



Writing Essays for Parkland College Scholarships

Handout courtesy of Angela Gulick

Thank you to the following people for their assistance:
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Haiti Eastin, Advisor, Financial Aid
Tracy Wahlfeldt, Executive Director, Parkland Foundation
Dr. Lori Williams, Professor, Humanities Department

Introduction

Every semester, students are invited to apply for **free money** courtesy of Parkland College scholarships. This handout gives you advice on how to write such an essay.

Understanding Your Task

- 1. Get started.** Go to <http://parkland.edu/scholarships> to start. From there, you can find information about Parkland Foundation Scholarships, special scholarships, and outside scholarships. You can also try <http://fastweb.com>, which is a national scholarship search engine.
- 2. Read the scholarship application materials thoroughly.** Pay close attention to verbs such as describe, compare, contrast, illustrate, and evaluate.
- 3. Determine how many questions are being asked, one or several.** Unless otherwise indicated by the application, you should answer each question specifically. Think about how you want to deliver your answers. Do you want to weave them throughout the essay or answer the questions in the order they were asked?
- 4. Contact the Financial Aid Office if you don't understand what is being asked of you.**
Office: room U286 Phone: 217/351-2222 Email: finaid@parkland.edu

Writing Your Essay

- 1. Answer the question(s) asked.** If it is a multi-part question, answer all of the parts unless otherwise indicated. Some faculty suggest answering these questions in the order they appear. Be sure to actually answer the questions. It is amazing how many times we see students who wrote nice little essays that never answered the questions posed.
- 2. Be specific and selective.** You can't say everything in a short essay -- and you shouldn't try. One of the biggest mistakes we see is students who squeeze too much into their essays and thus never go into any depth or specificity. Remember, a **specific and focused story or anecdote** can really help you "sell" a point and make your essay stand out from other essays that are more general or vague.
- 3. Think how to organize your essay.** Often, the prompt itself will dictate how to organize your ideas if you are asked a series of specific questions. Another strategy is the "past, present, and future" strategy in which you answer the scholarship application question in terms of past experiences that are relevant, present behaviors that are relevant, and future goals that are relevant.

4. **Remember that this essay represents YOU.** This is your chance to have your own voice, to speak to readers (admission professionals and professors), and to tell them about YOU. You don't need to flatter the school. Just focus on sharing something meaningful about you to your readers. It's better to sound like a real human being than an advertisement for the college.
5. **Pay attention to additional instructions:** If the application says the essay must be at least 150 words, meet that requirement. If the application says the essay can be no more than 300 words, meet that requirement. If the application says you need to submit two letters of reference, meet that requirement. Failing to follow directions can get you automatically rejected from scholarship consideration. **Super Important: READ THE FINE PRINT AND FOLLOW DIRECTIONS EXACTLY.**
6. **Think carefully about who you ask to write letters of reference.** Some scholarships ask that you provide one or more letters of reference for people to speak on your behalf. Make certain that your letters are current and professional. You should not ask friends and family members to write your letters. Rather, ask people who are familiar with your accomplishments, personalities, skills, experiences, and abilities that are relevant to the scholarship itself. For example, if the scholarship stresses creativity, ask someone who knows your creative or artistic abilities. If a scholarship stresses leadership, think of someone who has actually witnessed you lead.
7. **Seek out letters of reference early:** If the application process requests letters of reference, don't wait until the last minute to ask faculty, employers, coaches, and other people in your life to write these. Haiti Eastin, Financial Aid Advisor, recommends the following:

Students should apply early and for everything for which they are eligible! They should also **not wait until the last minute to ask for letters of recommendation**. Those can sometimes take time to obtain, and if a scholarship requires a letter of recommendation, and there isn't one attached, it's an automatic "no" from me. Also, if a letter of recommendation is outdated, [applicants] need to seek out new letters. . . . Letters should be relevant to the type of scholarship, the essay question, or where [applicants] are now in their academic career.

8. **Look carefully at the editing of your document.** In an essay, everything matters – what you say, how you organize your thoughts, *and* how much attention you pay to spelling, grammar, and mechanics. No matter how strong a writer you are, have others read your essay for you. Bring your work to the Writing Lab, ask your teachers for help, ask other trusted friends and family members. **Helpful Hint:** Write your essay in Microsoft Word which will make your work much easier to edit than in an online environment. THEN copy your finished essay into the application window.
9. **Stand out but in a good way.** The following great advice comes from English faculty member Dr. Lori Williams: "Write with specific details that make the story about you come to life: use proper names of places, the actual title of that song or teacher, a bit of actual dialogue. These are the details that help us live in the scene and imagine you as a real person." Remember, you are in competition for these scholarships, so use every aspect of this essay to set yourself apart.

Conclusion

The school wants to support students who are motivated, focused, and dedicated. You want your essay to contain enough specific information to be memorable because your essay may be one of hundreds being reviewed. Be genuine, be specific, and be clear. Good luck!