal, I needed to maintain superior grades in school while also pursuing opportunities outside of school to further my education. In school, I was able to maintain superior grades to the point where I am currently valedictorian in a class of 567 students. In addition, in school, I challenged myself by taking 16 Advanced Placement classes and 19 Honors classes. Two of the most beneficial classes were AP Capstone Seminar and AP Capstone Research. AP Capstone Seminar and AP Capstone Research are research-oriented classes where students are given the opportunity to pursue whatever track their research takes them down. As a junior in AP Capstone Seminar, I researched the effects of harmful pesticide use on the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in children. This year, as a senior in AP Capstone Research, I am learning about the effects of medical marijuana on the treatment of Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

Outside of school, I furthered my education through taking advantage of the Duke TiP summer program. Duke TiP is a summer program run by Duke University where students who score extremely well on the SAT as middle schoolers are able to take college classes at different universities throughout the summers of their middle school and high school years. I took advantage of this opportunity twice. First, I went to Trinity University in San Antonio to expand my horizons and learn more about debate. However, once I was done exploring, I decided I wanted to go into neuroscience. This led me to take an Abnormal Psychology class at Duke University's West Campus. This class opened my eyes to the interaction between neuroscience and mental health, mental illness, and personality. Years later, I am currently continuing my education outside of school as an intern at the University of Texas Dallas Center for Brain Health. Through this internship, I have been able to see different aspects of neuroscience including brain pattern testing, virtual reality therapy, and longitudinal research studies. With this background, I have positioned myself to be accepted by top neuroscience programs throughout the nation. So far, I have been accepted to the neuroscience department of University of Southern California, the University of Virginia, the University of Texas, and Southern Methodist University, as well as the chemistry department at University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill.

It is with this passion for neuroscience driven by my family and passion for education driven by internal motivation that I will set out to conquer my career objectives. My educational aspirations consist of acquiring a bachelor's degree in a biological or health science that would assist me in pursuing a medical career as a neuroscience researcher. I decided to attain a career as a researcher since my passion has always been assisting others and trying to improve their quality of life. After obtaining my Masters and my PhD, I plan to become a professor at a prestigious university and continue performing lab research on cognitive disorders. I am particularly interested in disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In the lab, I hope to find different therapies and medications to help treat the 3.5 million people around the world suffering from ASD. Furthermore, I want to contribute back to underserved populations that struggle because they do not have as much access to medical assistance as other privileged groups. As such, I hope to do a part of my research in less developed or developing Spanish-speaking countries. This will also allow me to pursue my love of Spanish while pursuing my love of neuroscience. I think that following such a career path will provide me the opportunity to learn about the medical needs of the autistic community and improve their quality of health. Furthermore, I hope to train a new generation of students to strive to research and make comparable discoveries. Whether it be through virtual reality labs or new drug discoveries, I believe that research leads to innovation which leads to a brighter future.

Breakdown

This student does a great job of making themselves appear competent and dedicated to the field of neuroscience. This is primarily because they provided tangible evidence of how they have pursued their dedication in the past —through their AP Capstone courses, their Abnormal Psychology class at Duke TiP, and their internship at UTD. There is no doubt in the mind of a reader that this student is high-achieving.

This student also engages successfully with a past-future trajectory, where they end with a vision of how they will continue to use neuroscience in the future. This helps the review committee see what they are investing in and the ways that their money will go to good use.

This student has two major areas for improvement. As we have said, the purpose of a personal statement is for a student to humanize themselves to a review committee. This student struggles to depict themselves separately from their academic achievements. A solution to this would be for the student to establish a theme towards the beginning of their essay that relates to both their values as a human and their achievements.

At the beginning of the essay, the student explores how their interest in neuroscience began. They explain their interest through the following sentences: “During this time, my love for neuroscience was sparked as I began to research her condition and, then, other neurocognitive conditions” and “Once again, with this illness came a lot of research on my part — research that encouraged me to pursue my dreams of exploring neuroscience.” The student made the great decision to tell the backstory of their interest, but they described their research in very mundane and redundant terms. Instead, they could have focused on their value of intellectual curiosity as a magnetic force that encouraged them to research their mother and sister’s ailments. Curiosity, then, could serve as a value-related thematic throughline to taking AP Capstone classes, taking college courses during the summer that weren’t required, and interning before even graduating high school.

A second area for improvement would be avoiding statistics. As the student identifies their valedictorian status and the number of AP classes they have taken, they might turn away certain personalities on a review committee by appearing braggy. Even further, these statistics are a waste of space. The review committee already has access to this information. These words distract from the major theme of the essay and would have been better used to humanize the student.

Example 2

Throughout my academic career, I have been an avid scholar, constantly pushing myself towards ambitious goals. I held and continue to hold myself to a high standard, enrolling myself in rigorous curriculum, including Honors and Advanced Placement courses to stretch my mental potential. During my junior year of high school, I took four AP tests, two on the same day, and earned the AP Scholar with Honor Award. Additionally, I received the Letter of Commendation for the PSAT/NMSQT, and qualified for Rotary Top 100 Students both my freshman and senior year, a sign of my commitment to my studies. However, school has not been all about having the best GPA for me; beyond the numbers, I have a deep drive to learn which motivates me to do well academically. I truly enjoy learning new things, whether it be a new essay style or a math theorem. I always give each class my best effort and try my hardest on every assignment. My teachers have noticed this as well, and I have received school Lancer Awards and Student of the Month recognitions as a result. It is a major goal of mine to continue to aspire towards a high level of achievement regarding future educational and occupational endeavors; I plan

on continuing this level of dedication throughout my educational career and implementing the skills I have learned and will learn into my college experience and beyond.

This fall, I will begin attending the University of California Los Angeles as an English major. I chose this major because I am fascinated by written language, especially its ability to convey powerful messages and emotions. I also enjoy delving into the works of other authors to analyze specific components of their writing to discover the meaning behind their words. In particular, I cannot wait to begin in-depth literary criticism and learn new stylistic techniques to add more depth to my writing. Furthermore, I recently went to UCLA's Bruin Day, an event for incoming freshmen, where I was exposed to many different extracurriculars, some of which really piqued my interest. I plan on joining the Writing Success Program, where I can help students receive free writing help, and Mock Trial, where I can debate issues with peers in front of a real judge. The latter, combined with a strong writing background from my undergraduate English studies will be extremely beneficial because I plan to apply to law school after my undergraduate degree. As of now, my career goal is to become a civil rights lawyer, to stand up for those who are discriminated against and protect minority groups to proliferate equality.

As a lawyer, I wish to utilize legislation to ameliorate the plight of the millions of Americans who feel prejudice and help them receive equity in the workplace, society, and so on. Though this seems a daunting task, I feel that my work ethic and past experience will give me the jumpstart I need to establish myself as a successful lawyer and give a voice to those who are often unheard in today's legal system. I have been a Girl Scout for over a decade and continually participate in community service for the homeless, elderly, veterans, and more. My most recent project was the Gold Award, which I conducted in the Fullerton School District. I facilitated over ten workshops where junior high students taught elementary pupils STEM principles such as density and aerodynamics via creative activities like building aluminum boats and paper airplanes. I also work at Kumon, a tutoring center, where I teach students to advance their academic success. I love my job, and helping students from local schools reach their potential fills me with much pride.

Both being a Girl Scout and working at Kumon have inspired me to help those in need, contributing significantly to my desire to become a lawyer and aid others. My extracurriculars have allowed me to gain a new perspective on both learning and teaching, and have solidified my will to help the less fortunate. In college, I hope to continue to gain knowledge and further develop my leadership skills, amassing qualities that will help me assist others. I plan to join multiple community service clubs, such as UCLA's local outreach programs that directly aid residents of Los Angeles. I want to help my fellow pupils as well, and plan on volunteering at peer tutoring and peer editing programs on campus. After college, during my career, I want to use legal tactics to assist the underdog and take a chance on those who are often overlooked for opportunities. I wish to represent those that are scared to seek out help or cannot afford it. Rather than battling conflict with additional conflict, I want to implement peaceful but strong, efficient tactics that will help make my state, country, and eventually the world more welcoming to people of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. These goals are close to my heart and therefore I will be as diligent as I am passionate about them. My perseverance and love for learning and community service drive my ambition in both education and life as a whole, and the drive to make the world a better place is one that I will carry with me for my entire life.

Breakdown

This student emphasizes two values in this essay: hard work and community service. These are values that go together nicely, and definitely make sense with this student's end goal of becoming a civil rights lawyer! That

said, some changes could be made to the way the student presents their values that would make their personal statement more convincing and engaging.

Structurally, instead of using a past-future trajectory, this student starts by explaining their academic achievements, then explains their career goals, then explains their history of community service, then explains their future desires for community service. This structure loses the reader. Instead, the student should have started with either the past *or* the future.

This could look like 1) identifying their career goals, 2) explaining that hard work and a commitment to community service are necessary to get there, and 3) explaining that they aren't worried because of their past commitment to hard work and community service. Or it could look like 1) providing examples of their hard work and community service in the past, then 2) explaining how those values will help them achieve their career goals.

Additionally, like with our other example, this student shows a heavy investment in statistics and spouting off accomplishments. This can be unappealing. Unfortunately, even when the student recognizes that they are doing this, writing "beyond the numbers, I have a deep drive to learn which motivates me to do well academically. I truly enjoy learning new things, whether it be a new essay style or a math theorem," they continue on to cite their achievements, writing "My teachers have noticed this as well, and I have received school Lancer Awards and Student of the Month recognitions as a result." They say they are going beyond the numbers, but they don't go beyond the awards. They don't look inward. One way to fix this would be to make community service the theme around which the essay operates, supplementing with statistics in ways that advance the image of the student as dedicated to community service.

Finally, this student would be more successful if they varied their sentence structure. While a small-scale autobiography can be good, if organized, every sentence should not begin with 'I.' The essay still needs to be engaging or the review committee might stop reading.