

Dos and Don'ts of Admission and Scholarship Essay Writing

Do convey a positive message overall. Cynicism will not score points with the scholarship or admission committee.

Do strive for depth, not breadth. Focus on one event or idea rather than trying to cover an entire subject. Think personal anecdote.

Do use analogies (metaphors and similes) to help convey your message, but don't overdo it.

Do incorporate dialogue into your essay, but think twice about using a screenplay approach (unless you plan to major in theater arts).

Do use more short sentences than long ones. Don't take this to an extreme, however. Mix up sentence length so that your essay flows naturally and rhythmically when read aloud.

Do use the active voice instead of the passive voice. In most cases, the active voice is preferred. Here's an example of each:

Active: The applicant wrote an outstanding essay.

Passive: A less-than-outstanding essay was written by the applicant.

Do avoid careless errors and grammatical blunders. Ask someone to review your essay. Reading your essay aloud is a good way to detect errors.

Do provide closure – a sense that you have provided the reader with bookends to your essay or that you have come full circle with your essay.

Do answer the question that has been asked.

Do be concise and get to the point.

Do be honest. Don't try to be someone you're not. Discuss qualities you possess, not ones you wish you had.

Do keep your essay focused. Don't try to mention everything you're interested in or have done. Choose one experience, incident or person to concentrate on in your essay.

Do be specific. Mention what you've learned, not just that you learned "a lot". Give examples of what you learned.

Do avoid slang and currently popular buzz phrases. You'll be "dissed" and brutalized by the committee, so write your essay in this style – NOT!

Don't quote others in your essay. It's great that you know what others say, but scholarship and or college admission committees want to know your thoughts, not what Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King, JR. or Betsy Ross may have said.

Don't write an essay that reads like a newspaper editorial. The schools welcome your opinions, but don't get on a soapbox and appear overly critical of other viewpoints.

Don't write about the following topics:

- Romantic relationships
- Views on drugs and alcohol
- Opinions about sex and other moral issues
- Political beliefs
- Religious beliefs
- Views on current events (e.g., abortion, disarmament)

Don't waste your essay opportunity to explain blemishes or deficiencies in your application. A low grade, a low SAT score or an absence or extracurricular activities is not a worthy subject for discussion in your essay.

Don't appear overly idealistic.

Don't even think about mentioning popular television shows, movies, musicians or actors, regardless of how significant they are to you – and please don't mention any Dr. Seuss book. (The wastebaskets in admission offices fill to the brim every fall with Dr. Seuss essays.)

Don't address the admission committee or ask them to admit you.

Don't use words like “finally”, “in sum” or “in conclusion”.

Don't repeat or sum up in any way.

Don't start too many sentences with the word “I”.

Don't tell the reader explicitly, “I am a unique and interesting person.” Instead, let the reader glean this from your unique and interesting essay.

Don't be a dummy by dabbling in dumb alliterations.

Don't use technical, scientific or obscure “SAT-style” words. A plethora of garish periphrasis may come across as haughty or supercilious.

Don't use superfluous words and phrases, including “courtroom” rhetoric, waffle words, needless self-references and transition words. Here are a few examples of what to avoid:

Rhetoric:	Clearly, obviously, unquestionably
Waffle words:	Somewhat, rather, quite, perhaps
Self-references:	I think, I believe, my feeling is that
Transition words:	First, second, third, finally, thus, in conclusion, moreover, however, the next point