

guide for drafting personal statements



ABOUT PROJECT EDUACCESS

Access to higher education is a privilege most people from marginalised communities are systematically denied through cost, information, and dispositional barriers.

Launched in 2021, Project EduAccess is a modest attempt to improve inclusivity in higher education institutions and work towards removing these barriers for students from marginalized communities in South Asia.

We hope to achieve this by providing expert mentorship, support, and guidance to learners in South Asia.

In addition to running a mentorship programme and organising workshops, Project EduAccess also regularly develops content such as guides and documents that aid potential applicants in their university and scholarship application processes. This guide for drafting personal statements is a part of our series *Guides on Application Documents*.

DISCLAIMER

This guide, prepared for the benefit of prospective applicants, is a compilation of advice available on the websites of several universities and scholarship bodies. The information provided is for general informational and educational purposes only. All information is provided in good faith.

DRAFTING PERSONAL STATEMENTS FOR SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS

In any scholarship application, and in particular for scholarships offered by organisations external to a university, the written statement is one of the most – if not *the* most – important deciding factors. An effective, engaging and coherent scholarship statement is crucial for your application to succeed. This guide is a resource to help you better understand and navigate the process of writing a scholarship statement, so that you can submit an effective piece of writing that gives you the best chance at a positive outcome on your funding applications.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

On a technical note, you would first have to fulfil any eligibility criteria that your scholarship of choice may have. Once you have a list of scholarships you can potentially apply to,¹ check if you're eligible to apply for each. Most scholarship bodies will have an official website with clearly listed eligibility criteria. For instance, the [website of the Chevening Scholarship](#) lists the following eligibility criteria are as follows:

- *Citizenship of a Chevening-eligible country or territory.*
- *Return to country of citizenship for a minimum of two years after the award has ended*
- *Completion of all components of an undergraduate degree for entry onto a postgraduate programme at a UK university by the time of application submission. This typically equates to an upper second-class 2:1 honours degree in the UK but may differ by course and university.*
- *At least two years (equivalent to 2,800 hours) of work experience.*

¹ See a list of some of the available scholarships for Indian students aspiring to UK universities here: <https://www.global-opportunities.net/scholarships-in-uk/#>

- *Application to three different eligible UK university courses and receipt of an unconditional offer from one of these choices by a specified date.*

Carefully review all the criteria to figure out if you are eligible to apply for that scholarship. If you are unsure, check directly with the body administering the scholarship if you are eligible to apply.

Beyond these eligibility criteria, most scholarship-awarding bodies are seeking talented individuals from diverse backgrounds who display outstanding intellect, ambition, leadership qualities, commitment to service, drive for positive social impact, and strong vision for the future. Scholarships like the Rhodes and Chevening expressly emphasise that there is no such thing as a 'typical' or ideal scholar, and encourage aspiring scholars to apply irrespective of aspects including age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, marital or parenthood status, religion, class, caste, and disability.

If you are eligible to apply for a scholarship, the next step is to carefully review the application documents you are expected to submit. You may notice that personal statements/ essays are a staple when it comes to scholarship applications. Apart from personal statements, some scholarship bodies may also expect you to submit references, writing samples, proof of academic record, etc.

SELECTION CRITERIA

If your scholarship of choice requires applicants to submit personal statements, remember that each scholarship has its own particular selection criteria, and as a next

step, you must carefully read and understand these selection criteria. Some examples are below:

Chevening Scholarship

- *Demonstrated influence on the opinions of others in a professional or voluntary context*
- *Experience building professional relationships*
- *Professional or academic experience*
- *Well-thought career goals and plans*

Commonwealth Scholarships

- *Academic merit of the candidate*
- *Quality of the plan of study*
- *Potential impact on the development of the candidate's home country*

Gates Cambridge Scholarship

- *Academic excellence*
- *Reasons for choice of course*
- *A capacity for leadership*
- *Commitment to improving the lives of others*

Rhodes Scholarship

- *literary and scholastic attainments (academic excellence)*
- *energy to use one's talents to the full (as demonstrated by mastery in areas such as sports, music, debate, dance, theatre, and artistic pursuits, particularly where teamwork is involved)*
- *truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindliness, unselfishness and fellowship*
- *moral force of character and instincts to lead, and to take an interest in one's fellow beings.*

It is clear from the above examples that scholarships tend to emphasise the following:

- **Academic achievement**

When selecting awardees, most scholarships will prioritise applicants who demonstrate high intellectual ability and a consistently strong academic track record which, for some funders (*but not all*), becomes the first filter to narrow their pool of potential recipients.

- **Positive social impact**

Scholarships value applicants who display a motivation to use their skills, resources, and initiative to contribute value to the communities of which they are a part. Successful candidates are also able to make a convincing case for how they would use the knowledge and skills acquired through the scholarship to continue making a positive change in society at local, national, or global levels.

- **A strong rationale for your course choice and considered career goals**

You should be able to effectively explain why you have chosen a particular programme, how this choice makes sense in relation to your personal and professional trajectory so far, as well as how it fits with your career goals. You must be able to frame your choice as a logical stepping stone to your future plans.

- **Initiative and leadership**

Most funding bodies are in search of talented and motivated individuals with a demonstrated capacity for leadership who seek out and create opportunities not just for personal growth but for the betterment of their communities.

PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

STEP 1: PREPARATION

If you are working towards a successful scholarship application, **preparation is key**. Once you have shortlisted the scholarships you would like to apply for, and before you can begin producing a draft of your statement, it is essential to gain an accurate idea of what is required. Think about:

- Points or questions to address in your statement,
- word/ character limits,
- formatting,
- submission guidelines,
- deadlines,
- additional documents or evidence.

Begin by familiarising yourself with the materials to upload and their specific requirements. For example:

Commonwealth Scholarship

The Commonwealth PhD scholarship (for least developed and fragile states) requires scholars to submit, among a range of other information, a 500-word statement on how your personal background has impacted your motivations to change your home country.

Gates Cambridge

The first step to applying for a Gates Cambridge scholarship involves submitting a scholarship statement, normally of 3000 characters (approximately 500 words), as part of the online application for a postgraduate course at the University of Cambridge. Candidates are asked to explain why they are applying for a Gates Cambridge Scholarship and how they meet the four main criteria. Candidates are encouraged to use their background, achievements, experiences and future aims to show how they would be a good fit with Gates Cambridge.

Rhodes Scholarship

The Rhodes Scholarships for India application requires a personal statement (1000 words) in support of the application. The personal statement is an opportunity for you to share your personal narrative, including your driving motivations, your work and your aspirations.

In preparation for writing your statement, make sure to read any guidance resources or links available on the official scholarship website, or example statements/ reflective pieces from successful candidates available in the open domain. Here are some examples of such resources for the [Chevening](#), [Commonwealth](#), [Gates Cambridge](#) and [Rhodes scholarships](#).

STEP 2: CONTENT

Once you have become familiar with the requirements of your scholarship statement, it's time to write a draft. The statement tends to be a showcasing of your story as well as a compelling case for your suitability for the scholarship. A good scholarship statement should reflect what you would like to communicate about yourself during an interview, and will generally include these features:

1. Your narrative

In most cases, part or all of your scholarship statement will give you the scope to detail your personal motivations, values, and the experiences that shaped you in relation to your chosen programme and institution. The assessors of your statement should be able to see how your life experiences have influenced you and moulded you into someone worthy of the scholarship. In other words, they should be able to see the 'you'—with your circumstances and life history—that ties together your various achievements, academic choices, professional endeavours, and future goals. Your narrative then becomes the thread that binds 'what you have done' and 'where you are going' by effectively sharing 'who you are' and 'where you have come from'. There is no 'right' way to craft your narrative – just

remember to harness the uniqueness of your perspectives and experience in doing this. What have you gone through that sets your story apart?

2. A rationale for your choice of course

This one relates closely to the previous point. As mentioned previously, your scholarship statement should effectively explain how you developed an interest in your field, why you have chosen your particular programme, how this choice makes sense in relation to your personal and professional trajectory so far, as well as how it fits with your career goals. Ideally, try to tie all this to any priority areas listed by the scholarship you are applying for.

3. Your qualities and strengths

Most scholarships are looking for candidates who display qualities of leadership, initiative, commitment to social service, and ability to overcome challenges. Make sure to use the statement to showcase these values as well as your strengths and skills. You should also try to demonstrate how you exemplify the specific qualities prioritised by the scholarship you are applying to. However, no matter what the specific prompts or points asked for, a strong statement will reflect a driven, proactive, and ambitious candidate of strong character and clear goals. You could consider the following questions to stimulate your thinking on this point:

- What have you achieved that reflects the values of the scholarship you have chosen?
- What are the qualities that people often praise about you?

- What skills have you acquired that fit with the scholarship criteria?
- What struggles have you had to overcome to pursue your aims?

4. Your achievements

A strong scholarship statement should describe and list what you have achieved personally and professionally that may set you apart from other candidates. An 'achievement' could include (but is not limited to) an award, a scholarship, a publication, a project, a community initiative, an expedition, a challenge you overcame, or an example of demonstrated positive impact on the lives of others. Be sure to describe it in detail, including what the situation was, what you did, and what the outcome was. You can link this to your qualities and strengths, describing what values or skills you had to develop in order to achieve something. Again, do try to tie this into the statement prompt.

5. Your plans, hopes and/or aspirations for the future

Awarding bodies are looking to gauge whether an applicant is likely to make use of the scholarship in a manner that is aligned with its own goals and priorities. So, when writing your statement, you should address what your future goals are and how these fit with the aims of the scholarship. Think about where you would like to be in 2, 5, and 10 years' time and describe a considered plan for how you would like to achieve your aims (be ambitious!). Then think about how the scholarship will help you in this process. You must be able to frame your choice of programme as a logical stepping stone to your future plans.

6. A conclusion tying everything together

A well-written conclusion can make all the difference in shaping the impact that your scholarship statement has on the reviewer. The conclusion is the final thought that you are going to leave them with, so it is imperative to make it count. A good conclusion should bring together the different threads of your statement and link them effectively and creatively back to the core theme of your narrative.

The six elements described above should all be interwoven with each other in a manner that makes a powerful impression on the reader. The piece should be centred around a focal theme that ties the entire piece together. All your examples, assertions, and stories must be arranged so as to have a logical flow, and should ultimately work to make a strong case for why you should secure a position on the course of your choice; why you would be an asset to the programme, the institution, and the scholarship community; and how you would use the scholarship to improve society. Aim to produce a statement that will make your assessors want to meet you, and share examples that make it difficult for the reviewers to reject someone of your calibre, grit, focus, diligence, and determination.

STEP 3: EDITING

The value of this step cannot be overemphasised. A sufficiently- and appropriately-edited draft is often significantly stronger than a first draft. A round of editing can give you a bird's-eye-view of the piece and help you refine the coherence and impact of your message. Here are a few suggestions for the editing process:

- Re-read your statement to check that it addresses the prompt, word count, and formatting specifications (if any).
- Check your statement for internal coherence, i.e., that all the content contributes to your overarching narrative, as well as external coherence with any other documents you may have to upload along with your application, such as a CV or résumé.
- Double-check your statement for grammatical correctness and consistency.
- Enlist the help of peers, colleagues, and/or professors in the editing process. You can request that they read your statement and share their feedback on it in relation to any of the above points.

Do-s and Don't-s

All the information provided so far should give you a strong foundation on which to build your scholarship statement. On a concluding note, we leave you with some do-s and don't-s to think about before you submit your application, to help you avoid some of the common errors that applicants make and give you the best chance at success.

- **Do** make sure the language of your statement is professional, thoughtful and cogent. Even if you are telling your own story, **don't** write in a manner that is overly personal, emotional or at odds with the logic of your narrative.

- Show, **don't** tell. When describing your achievements or qualities, **do** share examples or stories that demonstrate your point; **don't** make generalisations or unsubstantiated statements.
- **Do** start early and submit early! Even after you have completed a first draft, you will need time to get others' opinions on it and make any changes. You will also need time to navigate any online portals, upload documents, and submit the application. Connectivity can be unreliable, and it's best to submit with a good deal of time to spare rather than risking a late submission because of glitchy technology. Submitting too close to the deadline unnecessarily threatens all your hard work. **Don't** wait until the day of the deadline to submit your application.
- **Do** make sure to upload final versions—adhering to stipulated criteria—of your statement or any other documents you have written yourself, such as your CV, statement of academic purpose, or research proposal. If not specifically requested, it is uncertain whether assessors will consider any revised documents submitted afterwards. **Don't** risk delays or disqualification because of incorrect documentation.
- **Do** keep to the word/character count! Too short and you make insufficient use of the space you've been given to make a strong case for yourself. Too long and you risk your statement being disregarded altogether. Some applications automatically reject any additional words or characters, which means that

your statement may lose crucial concluding lines. **Don't** rely on exceptions being made for you, should you exceed the statement limit.

- As mentioned above, **do** ensure that your statement is in sync with any other documents you may be asked to upload, such as a CV or résumé. Try to make these documents complement or corroborate each other; the reviewer should be able to make sense of them together. **Don't** write a statement that is either a protracted version of your CV, or that is contradicted or unsubstantiated by your other documents.
- **Do** carefully consider the content you include in your statement. There should be a clear congruence between who you are and what you have written. **Don't** put anything in your scholarship statement that you wouldn't be able to substantiate if questioned during an interview.
- When giving examples, **do** refer to more recent instances. To attest to current character traits or qualities, **don't** refer to examples from many years ago, such as from your school days.
- When given a prompt, **do** adhere to and answer it completely. Think very carefully about whether the information you are providing is what has been asked for. **Don't** trail off at a tangent, write impulsively, or based on a standardised blueprint. For instance, if they ask for your motivations behind

selecting a certain course, don't give a description of how you are a motivated person.

- When giving examples, **do** focus on one or two relevant instances that best support your point. **Don't** simply list out all possible examples if they do not add any value to your narrative. Less is more. Similarly, **don't** bullet-point all your achievements and qualifications. Your statement should be a well-crafted story, not a factsheet.
- **Do** submit original work. Make sure that the documents you submit are entirely your own work and have not been written by anyone else. **Don't** plagiarise or you'll risk your application being disqualified at best.
- Finally, **do** have faith and confidence in yourself! The first big step for a successful scholarship application is submitting an application at all; and this guide should equip you with some solid tools to help make yours as strong as possible. So, give it your best shot and take that leap of faith. **Good luck!**

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