

How to Win a Merit Scholarship

Merit scholarships are typically awarded on the basis of academic, athletic or artistic merit, in addition to special interests. Some merit scholarships also consider financial need, but rewarding talent is the primary objective.

In most cases the scholarship sponsor has a set of criteria they use to select the winners from among the qualified applicants. (This is in contrast to scholarship lotteries which select winners randomly.) So a key to winning a scholarship is to identify the sponsor's criteria and tailor your application to those criteria.

Sponsors can have a variety of goals in offering a scholarship. Some companies offer scholarships as a form of community development, to invest in the future of the communities where they are based. Others offer scholarships to help retain current employees and recruit future employees. Colleges may offer scholarships to recruit a talented and diverse student body. Colleges may also offer scholarships in specific majors to encourage students to enroll in underrepresented majors (e.g., scholarships for women and minorities in science and engineering). Membership organizations tend to offer scholarships to promote their field or the mission of the organization. Other scholarships may be established to honor the memory of someone who has passed away, to provide a legacy that perpetuates his or her values.

The first step is to make sure you qualify for the scholarship. If the application requirements specify that you must have a 3.7 or higher GPA and you have a 3.6 GPA, don't bother applying. Most scholarship sponsors receive so many qualified applications that they do not have the time to consider applications that fail to satisfy the requirements. You may be a wonderful and talented person, but if your application is not qualified, the selection committee is not going to look at it.

On the other hand, if you barely miss the application requirements, you should try to improve until you qualify. For example, if you have a 3.6 GPA and the award requires a 3.7 GPA to apply, you could try working hard in school to improve your grades until you achieve a 3.7 GPA. This is why it is worthwhile to search for scholarships as soon as possible. Many awards also have prerequisites, such as requiring a portfolio of your work or a project report, that can take time to prepare.

The [FastWeb](#) scholarship database will only show you awards that match your profile. FastWeb has the tightest match of any scholarship database, so you're less likely to waste time on awards for which you aren't qualified.

As noted previously, all scholarship sponsors receive more qualified applications than they have awards available. The most competitive scholarships have a selection ratio of 1 in 400. The least competitive awards have a selection ratio of 1 in 10. According to the 1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 6.9% of undergraduate students receive private sector scholarships, and the average amount received is \$2,051. That means that your raw odds of winning a scholarship are 1 in 14.5.

But scholarship sponsors aren't going to give you money simply for breathing. They want to give money to the most talented qualified applicant. So to maximize your chances of winning the award, you need to identify the criteria they will use to select the winner. Sometimes the sponsor has published the criteria they use. Sometimes you have to critique your application from the sponsor's perspective.

It is important to remember that scholarship sponsors are evaluating applications, not applicants. You need to ensure that your application and the supporting materials contain all the relevant information the committee needs to evaluate your candidacy. The committee only knows what your application and your letters of recommendations tell it. Write an application that highlights the aspects of your background that match the sponsor's goals.

Additional tips for maximizing your chances of winning a scholarship fall into several broad categories:

- 1) **Searching for Scholarships**
- 2) **Getting Organized**
- 3) **Advance Preparation**
- 4) **Essays**
- 5) **Letters of Recommendation**
- 6) **Interviews**

Searching for Scholarships

- **Start Searching for Scholarships ASAP.** It pays to start your search for scholarships as soon as possible. Many scholarships have early deadlines, even as early as August or September. If you start searching in January, you will miss the deadlines for half the awards. Start searching for scholarships at an earlier age. Most students don't start searching for scholarships until their senior year in high school. But there are many awards available for students in earlier grades, even junior high school.
- **Apply to as many awards as possible.** Apply to every award for which you are qualified, no matter how small the award amount. Every penny helps, and winning an award adds a line to your resume that can help you win other awards. The less lucrative scholarships are often less competitive, so you have a better chance of winning them. Several small awards can add up to a significant amount of money.

You can't win if you don't apply. Even if you are extremely talented, your chances of winning any particular scholarship are low, since you are competing with many other equally talented applicants. To improve your odds of winning a scholarship, apply to more scholarship competitions.

Do not, however, apply for awards for which you do not qualify. It is a waste of your time. Scholarship sponsors receive far more qualified applications than they have awards available, so they are not going to look at any candidate that doesn't satisfy their criteria.

- **Seek out less competitive scholarships.** Seek out small local awards that are not listed in most of the national databases and scholarship books. These awards are less competitive, and so your chances of winning them are greater. Examples include the local PTA scholarship, Dollars for Scholars scholarship, local cultural and religious organizations, local businesses, and your parent's employer. You can also find information about local awards on bulletin boards at the local public library and outside your guidance counselor or school financial aid office. (The FastWeb scholarship database is particularly thorough about listing small local awards, and encourages all scholarship sponsors to [submit information about their awards](#), even local awards. FastWeb can code those awards to show them only to students who qualify.)
- **Use up-to-date award information.** When looking for information about scholarships in books, check the copyright date of the book. A book that is more than one year old is too old to be useful. Similarly, ask how frequently an online scholarship database is updated. Most are updated annually or quarterly. The FastWeb scholarship database is updated daily.
- **Beware of [scholarship scams](#).** If a scholarship has an application fee or other required fees, it isn't worth your time and money to apply. At best such "scholarships" are re-circulating the fees to the students, and at worst no money is ever awarded. Never invest more than a postage stamp to obtain information about or to apply for a scholarship.
- **Ask the school about academic scholarships.** Many colleges offer presidential or academic scholarships to attract talented students. This is especially true at second and third tier institutions. You might be able to get a free ride at a college that isn't as well known.

The main difference between colleges is not in the quality of the faculty or the quality of the facilities, but in the students. After all, Harvard and MIT graduate more PhDs than they can hire as faculty, so many less-well-known institutions have top notch faculty. Since you will be spending more time learning from your peers than inside a classroom, you should visit the school while classes are in session to get a feel for how well you will fit in. But if you like the atmosphere at the school and the school has a good program in your major, there's no reason why you

shouldn't accept a full-tuition scholarship at your third choice school. This is especially true if you intend to go on to grad school, since nobody cares where you got your bachelor's degree when you have a PhD or MD.

- **Ask to be nominated.** If a scholarship requires that you be nominated by your school or the local chapter of the organization, find out who is responsible for nominating applicants, and ask them to nominate you. Often the nominator will not have a formal process for selecting a nominee. If the nomination deadline is approaching, sometimes they will nominate you simply because you're the only one who asked. Even if they have a formal process, by introducing yourself and your qualifications to them you will have improved your chances of being nominated (assuming you didn't annoy them by being too persistent). Provide the nominator with a copy of your [accomplishments resume](#).
- **Don't forget to renew your scholarship.** If you won a renewable award last year, make sure you satisfy any requirements for retaining it in subsequent years. This may involve maintaining satisfactory academic progress, maintaining a minimum GPA, continuing to study in the same major, retaining full-time enrollment, submitting an annual progress report, and providing a copy of your transcript each year. Some scholarships may require community service or other activities.

Getting Organized

- **Get organized.** If you start off organized, you are less likely to miss an application deadline or forget to ask for a letter of recommendation. Put each application's materials in a separate file folder. Attach a checklist to the front listing all the required materials and the date you requested and sent the materials. The checklist should also indicate the deadlines. Keep a photocopy of your entire application, so you can resend it in case it is lost in the mail. (You will also find it helpful to refer to old applications when applying to other scholarships.) Keep a master checklist of all the scholarships to which you are applying, so you can check off the completion of each application.
- **Do not miss deadlines.** If you miss a deadline, your application is disqualified, regardless of your excuse. Scholarship sponsors never provide extensions. So when you receive the application materials, take note of the deadline and whether it is a postmark or receipt deadline. If the deadline is based on the date your application is received by the sponsor, be sure to mail the application at least a week before the deadline date. Set your own personal deadline at least two weeks prior to that date, so that your application materials are ready well in advance of the official deadline. You might want to include a self-addressed stamped postcard with your application that the sponsor can drop in the mail to let you know that your application has been received and whether you are missing any supporting materials. (You could also send the application by certified mail, return receipt requested.)
- **Organize the application materials.** If an application consists of several loose pages, label each page with your name, and possibly also a purpose and page number. This will help prevent parts of your application from getting lost or out of order.

Advance Preparation

- **Well-rounded background.** Colleges do not necessarily want a well-rounded student so much as they want a diverse student population. If every student at a school were well-rounded, it would be uniformly dull.

It is far better to excel at a single activity than to be average at several. If every applicant plays a musical instrument, volunteers at the local hospital, and participates in a school sport, there's nothing to distinguish one applicant from another.

You should certainly pursue hobbies and extracurricular activities, but only if you are passionate about them. Selection committees can easily distinguish students who pursued a hobby in depth because they were deeply interested in the topic from those who superficially participated in order to acquire a credential. The depth of your interest in a field or endeavor will distinguish you from other candidates. Quality is more important than quantity.

On the other hand, participating in a variety of activities can help you develop new interests. Explore several possibilities, but focus on those that you find the most interesting.

- **Practice for the admissions tests.** Buy a book of practice admissions tests, and take them in a realistic setting. Score them using the book's answer key, and use the scores to evaluate your weaknesses. Take the practice ACT and/or SAT tests in the fall of your junior year in high school, and actual tests in the spring of your junior year and fall of your senior year.
- **Ask for reviewer's comments.** Some scholarship programs will allow students to apply twice (e.g., once as a high school senior and once as a college freshman, or once as a college senior and once as a first year graduate student). If you didn't win the award the first time, write a letter asking for a copy of the reviewer's comments on your application. Some scholarship sponsors are willing to provide you with a copy of the comments. These comments are often quite specific. If you address the problems in your next application, it can help you win. Seeing the comments can also help you improve your future applications to other award programs.

A good example of this is the National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship. Students who were honorable mentions as college seniors have won the NSF fellowship after fixing the problems noted in their previous application.

Letters of Recommendation

- **Seek good letters of recommendation.** When asking people to write you a letter of recommendation, ask them if they can write you a *good* letter of recommendation. You should pick people who can not only write well, but write well about you. If they seem uncomfortable with the idea of writing a letter of recommendation for you, ask them to suggest someone else who might be a better choice.

Choose people who are relevant to the sponsor's goals. For example, ask a science teacher to write a letter of recommendation for a science scholarship, not your English teacher. All else being equal, it is better to ask someone who has known you longer and who is more impressed by your qualifications.

Depending on the nature of the scholarship program, you should consider asking your teachers or professors, your employer, your coach, the director of a community service activity where you volunteered your time, and anybody who knows you well. Never, however, ask a family member to write a letter on your behalf.

The purpose of the letter of recommendation is to provide the selection committee with third-party documentation and validation of your background. They want to read the opinion of someone who is familiar with your background and knows you well. It is even better if they can compare you with other students, especially students who have won the award previously.

Provide the recommender with a stamped and addressed envelope and any required forms. It is also helpful to provide them with a summary of the purpose of the award. Ask him or her to write the letter at least four weeks before it is due. Gently remind them ten days before the deadline, asking them whether they have sent in the recommendation or need more information from you.

Do not ask to see a copy of the letter, even if they offer to give you a copy. If the recommender provides you with a copy of the letter, the selection committee may suspect that the letter isn't as candid as it might have been otherwise.

Send the writer a thank you note after the letter's been mailed. In all likelihood you will ask them to write additional letters for you. Once they've written one letter on your behalf, the second letter is much easier. If you send them a thank you, it will give them a good impression and make them more willing to spend time writing you additional letters in the future.

- **Create an accomplishments resume.** An accomplishments resume is a summary that lists of all your accomplishments, both academic and extracurricular. You will find it helpful to refer to it as your complete applications, to ensure that you do not omit any relevant aspects of your background.

You should provide a copy of your accomplishments resume to the people who will be writing letters of recommendation for you. Even people who have known you for a long time may not be familiar with all of your accomplishments, and the resume can help jog their memory. They will also be able to incorporate details from your resume into their letters, making it seem like they know you better than they do.

The resume will also help save them time when they are writing your letter. Writing a good letter takes time, so anything you can do to make this process easier will help.

Interviews

- **Practice.** Ask your family and friends to help you practice for your interviews by staging mock interviews. This will help you become familiar with the interviewing process, making you less nervous during the actual interviews. Think of the interview as being a conversation, not a confrontation.

Good questions for practice interviews include questions about your background, academic achievements, hobbies and extracurricular activities, academic and career goals, your upbringing and values, and any notable awards and activities.

- **Be punctual.** Do not arrive late for an interview. Try to arrive a few minutes early for the interview.

- **Dress for Success.** Wear semi-formal business attire, such as a suit and tie, to your interview. If you wear a t-shirt and jeans, you won't win the scholarship. If you don't have a suit, wear conservative clothing, such as a sweater or dress shirt. Wear a clean shirt.
- **Be decisive.** When answering questions about why you chose a particular major, do not mention if you were uncertain about your choice. If you are wishy-washy, the selection committee will wonder whether you will complete the degree. The scholarship sponsor wants to support students who will graduate with a degree in a particular major, not students who may switch to another major or drop out entirely midway through the program.
- **Be relevant.** When an interviewer asks you to "tell me about yourself", they don't want to hear your life history and how you like vanilla ice cream. Instead, tell him or her about your relevant background and qualifications for the award. Everything you write in your application and everything you say should be directed, as much as possible, toward answering why you are the best candidate for the award. Be concise in your answers; do not ramble.
- **Be positive.** Try to avoid being negative, as that will prime the interviewer to write a negative assessment of your interview.

The only exception is when you don't know the answer to a question. Either say "I don't know" or ask for a clarification. Do not dwell on the question, and do not try to finesse your way through the answer. A short "I don't know" will allow the interview to move on to other topics.

- **Be polite.** Use all the good manners your mother taught you. Introduce yourself with a firm handshake. Say "thank you" and "please". Be neat and tidy. Make eye contact. Do not chew gum or smoke. Sit up straight in your chair and do not slouch. Do not bite or chew your nails. Thank the interviewer after the interview is over.
- **Expect the unexpected.** Some interviewers ask unusual questions or do strange things simply to see how you will react. It is ok to pause to think before answering any question, so long as the pause is short.
- **Prepare your own questions.** Come prepared with a question or two of your own, but do not ask a question that is already answered by the application materials.

Information provided by: <http://www.FinAid.org>