

# **Positioning Yourself to be a Winner**

## **(Scholarships, Jobs, and College Acceptance)**

Phi Theta Kappa International Convention

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Colleges and other organizations that give scholarships want to know who YOU are. They want to know what you are about in life. What efforts have you made thus far beyond your academic achievements to make a positive difference in our world? How are you helping others? How are you balancing your life--your college activities, work, family, play, church, and community, as well as in your academic studies? The applications that you will fill out will give you the opportunity to convey all this information to these groups that would love to give you financial help to finish your degrees. So how do you make yourself stand out in the crowd? Read on....

### **Some Basics:**

#### **▪ Two Kinds of Scholarships**

1. Campus-nominated (e.g. All-USA Today, Coca-Cola)--Campus nominates and generally are limited in how many they can nominate (as in 2 per college for All-USA and Jack Kent Cooke, 1 per college this year for Coca-Cola).
2. Self-Nominated (e.g. Guistwhite, Leaders of Promise, other transfer scholarships)

#### **▪ Where to look for Scholarships**

1. Research your transfer colleges. Ask them about financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Start early--many have very early deadlines.
2. Internet – [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com); Phi Theta Kappa -- [www.ptk.org](http://www.ptk.org); your college Career Center; your target transfer institutions' websites

#### **▪ Never Pay an Agency to find you scholarships - - it's a *scam*.**

#### **▪ Windows of Opportunity**

1. Apply for many, many scholarships--from many different colleges and resources.
2. Watch for qualifications, criteria, and deadlines of a scholarship. Give this the time and attention of a part-time job; it can pay off far more than minimum wage for the hours you invest!

## **Long-range Planning:**

### **1. Keep a Planning Calendar—and keep it with you.**

- Have a page for ideas, inspirations, etc. Write before you forget; refer back often.
- Enter each thing that you commit to on that day in the calendar, including time and place.
- Be very sure to *follow through* on that commitment
- When it is done, make a note of the actual time you served. Many planning calendars have a Monthly Summary Page where you can record the hours of service and include a contact name and phone number. Many scholarship organizations or private donors often call the claimed organization to verify that you did volunteer so many hours of service with their organization. You will be asked to provide the name of the organization/institution that you did the service for, the number of hours worked in the past year, the name of a director or supervisor and a telephone number.

### **2. Take as many opportunities as you can to develop your leadership skills**

- Organizations on campus (Phi Theta Kappa, Student Senate, etc—not just membership but **leadership** roles.
- Internships in the community
- Volunteer work in the community

### **3. Expand your mind and horizons so you have interesting things to write about**

- Read up on topics related to your career goals and dreams. Meet up with others in your related field. Make meaningful connections with those who can guide you along your way.
- Become knowledgeable about what is going on in our world, in your communities, in your schools. What are the current issues to be addressed and that need to be changed to help our world and those in need? What do you want to see changed? How can you help make a real difference?
- Expand your personal, relationship circles. Reach out and make friends outside your normal group.

### **3. Start a ‘Look Who I Am’ File or Portfolio for**

- Certificates of accomplishment or recognition
- Letters of commendation
- Documents of membership in organizations
- An up-to-date resumé
- And any other evidence of your accomplishments

## **Filling Out the Application:**

- Begin early (five to seven weeks before deadline, at least!) and read over the entire packet—to be sure you are qualified and to be sure to include everything
- For the applications that require you to be nominated by your college, find the contact person at your college and ask for a copy of the application forms and the internal deadline for submission for the run-off judging.
- Contact those you will need to help you
  1. references to write letters of recommendation (see section below on recommendation letters)
  2. readers of drafts
- Make copies of application for a working draft and practice.
- When listing awards, activities, jobs, etc., start with the most recent things first and work backward. Many applications want just a specific time period included.
- Always type—never leave any areas blank. Be sure to do a draft first, to ensure you have included everything and have everything spelled correctly.
- Many applications can be completed online now. Do your drafts in Word first, to do the spell checks, and then copy and paste into the online form. Most online applications have firm size limits, often based on characters, not words. Watch to be sure nothing is cut off at the end because of space limits.

## **Letters of Recommendation**

- Review the application as to specifics for the letters.
  1. Be sure to ask people from the different areas the application requires (such as instructor, community member, campus person who was not an instructor, etc.).
  2. Be sure to note any specific format and other stipulations – letterhead, sealed envelope, etc.—and call that to the attention of the writer.
- Give the letter writer a copy of the requirements, with any crucial details highlighted. Provide also a summary of your achievements and goals, as well as anything else they might need to write a personal and detailed letter.
- Give plenty of time--set a deadline of getting it back to you two weeks before you need to send in the application. You can ask for more letters of recommendation than you need. Then if one writer is unable to finish his or hers, you'll still be ok. Also, if the letters are not sealed, you can choose the best ones to send--but never send more than required.
- Ask each of your writers to keep a copy of the letter electronically. You may need another letter for another application, and they can just revise this one to fit the new situation.

## Writing the Essays

In the essays you have a chance to convey something more human and personal about yourself.

- **Be sure** to answer the question(s) asked. Don't make up your own topic! (see samples at the end)
- Use clear, precise writing in a well-supported, audience-directed essay that addresses the topic within the word count (as close as possible--NEVER OVER). Write from your heart, not just your head. What do you have a passion for? What events in your past have made you who you are? What do you really wish to offer in your leadership role? What do you want to do with your life?
- Bring in **specific** examples. You need for the readers to see and feel something of what you are relating.
- Plan to do many (at least six) rewrites:
  1. First draft--just talk about subject—get your ideas out. Usually wordy and not so well organized.
  2. Next draft look at the organization of ideas and the content (did it address the topic?). Look for ways to use some of the same words or phrases the donor uses in the promotional literature
  3. Do not have an egocentric essay (i.e. from your own point of view, your needs). Such an essay is writer-based, not reader-based. Revise by imagining you are talking directly to the evaluators (see samples at the end below).
  3. Fine tune opening lines and final paragraph for impact.
  4. Continue with drafts until you feel the content is as good as you can get it.
  5. Proof, proof, have someone else proof, and proof again. Because of the large numbers of people applying, selection committees are often looking for way to eliminate some applications, and applications with writing errors are often where they start.

### Essay Writing in Summary:

Give yourself plenty of time to write, set aside, revise, set aside, and revise. Don't leave writing the essay to the end. Find outside readers to assess your essay--especially people who don't know you well. Always run spell and grammar checks, proof, have another person proofread, and, just before it's ready to go--proof again. **Absolutely no Typo or Grammar Errors!** Use regular size font and margins--don't make it hard to read with any fancy stuff.

**Finally...** Review the application again. Make sure everything required is included (e.g. a college transcript, President's signature); organize everything in the order listed in the application. Never send an incomplete scholarship application; usually it will be eliminated. **Keep a photocopy** of the entire application. Then mail the application **well before the due date**, allowing time for any sort of delay in delivery. It is wise to spend the extra little bit to have the package tracked, so you can see when it is actually delivered.

**CELEBRATE!** Thank the people who helped you—the letter writers, the proof-readers, the supporters. Also, once you get the results, let them know how you did. Your success is their success!

If you do receive a scholarship, be sure to write a formal and professional "thank you" to the donors.

Keep a personal reference file (hard copy and electronic) of the copies of all of the applications you fill out and send. They are useful in filling out future applications in that you don't have to "reinvent the wheel" for every application you do. You can simply build on the previous ones.

## **Some sample directives that you might find on your applications:**

1. "Summarize activities in which you have been involved that demonstrates leadership — in your school, community, or in your church."
2. "List and describe any award and/or honors you have received."
3. "Ask your Phi Theta Kappa Advisor to complete the reference form."

For a scholarship in the performing arts, they may say something like:

4. "Write a brief essay describing your performing arts involvement and accomplishments."
5. "List the name of each performance, production, and/or performing arts organization with which you have been involved during high school or community college, and the corresponding name of the conductor/director. (Ask your performing arts supervisor or advisor to complete the reference form.)"
5. Career Objectives: "What specifically do you plan to aim for as a career?" (Here you can be creative but specific with expressing your vision of what you see yourself accomplishing.)
6. "Describe your academic goals while attending \_\_\_\_ college and how this scholarship will help you to attain them. (Be specific)"
7. "Describe a significant event in your life and tell how it has influenced your personal growth and professional goals."
8. "Describe something you have tried but failed at. What did you learn from the experience?"
9. "List volunteer or community service experiences, honors, recognitions, achievements, and employments." (Document dates of activities!)
10. "List paid employment in the past 5 years." (Do not discard your old planning calendars; you will need them for references.)

From this year's Jack Kent Cooke application:

11. "Select a piece of art, literature, music, or film written or created by someone other than yourself. Respond to it."
12. "Discuss your artistic development and how it relates to your academic interests. Refer to an individual, an author, a book, or an aesthetic experience that was instrumental in your artistic development."
13. "Studies over the last 20 years have shown that academic dishonesty is on the rise in academic institutions across the United States. What might explain this increase? Suggest remedies and cite evidence to support your position."
14. "Briefly describe an important problem in contemporary American society. Discuss the conditions, changes, or events that have caused this problem. How would you solve this problem?"
15. "Narrative Autobiography: This statement should provide information not elicited elsewhere in the application, such as leadership roles, family, educational, philosophical, or other life experiences that have influenced your achievements and career decision. It should also include professional and civic activities that you consider important. The narrative should be concise, emphasizing those areas most important to your intellectual development."

## Essay Samples

### Example of Writer-Based Personal Essay:

*Your scholarship is very beneficial for any individual interested in continuing his education in an engineering degree program. The field of engineering related to all aspects of today's world, especially in the area of research and development. This philosophy helped me develop a growing interest in the field of engineering. I am currently pursuing an Associate of Science Degree at Whatsit Community College. I have complete over 50 credits in my curriculum with a demonstrated academic success of better than 3.0 cumulative GPA.*

*My ultimate goal is to transfer to a university to obtain a Bachelor of Science Degree in engineering. Upon graduation from college, I want to seek employment with a growing organization in the field of electromechanical technology, specializing in the area of robotic design and development.*

*I have always been a good representative on any organization I joined. I served honorably in the U.S. Army for over 10 years. I have many awards to attest to my fine performance while in the military. While in the military, I completed college credits towards a degree. I am currently involved in the Minority Peer Mentoring Program at Whatsit. I am actively involved in many of my church's organized events, responsible for such duties as welcoming visitors and counting money at the end of service. My final goal would be to develop youth and make them understand the advantages of pursuing a sound education and capitalizing on the principle of "leading by example".*

Here, the writer has not taken into consideration what the audience's needs are. He has written a writer-based essay that 1) lacks specific detail, dates, events--in his mind, but not expressed, (such as *many awards* and *currently involved*), 2) has many sentences beginning with 'I', and 3) fails to demonstrate the personal traits and qualities the evaluators expect of the candidate.

### Final draft, a reader-based essay:

*My primary goal, earning a BS in Electrical Engineering, grew out of my serving in the US Army for ten years. After completing my AS in Engineering at Whatsit Community College, I plan to complete my degree at Another State University. My second goal, mentoring black youth in my community, is being realized through my work with the Community Youth Fellowship.*

*The military taught me, a potentially errant inner-city teen, self-discipline and personal pride. After training as an aircraft mechanic, I discovered that learning could be a pleasure, not a chore. Top ratings in job performance made me proud of doing a job well. The military also showed me that others would follow a man who never stints on his team, a man who reaches out and helps another, so that the whole team succeeds. While stationed in Austin, Texas, I became a basketball coach for disadvantaged youth, boys not unlike me seven years earlier. Their attitudes showed me how many young black men require positive male role models. After my discharge, joining a church and working with boys became an avocation as important as going to college.*

*The military became an opportunity for character development, and Whatsit has become an opportunity for academic growth. In working with Whatsit's Minority Peer Mentoring Program, I am learning skills that combine social and educational strategies that allow me to serve youth better in my community. As a married man with a wife and three young children, I am not able to transfer to a college beyond this area. However, I do not regard my situation as a limitation because in the military I learned a person can serve wherever he is; he has only to look around him and find a means.*

In this draft, the basics of the first draft are summarized in paragraph 1. Paragraph 2 gives specific examples with a personal touch, and paragraph 3 relates character traits and limitations (with a positive twist).

### **Example of response to a specific question:**

#### **8. “Describe something you have tried but failed at. What did you learn from the experience?”**

##### **Example 1:**

*As Vice President of Service for my Phi Theta Kappa chapter, I was able to learn a great deal about how to be a leader and plan events. Before this time I was quite shy and didn't think I could get up in front of people and talk to them or get them to do what I suggested. As Vice President, I was able to make some connections with groups in our community and then plan service trips that other chapter members would participate in. For example, we worked with our local battered women's shelter and had teams that worked on houses they owned, cleaning and painting them, and we had groups that worked with the children while the mothers were in classes. I learned a lot about my own abilities from this experience, and I am now more confident that I can make a difference in my world.*

[This response does not answer the question. While the student had good intentions (wanted to share what she had learned without looking like a failure), that is not what the readers are looking for. This is also fairly general, with just the two examples of volunteering that was done to give concrete imagery to the writing.]

##### **Example 2:**

*As Vice President of Service for my Phi Theta Kappa chapter, I was able to learn a great deal about how to be a leader and plan events. One of my most valuable lessons was from my very first project, one that was a huge failure. I had made connections with a local battered women's shelter to find out things we could do as service for them. They said that they are always in need of diapers and other necessities for mothers and babies, so I determined to have our chapter sponsor a “Diapers-Plus...” drive on campus. While the idea and plans for advertising it were firmly planted in my mind, I got busy with studies and work and did not share the idea with the other officers or do the advertising that I had planned. Finally, the day before the event, I quickly made some posters and fliers and put them up around campus, but as I sat at the collection table the next day, I was humiliated to receive only one package of diapers. I felt embarrassed and knew I had really let down the people at the shelter that so badly needed these items. I determined then and there that I would never again commit to something and fail to follow through. I learned how and when to promote things effectively and how to engage the others in the chapter to help, and we have gone from that first failure to developing a positive working relationship with this shelter and the great people who serve in it.*

[This response not only answers the question but it also is much more concrete and vivid. The readers will be able to visualize the event and get a better feel for who this person really is.]

### **Consider the words of Thomas Jefferson from the 1800s:**

**“I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it.”**

**And wisdom from even farther across the ages, from Seneca in the first century AD:**

**“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”**

**So good luck as you prepare for great opportunities!**

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