

## College Scholarship Guide

Michael Gardon

Oct 29, 2019

Higher education costs are at an all-time high, and landing the right scholarship could be the difference between graduating debt-free or paying off loans for years and years.

Unlike a loan, a scholarship does not need to be repaid. It is a gift. Scholarships are granted by a variety of entities, like schools, private endowments, businesses, religious organizations, nonprofits, the government, and professional associations. There are thousands of scholarships available to undergrad and graduate students throughout the country.

### **The Scholarship Application Guide**

The scholarship application process can be broken down into four main steps.

1. Prepare
2. Organize
3. Search
4. Apply

How you approach each step will determine your effectiveness. A cohesive strategy for each step will save you time and ensure you apply to the scholarships with the highest odds.

#### **Prepare**

Prepare well before the scholarship application deadline. Since most scholarships are merit-based, past performance matters. A documented history of your experiences, lessons learned, and accomplishments will come in handy when writing essays or preparing for interviews. Find out what makes the difference with scholarship reviewers and plan ahead.

#### **Understand what scholarship committees look for**

Scholarships are competitive. Very small differences in candidates' backgrounds often make the difference. Scholarships tend to prefer candidates who are well rounded, meaning the candidates demonstrate they have pursued and excelled in several areas other than just academics.

Grades are important, but extracurricular activities also matter because they show your varied interests and dedication to learning skills or providing service outside of the classroom.

#### **Study and prepare for the ACT/SAT**

Like it or not, in the eyes of reviewers the score you get on these tests is one of the best predictors of not only your raw intelligence, but also how you work and prepare. ACT and SAT test-preparation courses are often worth the added expense.

#### **Only pursue extracurricular activities you'll partake in**

Extracurricular activities is a catchall term for anything you might be interested in outside of class. Sports are popular and demonstrate teamwork and perseverance. Band, drama club, chess, debate, and student government are also good choices, but almost anything can do as long as you show a genuine interest in the activity.

No matter what your interests or extracurricular activities are, there is likely a scholarship for you. Instead of choosing activities that might "look good" on an application, choose activities you're genuinely interested in and ensure you take active part in it. Your enthusiasm will stand out much more vividly in your application. Focus on quality over quantity of

your experience. Providing a detailed description of how an experience shaped you will get you further than listing 20 activities where you were a non-participant.

### **Explore service opportunities**

Dedicate time to serve others. This is not only rewarding, but it also looks great on a scholarship application. You can serve in a variety of ways, including:

- Homeless shelters
- Youth mentorship programs
- Children's hospitals
- Big Brothers Big Sisters
- Charities

There are literally hundreds of ways to get involved through service. These opportunities have expanded in recent years because of the growing number of remote opportunities, such as phone fundraising or pro-bono grant writing.

### **Seek guidance from scholarship reviewers, counselors, and personal relationships**

Scholarship reviewers are a fantastic, yet often untapped, source of rich information. Reaching out to a reviewer shows great initiative. You can ask a reviewer about any part of the application process, but you may want to focus on finding out how much weighting they give to grades vs. test scores vs. extracurriculars.

You could also ask if they could provide any example essays from past scholarship winners. Having an example often takes the pressure off of structuring your essay so you can write more freely. You can usually find someone to talk to by researching the scholarship webpage.

Counselors are a great resource for specific scholarship statistics, tips, interview practice questions, and writing workshop information that can come in handy during the application process. Since counselors see college-bound students graduate high school every year, they usually have many examples of students that won scholarships and can share with you the approach those students took to win. Remember that counselors are there to help you but, like your teachers, they are busy. Always be polite and courteous of their time.

Your parents and your peers can also be great sources of help. If you're considering some extracurricular activities but are unsure of what activities you should participate in or what you are interested in, your parents and friends can help you explore some of your interests and narrow down some ideas by commenting on what they think are your strengths and weaknesses.

### **Collect and organize all your relevant information**

Here is where you document your grades, activities, accomplishments, and other important information for use later in the application process. Don't limit your documentation to only statistics. Commentary can be particularly impactful in an essay, particularly if there is a story of a lesson learned from a significant experience in your life. You can organize this into a running collection of your accomplishments, similar to how professionals use resumes.

Set up a document to use during your scholarship search. Input information like scholarship name, website, and deadline date for easy referral.

### **Search**

Now that you are prepared, understanding where to search and what to look for will help you find scholarships for which you qualify and offer you the best chance to win.

## Search early and often

The scholarship application process is time-consuming, so it pays to start your search early to give yourself enough time to find, assess, and apply before the deadlines.

Searching often helps you keep up on any new scholarship opportunities. Free scholarship search tools are updated often. A regular scan helps you respond to a new scholarship quickly.

## Focus on quantity

Your objective in the search should be to generate a large number of potential scholarships in a small amount of time. There is no limit to the number of scholarships you can win, so a high number is key. You will spend time targeting high-value scholarships in the next step, but for now capture as many options as you can that apply to you.

## Start with your target college

If you've already been accepted, the financial aid office for that college will be the best starting point for eligible scholarships. In addition to their own scholarships, many colleges have affiliations with other organizations that provide scholarship opportunities to students at that specific school. These opportunities, while competitive, are also some of the most accessible.

## Use free scholarship-search resources

- High school or university counselors
- Foundations, nonprofits, community organizations, local businesses, or civic groups in your school's area
- Organizations in your field of study
- Careerinfonet.org [Scholarship Search](#)
- Federal aid agencies
- State grant agencies
- Employers

## Target high-value scholarships

Once you have generated a good list, prioritize which scholarships you will apply to. Organize your list by identifying high-value scholarships. This will help you make sure you have time to apply to the best scholarships first so you don't miss any important deadlines.

High-value scholarships usually have some combination of these three traits:

1. Relevance to your background, interests, ethnic makeup, or financial needs
2. A high dollar amount
3. Feasibility — you already have the required information and can meet the deadline

## Apply

A scholarship application usually consists of more than just filling out a form. Many times, scholarships reviewers use essays, letters of recommendation, and even interviews to make their decisions. Each application is different, but the #1 mistake people make is not reading the directions.

## Essays

Nailing an essay with interesting, personal, and impassioned stories can be the key to cashing in on a scholarship opportunity. If you did your preparation work capturing and documenting your academic and extracurricular activities, essay writing will go smoothly.

Here are some tips for writing a great essay:

- **Use an outline.** Collect your thoughts, key points, and create a general structure for the essay.
- **Use real, vivid examples of how an experience impacted you.** Discuss the lessons you learned. For example, how did working at a homeless shelter impact the way you look at the underserved population in your area? How are you an outspoken leader? When have you exemplified teamwork?
- **Skip the exaggerations.** If your experience isn't real, it will show and your essay will come across as inauthentic.
- **Be ready for a question about your weaknesses or a failure.** Use this opportunity to be very honest, but also showcase how you learned from this experience to show your personal growth and resolve.
- **Proofread your essay.** Reviewers are not looking for text-message essays or tweeted experiences. Proper grammar and punctuation show reviewers how meticulous and thorough you are.
- **Get others to review your essay.** A different point of view or perspective can make a great difference and help you make your point more clearly.

### Letters of recommendation

Another way to differentiate yourself as a scholarship candidate is to request letters of recommendation. These are letters written on your behalf by people who know you and can vouch for some aspect of your work, academic studies, skills, or character. Someone who can articulately write about a cross-section of these attributes is best.

Most often, scholarship reviewers will request letters from people outside of your family. These people could be coaches, teachers, bosses, or family friends. Follow these tips to get the best out of your letters of recommendation:

**Select relevant people.** It goes without saying you will select people who only have good things to say about you, but make sure the people you approach possess in-depth knowledge of the relevant qualities you exemplify in your application. A coach that can speak to your leadership and team-building skills is a good example. Perhaps a teacher saw you struggle in math but put in the extra time to excel. This person could write about your determination and work ethic.

**Make it easy for people to complete the task.** Provide the name of the scholarship and its general requirements. You could even structure the letter in advance and allow the recommender to fill in the details. Include envelopes and postage if the writer is to mail the letter in directly.

**Provide examples of your accomplishments.** Even if you know the writer well, they may not know which important details you'd like to get across to the scholarship reviewer. If you created a collection of your accomplishments in the preparation section, you can easily send this to the writer. They can then include some examples from this document in their letter.

**Follow up.** Thank the recommender in person or with a note. This shows your appreciation for the person's time and positive recommendation, not to mention it makes him or her more likely to write another letter if needed!

### Interviews

Not every scholarship requires a resume, but the most lucrative and competitive ones do. The good news is this process will help you down the road as you do more interviewing in your career. As with any skill, practice and preparation are key. Here are some other tips for interviews:

**Practice makes perfect.** Ask parents, friends, or teachers to practice some interview questions with you and give you feedback on your answers, mannerisms, and tone. Plan out concrete examples you can use within the interview and rehearse them.

**Prepare some questions.** Ask the interviewer about the scholarship, the people funding it, or anything else relevant to the scholarship's mission. This can set you apart because most other candidates are only thinking of what questions they will be asked. A well-researched, well-thought-out question of the reviewer can help you stick out in their mind later on.

**Use a polite, relaxed tone.** If you haven't interviewed much, practicing with a very relaxed, conversational tone can pay off. When you're so busy thinking of what you are going to say, it's easy to forget how to say it as nervousness creeps in. Again, use your parents, friends, or even a mirror or video camera to practice. And always remember to be polite!

**Minimize indecision when possible.** Not everyone knows exactly what they want to do or how they will do it, but showing uncertainty toward a choice can be perceived negatively. Instead, use the opportunity to showcase your thought process. Acknowledge that at first you were uncertain, but then you considered factors A, B, and C to ultimately choose your path.

**Be on time.** Show up 15 minutes prior to your appointment.

**Groom and dress appropriately.** If you're a man, shave and maybe get a haircut. When this is taken care of, make sure to inquire about dress code. Not all interviews will require business attire, but most do. Even if they don't require formal clothing, show up looking like a professional.

### **Deadlines: When to Start the Process**

Every scholarship has its own application deadline. Many times, the deadline is six months to even one year before the scholarship is awarded, so start as early as possible.

Some types of scholarships, especially first-year scholarships from universities, have rolling deadlines that coincide with the admission deadlines. In this case, getting your application in early will increase your chances of winning. However, if you don't get the application in on time, scholarships are often given on an annual basis, which means even if you missed out the first year, you can apply again next year.

If you are a new college applicant, the best strategy is to research scholarship information for each school as you work on your application. This is extra work upfront, but it will save you from missing any deadlines and losing out on the cash. It also might help you decide which college to attend.

One more note on deadlines: **Aim to submit your application 2-3 days before the deadline.** You don't want computer glitches, freezing, or crashing to cause you to miss the deadline. The added time cushion will allow you to recover if you encounter a problem.

### **Types of Scholarships**

Almost all scholarships are **merit-based**, which means they are earned by exceeding standards set by the giving organization. Scholarships for undergraduate and graduate schools mostly land in these broad categories:

**Academic:** Scholarships are most often given for top grades and superior classroom performance. GPA and standardized test scores are weighted heavily to evaluate applicants.

**University:** Scholarships are given by individual schools as part of their ongoing financial aid programs.

**Demographic:** Scholarships target students of a certain demographic, such as women or minorities.

**Needs-Based:** Scholarships give cash to students who demonstrate financial need. There is usually a specific process to provide evidence of need. Academic performance or other attributes are also typically considered for these scholarships.

**Career, Major, or Industry:** Scholarships are granted to students pursuing degrees in certain fields. Certain businesses might offer scholarships to marketing students, for instance. Computer science students might receive this type of scholarship from technology-related companies. Other scholarships in this category are government-sponsored to promote enrollment in such fields as education, nursing, or pre-medicine.

**Athletic:** Scholarships are handed out to stand-out athletes in specific sports. The most common are football, basketball, baseball, and softball scholarships.

Many of these types of scholarships cross over into other categories. For instance, a minority-business group may give a **Demographic** scholarship to a student pursuing a finance degree. This type of scholarship could also be considered a **Career, Major, or Industry** scholarship. In addition, many **Needs-Based** scholarships are given as **University Scholarships**.

Deciphering which scholarships you qualify for can be difficult, so it is critical to conduct ample research as early as possible. You don't miss out on an opportunity for which you would be a top candidate.

**I won! How will this scholarship affect my other student aid?**

Once you win a scholarship, make sure to notify your school's financial aid department. If you have other grants, scholarships, or certain student loans, the total aid cannot be more than the cost of your tuition.

Certain scholarships specify the funds be used for room and board, books, or other expenses, so make sure you understand the terms. Your financial aid office should be more than equipped to help you through this process. Once you've maxed out on your scholarships, you may need to move on to finding the best student loans to fund the rest of your college time. Best of luck!