**Writing Scholarship & University Admission Essays**

1. **CAPTURE THE READER’S ATTENTION**
   
   Use a *grabber*, a creative opening sentence, paragraph, or image. The reader(s) will see many applications—many of these essays are of the “I’m eighteen, love my dog, and want to save the planet” type, laden with clichés and empty platitudes. Yours *must* capture attention. Your grabber may be humorous, cite an important incident in your life, assert a point of view on a significant issue, or present your strong interest in educational or career pursuits. If the essay instructions require you to respond to a topic, address it directly in a clear, engaging opener. See the SAMPLE ADMISSION AND SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS for examples.

2. **DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU’RE A SERIOUS AND ABLE STUDENT—A GOOD INVESTMENT**
   
   Colleges and scholarship grantors want to deal with serious students. Demonstrate that you take your academic career seriously, you’re well focused, and you have clear plans for your academic and professional future. Refer to your history of academic performance and note your GPA if it is significant, such as if you are a returning student with better grades than when you first attended college, or if you’ve earned a high GPA while handling other responsibilities. If your academic record is not strong, explain why, and discuss why it will be stronger with a scholarship. If you’re a reentry student, parent, or working student, highlight this in your essay; demonstrate that you’re serious and capable in other aspects of your life.

3. **DISTINGUISH YOURSELF FROM THE OTHER APPLICANTS**
   
   While a creative opening will set your letter apart, something more substantial is required to distinguish you from the other candidates. A record of personal or academic achievement is helpful, but it must be presented carefully. The sample essays demonstrate some effective means of doing so. Personal background, unusual or career-related work history, family management experiences, or recreational interests might be highlighted—briefly. If you’re a first-generation college student (neither your mother nor father graduated from a university) or are involved in community service, highlight these key scholarship and admission criteria.

4. **DO YOUR HOMEWORK**
   
   If you’re writing for admission, review the college’s catalog, usually available on its website. You can use computers with high-speed Internet connections at the NVC Library, Campus Computer Center, Career Center, and Transfer Center (which also has printed catalogs from California colleges and universities). State in your essay that you’ve reviewed the catalog (few applicants do) and cite specifics, such as information about the program and courses you’re interested in. Don’t just restate it—relate it to your academic aims and interests.

   If your essay is directed toward scholarships, research the organization granting the scholarship. You may not have time to do so for each grantor (especially for small organizations or individually-granted scholarships), but you should be able to find information on larger entities. Libraries have encyclopedias of professional and service organizations, and these can give concise background data. A brief email or phone call to local organizations can be fruitful. In your essay, mention briefly that you’ve done this research and demonstrate how your candidacy matches the goals of the organization or the criteria for scholarships.
5. **STATE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**
A brief statement of your academic and career plans will reinforce the image of you as a serious student. Make this statement as specific as possible; people will recognize, of course, that students do change focus as their academic career proceeds, so don’t feel that this will lock you in. If you haven’t declared a major, discuss which fields interest you and how you’ll narrow your choices (reviewing program and course offerings in college catalogs may be helpful, as may working with a counselor to review career opportunities in your selected fields). It is also wise to relate your future plans to past interests and experience, as well as present a plan for community service after you graduate and establish your career.

6. **ASK FOR IT—AND DEMONSTRATE HOW IT WILL HELP YOU**
If yours is a scholarship essay, show how the scholarship will help you. Will it let you reduce working hours and focus more effectively on your studies? Do you need to fund childcare to give you time to study? Will a scholarship help defray the cost of expensive textbooks or instructional materials? Do you need a computer, upgrade, or software, or special items (such as medical equipment or uniforms) related to your academic pursuits? Also consider living expenses and transportation. Be as specific as possible. Some writers depict what will happen if they don’t receive the scholarship, but a positive approach is more effective.

If you’re applying to a university, tell why it’s the best place for you. What will you gain there that is not available elsewhere? Discuss the program in which you plan to major, as noted above, and mention other benefits of the school. Avoid empty statements, such as, “Pinole University is world class!” Discuss what you bring to the college, how admitting you will benefit the institution, and how your education at the university will benefit the community.

7. **USE A STRONG CLOSER**
In your closing paragraph, it is persuasive to echo the grabber of the opening; such cyclical structures are powerful in terms of organization and effect. This final paragraph is a good place to briefly (and tactfully) note that you will benefit the institution by reflecting well upon the school or scholarship grantor. See the SAMPLE ESSAYS for examples.

8. **PROOFREAD AND CORRECT THE ESSAY**
Print your essay and read it from bottom to top, sentence by sentence; have others read it as well, since your familiarity with the essay can blind you to logical and writing errors.

9. **SEND A THANK-YOU NOTE AND REGULAR PROGRESS REPORTS**
If you win a scholarship, write a thank-you note. In addition to demonstrating good manners, a thank-you can give you an edge if the scholarship is renewable. Let the grantor(s) know that they have chosen well, and that you’re interested in renewing the scholarship (sometimes, you can persuade them to do so). Some scholarships are multi-year; for such awards (and even for one-time awards), it is wise to send a periodic (by semester or quarter) update letter to the grantor. This follow-up letter should deal with your progress and plans, as well as state your need for and ask about the availability of future scholarships.

10. **KEEP A COPY OF THE ESSAY(S)**
Make a backup copy of the essay on CD, DVD, or flash drive and store it in a safe location. Once you’ve written a scholarship or admission essay, the document can be edited for other situations, such as future scholarships, university and graduate school admission, or job applications. The time you spend composing your essay will be rewarded.