



Scholarship Essays: Fulbright, Marshall, Rhodes, & Truman

What Scholarships Are Out There?

The major *graduate* awards are: Fulbright, Rhodes, Marshall, Rotary Ambassadorial and Mitchell (Northern Ireland) and Gates-Cambridge (to Cambridge)

The major *undergraduate* are Truman (most competitive), Pickering, Boren, Udall (environmental topics), Goldwater (science, computer science, engineering, math)

Note: Fulbright can be either graduate or undergraduate.

How Competitive Are These Scholarships?

Marshall receives 1,000 applications but usually awards only 33.

Fulbright receives 10,000 but usually awards only 1,000.

Is There A Difference Between Applying for a Fulbright Scholarship As Opposed to Writing a Graduate School Essay?

Dr. Trisha Folds-Bennett, Associate Dean of the Honors College at the College of Charleston, says that the application for graduate school (like law and medical schools) is not necessarily at so high a level as the Fulbright et al.; for law and medical school, the personal statement is just one part of the application whereas for Fulbright et al. it is the “make or break” part of the application because all the applicants have the high grade point ratio (average) required to apply.

What Makes a Successful Scholarship Essay?

Overall, “It has to sing,” according to Dr. Folds-Bennett, Associate Dean of the Honors College.

More specifically,

---It should show a serious, self-reflective self.

---It should use your authentic voice, so be loud and clear when telling your story, yet be sophisticated.

---It should tell what is unique and human about you and tie it to the scholarship itself.

---It should be disciplined in proving its points. For example, you can say you changed your school, but what is the measure of this success? Tell specifically what you did and show how it had an impact.

---It should not be overly modest; your essay must “sell” you to the decision committees.

---It needs a cohesive story that engages the reviewers’ interest.

---It should flow logically.

---It should be technically perfect. (No typos!)

What are the Biggest Mistakes When Writing the Scholarship Essay?

--The writing is merely a prose version of the resume, told chronologically, such as “I like biology and majored in it...”

---The writing lacks a narrative arc.

---The writing might use an analogy or metaphor at the beginning but never return to it later in the piece.

---The writing is full of clichés: “I would like to pursue land reform and go to med school to help people.”

---The writing’s opening is too overly dramatic.

---The writing is wordy and redundant.

---The writing does not answer the prompt questions. You must answer all questions in the order presented. Also, your responses must be different for each prompt; so if asked what you want to do in five years and, then, in ten, have different answers.

Sample Prompts from the Fulbright Application

What do you value? What are you good at? Where do you want to leave a mark? What can you contribute?

Advice for the Online Prompts

You may have to submit your scholarship essay on-line, responding to prompts.

Caution: if asked to complete this type, **be absolutely sure you carefully read and make every effort to understand and respond to the questions asked.** For example, if asked, “What satisfaction do you expect to receive from being a _____ (doctor, lawyer, etc.)?”, don’t make the mistake of answering the question, “Why do you want to be a _____?”. These questions are not asking for the same information.

Tips about the Marshall, Fulbright, and Truman Awards

According to Dr. Folds-Bennett, the Marshall/Fulbright are similar. However, the Truman Award is looking for true “change agents” or evidence of transformative leadership—it has nine different questions including a policy statement, which means the applicant writes to a legislator about a current, vital topic, such as the immigration issue, and proposes ways to handle it.

How Much Time Do Reviewers Spend with Each Scholarship Essay?

Unfortunately, reviewers probably spend no more than 5 minutes. So, keep to the word count limitations; even going over by one word will discredit the application. Also, be sure to follow the directions for typing and margins.

Preparing to Write the Scholarship Essay

Inventory yourself, and research each scholarship to which you intend to apply. You should

1. Inventory Yourself

Write down a list of your career-related education (classes, research, seminars you have attended) and work experiences (internships, jobs, such as a research assistant). Focus particularly on your strengths. Identify and be prepared to provide a rationale for any weaknesses that may make a graduate school committee question your ability to complete successfully a degree in its program and be successful in your chosen profession. Include any personal experiences that your committee would consider strengths (e.g., you finished your college education 100% by working while also maintaining a solid GPA).

2. Research Each Scholarship

Consider visiting the following Web site that describes each scholarship: Joe Schall accessed at <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/>

Of course, also visit the individual sites of the scholarships.

Writing the Scholarship Essay

Writing the Opening

The first paragraph is vital because it must hook reviewers, so avoid “throat clearing” in the opening paragraph; that is, get right to the point. Consider, for example, a dramatic opening and, then, a topic sentence: “When I was 5 years old, my father ran into a tree and lost his ability to be either a lawyer or geologist. I was inspired by him.”

Sample Opening from a Successful Fulbright Applicant

Originally, the opening started with “At the age of 2 I became interested in languages.”

Here is the revised beginning:

“Que tengas un buen camino y cuando necesites un descanso, ya tienes tu lugar aquí,” was one of the many sincere goodbyes I received as I left Mexico after six months of studying and volunteering in the states of Guanajuato and Michoacan. Such displays of warmth and welcome abound in Mexico. I plan to return to the country, but this time, to do a different region and not for a “descanso” (break), but in order to pursue a specific career goal. I plan to study for a Master’s Degree of Nutrition in Chiapas, the most southern Mexican state, with some of the highest rates of suffering from malnutrition in all of Mexico. I will live and study in Chiapas so I can work with marginalized populations, improve their access to nutritious foods, and lay a foundation for future studies in medicine. While I am determined to reach out to underserved communities, I only identified the exact means and motivations within the last months, the culmination of a journey that began sixteen years ago” (used with permission).

Note: The new opening starts by quoting Spanish since the applicant had been in Mexico before—the new version gives a sense of who he/she is, and that is important to the reviewers.

Writing the Middle of Your Application Essay

In the middle section, most scholarships want you to detail your interest, experience, and knowledge of your particular field. (However, once again you should refer to the instructions on the Web site for each scholarship because some require other types of information.) In this section, you are basically explaining:

1. *What you have done thus far in your chosen field.* Be specific—refer to specific experiences like work, research, classes, conversations/work with people in the field, seminars you have attended, AND explain HOW/WHY your education, work, and other experiences suit you to this field and to this particular scholarship. In doing so, you show that you know your field and can employ language which professionals in this discipline use to convey ideas. Be selective—Remember, you cannot tell your readers everything about yourself nor should you—again, stress your strengths. Pay particular attention to qualities about yourself that your readers would find unique and attractive.

IF any aspects of your résumé may be seen as weaknesses, explain them AND, to the degree you can, turn them into positives. For example, if your undergraduate GPA for your first two years was weak but for your last two years it was excellent, you might use this improvement to stress your growth, maturity, and determination to succeed in your



chosen field. Explain any weaknesses concisely and clearly, embedding such explanations within a paragraph that begins and ends on a positive note. Giving too much prominent space to weaknesses may undermine your case. At the same time, failing to explain such problem areas may lead the committee to question your qualifications.

2. *What you plan to do in the future (your professional goals) and why you have chosen this particular field.* Once you have stated your chosen profession, explain your reasons for selecting this profession. Be realistic. Grandiose statements like “I want to become a doctor, so I can go to the Middle East and cure all health problems there” show poor judgment. Such statements also smack of “brown nosing” which scholarship committees can sense a mile away. Be honest. Some scholarship committees also want to know why you have selected their specific scholarship. How do you envision using your education in the future? What skills do you hope to develop while using the scholarship? What can you contribute to your chosen field?

Writing the Conclusion

Concluding sections vary according to what you feel would most persuade the committee to accept you. For example, you may wish to reiterate key qualities about yourself that you believe the scholarship committee members may seek—particularly if you have established those qualities in the opening paragraph and explained them in the middle section. In the example cited previously of the student applying for medical school, he might say, “Please carefully consider my application for _____ (name of scholarship). You will find I am committed to the medical profession and to becoming an excellent doctor. I look forward to the intellectual challenge.” You should conclude on a positive, upbeat, persuasive note. Do not simply retell what you’ve already told your readers—boring, boring, boring! DO be respectful! DO stress your commitment to your chosen profession—show you understand the amount of work ahead and are committed to it.

PLEASE NOTE: DO NOT WRITE ONE GENERIC SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY. No one essay is suitable for all scholarships. Rather, you should tailor each essay to your readers. Not all committees are looking for the same qualities. Thus, you must carefully research yourself and each scholarship before writing.

3. *Revise and edit your essay.* Listed below are tips for revising and editing, tips based on the criteria that scholarship committees use to judge essays.
 - A. Use a clear, concise writing style (Just say it simply, and be straightforward—a high blown literary style, long sentences, are too hard to read!).
 - B. Stick to the stated length.
 - C. Maintain a positive, upbeat tone that shows you are enthusiastic about this particular scholarship and your chosen profession.
 - D. Make sure your essay is well-organized (Does each paragraph of the body have a topic sentence? Have you used transitions? Have you placed paragraphs in a logical sequence?) and logical (Do you notice any lapses in logic? Any illogical statements?)



- E. Make sure your content is sufficiently developed—Have you cited relevant specifics? Supported each main idea? Have you been selective in the information you have included? (Highlight those aspects of your education and experience the committee will react to favorably—This is an essay for graduate school, not *War and Peace*.)
- F. Use the “You Attitude.” That is, use “you” and “your” instead of “I,” “me,” “mine,” whenever possible and stress how this graduate school and your profession will benefit by your selection. Your essay should NOT sound egocentric (“I did this...”, “I believe...”), nor should it sound like the story of your life.
- G. Express a sense of commitment to the scholarship and to your chosen career.
- H. Be persuasive—Why should this committee accept your application?
- I. Be original—What is unique about you, and how does this quality make you particularly suited for this scholarship?
- J. Be honest, tactful, and respectful—BUT do not be phony.
- K. Once you have revised the content and structure, you should then EDIT your essay. **BE ABSOLUTELY METICULOUS** in proofreading. Any typos, words omitted, slang, and grammar/spelling errors will be seen as a sign you are not a person who attends to detail. At the very least, the review committees expect you to edit your work.

Sources

Droll, Linda. Milliken University (Decatur, IL).

Folds-Bennett, Trisha, Associate Dean, Honors College, College of Charleston (SC)

Graduate School and You. Washington, D.C.: Council of Graduate Schools, 1989.

Schall, Joe accessed at <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/>

Writing Lab’s Handout on Graduate School Essays, College of Charleston (SC)

See also National Association of Fellowship Advisors (NAFA)

Dr. Vander Zee, College of Charleston. Nationally Competitive Awards Office

What follows is a rubric (scale) to evaluate one’s own essay:

3-2-1 Personal Essay

Assessment Total Score_____

The best personal essays strategically align your past values and experiences with the prospective opportunity, and also show how that opportunity will enable clearly articulated future aspirations. First, select a limited and specific set of values (or a single value) that will supply the grounding theme for the essay. Then, begin to gather compelling and diverse evidence for those foundational values. Seeking that key evidence, some essays will focus on a single, multifaceted experience, but it might help to think of each paragraph as a container for a distinct experience—academic, professional, personal—that allows your reader see the essay’s grounding values in fresh and dynamic way. Remember: It takes a great amount of effort—and many drafts—to compose elegant, engaging, and effective personal essays. Good luck!



Criteria	Ready to Submit (3)	Needs Work (2)	Start Fresh (1)
Opening Moves SCORE____	Opening situates the reader dynamically in the midst of an engaging thought or action that aptly frames the narrative, clearly suggesting the core value(s) that will inform the essay throughout	Opening moves are compelling, but it's less clear how they frame the essay itself	Opening offers no clear, sustained, or engaging strategy
Middle Ground SCORE____	Middle paragraphs focus on representative experiences (academic, personal, professional) or representative facets of a single experience	Middle paragraphs are coherent, but they attempt to cover too much or too little ground	Middle paragraphs lack a central identity and coherence
Final Gestures SCORE____	Conclusion strategically extends, echoes, or reflects upon the thoughts or actions introduced in the opening in light of the unfolding narrative Conclusion projects grounding values Meaningfully and specifically towards future goals	Conclusion rounds out the narrative, but repeats what has already been conveyed without adding to it Conclusion does not make a meaningful and specific gesture towards the future	Conclusion is repetitious or relies on generalities Conclusion makes no gesture towards the future
Narrative Arc & Transitions SCORE____	Paragraphs form a cohesive story of growth and development focusing on author's character Transitions between paragraphs effectively bridge core ideas rather than rely on mere sequence or chronology	Narrative contains a few notable gaps or shifts too abruptly, weakening the arc Transitions between paragraphs are clear but formulaic	The narrative arc is absent or weak There is no clear transitional strategy
The Stuff of Character SCORE____	Author clearly conveys a strategically chosen value (or set of values) supported by key competencies that unify the essay, and that each paragraph freshly embodies Essay gives the character <i>something to do</i> , aptly balancing action and reflection Author's character is likable—perhaps quirky but not flawed	Essay conveys a clear set of values and competencies, but relies on direct statement of those values Essay lacks action and narrative specificity at times Essay reveals flaws that might damage character	Essay does not reveal a clear set of competencies and values. Essay consistently lacks action and detail Author's character is not likable
Style and Function SCORE____	Author varies sentence pacing (length) and structure (syntax) Essay contains no errors / typos Author achieves concision by using active voice and vivid verbs (few "to be" verbs), and avoiding strings of prepositional phrases	Essay occasionally reverts to static sentence structures and pacing Essay contains minor errors. Writing is clear, but lacks concision at times	Static sentence structures and pacing prevail Essay includes significant errors Writing lacks clarity
The Detailed Self SCORE____	Author uses vivid details to engage the reader on multiple sensory and intellectual levels, encouraging the reader to smell, hear, think, feel, taste, see, laugh, and so on	Author offers details, but either misses opportunities for engaging the reader, or offers excessive and distracting details	Essay remains too vague, lacking the kinds of details that bring an essay to life