Dear Prospective Scholarship Applicant:

Great news! You are just as likely to be an HFA scholarship winner as any other applicant, and if you read this note, your chances may improve. What follows is just me, Alan, talking. I’m one of several reviewers who will read your application and this is my take on what makes a good one.

I will read more than 100 applications, which isn’t a huge number, but it is a small crowd. So, what can you do to stand out? What will make you memorable? It only takes a little time, a bit of thought, and good essay to get my attention. More about that last item later.

How important is your GPA? Mmmmmm, not very. Sometimes students with the highest GPAs get scholarships and sometimes they don’t, but every student who meets the eligibility requirements starts with a GPA that is, by definition, good enough.

What about activities and work experience? Being involved on campus or in the community is fabulous, but the extent of your commitment and the substance of your contributions will always trump a list of organizations to which you “belong” in name only. Naturally work is important. If you landed a paid internship that leads to a dream-job offer, I’ll be impressed. (Hint: Tell me how you did that.) But you know what? It’s perfectly OK to be a cashier, unless you decide to call yourself a “Point-of-Sale Customer Care Representative.” What’s more important is your ability to learn from whatever work experience you’ve had and it’s even better if you are able to show me how that connects or applies to your education and personal or career goals. But you know what? If your job is within walking distance of where you live because that’s the only way you can get there reliably and if it doesn’t offer a whole lot more than a small paycheck, then tell me how you got the job and what it means to have it.

An extensive list of every award bestowed upon you and all of the accomplishments you’d amassed by the age of five is kind of boring on its own. I’m pretty sure you’re smart and I will take note of others who think so, too. If, however, there is something particularly noteworthy about an award or accomplishment, by all means, tell me why you are proud of it or why it is special. Keep in mind, though, that no one earns a scholarship just because his or her “list” is longer.

And now, as promised, I’ll tell you the best way to get my attention. Let me start by saying that it is absolutely impossible to get a scholarship with a lousy essay. Not happening. But, it is altogether possible you could earn a scholarship with a compelling essay.

Regardless of the prompt you choose, your essay must be about YOU. If you’re writing about an influential professor, tell me about the impact he or she had on you. Don’t describe the instructor and what he or she has done. What did you learn? Why was it important? How was your thinking changed by this person? If you are writing about an event, tell me how it shaped you. If you are studying what you love and plan to make it a career of it, tell me about your dreams and aspirations and what influenced your decision. Make every word count.

Essays need a beginning, middle, and end. The beginning must draw me in and the end must bring everything together. Here are examples of a couple of opening and ending sentences from applicants who received scholarships not long ago:

I chose to double major in Spanish and Sociology because I have always had a love for languages and people…. After graduating from UMass, I plan on using my studies in Spanish and Sociology as preparation for a career in law enforcement and social work with underprivileged Hispanic children.
‘This…this is the structure of nature. This is its language.’ Our professor leaned back, satisfied. We were sitting in class, flabbergasted, staring at a wall of numbers neatly boxed in by brackets. A passerby would most likely see nothing, and I would have, too… but now I saw the world…. I am now diving willingly into the abyss, but know that the structure of nature lies in its depths.

Essays should be personal, thoughtful, heartfelt, and authentic. They should tell a good story. They should tell me a little bit about who you are.

Typos, grammar, agreement, oh my! Yeah, these matter. If you misspell a word I will notice, even if Spellcheck doesn’t. Not long ago a student intended to write “assess,” but instead typed “asses.” Oops!--------True story. Note: If you are not confident about your ability to write well using the English language, you might ask someone else to proofread your responses before pasting them into the application.

So, basically, having a good shot at getting a scholarship comes down to you providing me with information about what you do and why, and writing a compelling personal essay that shows me what makes you tick. It’s that easy.

Oh, and if you’re going to put little or no effort into the application, please don’t bother to apply. It’s obvious every time this is the case and it never results in a scholarship award.

Best of luck and I look forward to learning something about you.

Alan