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Painting Your Scholarship Portrait

-- by Benjamin Kaplan

Some scholarship applications bring home the bucks—but plenty of others don't. When you put these two groups of applications side by side, the differences are like night and day.

What Makes a Winning Application

Unsuccessful scholarship applications, more often than not, resembled a laundry list of activities, awards, and accomplishments. Although these credentials were often impressive in and of themselves, reading such materials felt like inhaling a random conglomeration of facts.

When reading a winning application, on the other hand, I felt like I was actually getting to know the person who submitted it. I came away from each feeling like I understood the core interests, skills and values of the individual.

My impression of these winning applications is reinforced when I think back to conversations I've had with contest judges at various scholarship awards ceremonies. When actually meeting many of the judges who evaluated my applications, the most frequent comment I heard was "I already feel like I know you, Ben."

Portrait of a Winner

Why do winning scholarship applications ultimately leave such strong impressions? Quite simply, *these applications create vivid portraits of the applicants*: Each one of these applications doesn't just recite accomplishments—it depicts the person behind all of the grades, extracurricular activities and awards. After all, *judges award scholarships to people, not to resumes*. If a judge feels like he or she know you, it creates a powerful emotional connection that elevates your application to more than just another in the pile.

So how does one paint these self-portraits?

- First, treat each component of a scholarship application (such as the essay, extracurricular activity list and recommendation letter) as *part of a unified whole*—not as a separate entity. Just as combining the melody of a romantic ballad with the lyrics of gangsta rap would create musical chaos, if you don't coordinate the message that each part sends, the overall impression you leave is unclear and fragmented.
- Second, we must develop the message itself: the core idea that permeates the entire application and powerfully communicates who you are. I call this cohesive message the **application theme**.

Developing Your Theme

Think of the theme as the main point you are trying to communicate about yourself—the framework that puts all of your activities, interests and credentials in the proper context. Application themes are frequently created around particular activities that you're passionate about, particular interests that fascinate you or career goals you're striving towards.

In my experience, the typical application should have no more than one or two major themes. Any more than this, and you start to dilute the communicative power of your message. If an application has two major themes, then one should be the **primary theme**, and the other the **secondary theme**. The primary theme should be the focal point of the application—the primary message you're trying to communicate. The secondary theme builds upon this message by illustrating another important aspect of your life, interests and personality.

In one of my own scholarship applications, for instance, my primary theme was built around my passion for writing and my deep appreciation for all forms of communication as tools for solving problems. My secondary theme focused on how I had already exhibited, and would continue to exhibit, a high level of leadership. I placed credentials that emphasized these themes in prominent positions at the top of extracurricular activity and awards lists, addressed these themes in my essays and personal statements and chose recommendation letters that also reinforced these key ideas. I still included in my application materials all of the other information and credentials that didn't relate to my thematic message (you still want to show well-roundedness, after all), but my primary and secondary themes took center stage. And it worked: I won \$17,500 from that particular contest.

So which activities do you most enjoy? What types of disciplines and skills come naturally to you? What do you dream of doing 20 years from now? Begin asking yourself questions like these, and you'll be well on your way to developing the application themes that work best for you.

Visit [The Winner's Circle Scholarship Handbook](#) for more expert advice.