

Scholarship Statement of Financial Need: Drafts, Feedback, & Line Editing

Project Overview

Client & Topic: This client was a PhD student applying for a scholarship that would not only fund her research, but would also connect her with resources, scholars, mentors, and hands-on experiences to further her work. Long-term, this client would like to work for the organization that hosts the scholarship, so she also viewed her application to the scholarship as a strategic career move.

Like all grad students, this client was on a budget. So I maximized her investment by putting some of the work back in her hands. I kept my time with the text minimal and instead made suggestions that she could implement herself.

Financial need is a personal topic and my client's story was particularly sensitive. So I focused on making sure this client's statement balanced dignity, gratitude, and real need. She gave me permission to share a redacted version of her writing process.

Context: This financial need statement was for a highly competitive federal scholarship. It was part of a large application packet that also included a statement of intent, a research statement, and multiple letters of recommendation.

Audience: The deciding body for this scholarship is a group of federal employees, scholars, professors, and extension officers. I tailored my client's language to meet the audience's expectations.

Order of Feedback: Below, you'll see the essay evolve from first to final draft.

This particular project had a good amount of back-and-forth, since the client was implementing my suggestions as we moved forward. You'll notice my feedback began at the organizational level. Once the writer improved the flow and tightened the prose based on my feedback, I switched to sentence-level editing. For the penultimate draft, I zoomed back out to big-picture suggestions.

Editorial Overview: The first draft was full of great material and heart; however, it was weighed down with unnecessary details and a distracting order of events.

Together, my client and I reorganized the information, reduced the length by half, and highlighted the most compelling portions of her story.

The final draft draws the reader in, makes a compelling argument for awarding my client the scholarship, and closes by pointing toward the greater impact of her research.

While an editor's job is of course to clean up grammar and word-choice, that's only the *beginning* of the process. For this project, I also focused on clarity and storytelling. Throughout, I worked to maintain the author's unique voice.

First Draft: Big-Picture Feedback

I'm no stranger to hard work. At 14, my first job was cleaning donkey stalls at a farm down the road where I would walk from my rural [REDACTED] house. I've worked ever since, including having at least one job through 9 years of higher education, and almost always holding two jobs at all other times, aside from the first year of my son's life, when I held just one full time job and focused on raising our son while my husband was in school. However, as many Americans know, hard work does not always translate to financial security. I worked part-time while earning my undergraduate degree, full-time while earning my first master's degree, and part-time while earning my second master's degree. Now, as I pursue my PhD, I am also working part-time as a Fellow at the US [REDACTED] Agency.

It came as a huge, disheartening surprise when after working at least two jobs for 16 years and earning a Bachelor's degree and two Master's degrees with only \$10,000 in student loans, I would be on food stamps, my State's WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program, or have a son born on Medicaid. But life has a way of surprising even the most careful of planners and tireless of workers.

I grew up in a working-class family. My father is the son of a dairy farmer and my mother is the daughter of a woman who lost her husband to a car accident in the 1960s, at a time when it wasn't the norm for single widows to work and raise three children on their own. Although my parents have not been able to provide much financial support to me, extremely dedicated work ethic is almost a genetic condition that I am lucky to have received.

Growing up, in addition to mucking donkey stalls, I also worked a summer job as a camp counselor while in high school. In college, I worked as a Resident Assistant at my college to cover my room and board, and during the summers, I was either a hostess, a waitress, or a research assistant. My undergraduate tuition was covered by a scholarship, so I ended up with a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Geology debt-free. After college, I moved to [REDACTED] to join the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] where I worked as a public high school science teacher, soccer coach, mentor for the Nature Conservancy, and a volunteer Hiking Club coordinator. The [REDACTED] Program covered my Master's degree tuition, so in the evenings, I earned a Master's degree in Secondary Science Education. I was living in [REDACTED] as a 21 year-old, so I was broke and living in a shoebox, but I was still debt-free, earning a solid income and a master's degree, and proud of it. I moved back to my native [REDACTED] to marry my now-husband, himself a first-generation college student, and taught high school science full time, while waiting tables, coaching men's and women's soccer, running the Envirothon club, tutoring, and working seasonally as a Wedding Planner's Assistant. These years were difficult, but I am proud that I have supported myself since I was 18 and have worked, hard, since I was 14. I loved teaching, and I felt as though I was able to have a powerful impact in teaching. I believe that being a public school teacher is one of the most important jobs, but it is underpaid, particularly in the state of [REDACTED], and that strain was taxing.

Seeking to pursue our passions and increase our earning potential, my husband and I both decided to go back to school—I for my second Master's degree in Environmental Sciences & Engineering and he for a Law Degree after working for ten years at a [REDACTED]. Despite knowing the financial risk of pursuing higher education for long-term benefits, we burned through our savings pretty quickly for those degrees and started taking out loans. When we decided to get pregnant, my student health insurance plan was set-up to cover us until I could be added as a dependent on my husband's insurance—perfect—we had it all planned out.

That's when things fell apart.

The school changed their insurance plans midway through my husband's degree, so not providing what they promised him when he started (and we had specifically asked about adding dependents prior to his enrollment for precisely that reason). So there I was, 7 months pregnant defending my master's thesis, with a baby due in [REDACTED], and my husband's dependent's policy has been completely scrapped: no more adding dependents at all. I

Commented [S1]: This is a great start! Lots of material to work with...and what a story! Before I do any sentence-level editing, I'd suggest reorganizing what you've got. It currently goes back and forth in time, and that's a bit distracting. The order I suggest below will both improve the flow and (maybe more importantly) highlight what's really compelling about your story. Here goes:

1. Start with the crisis. Maybe the moment when you were sitting in the social services office, realizing you were swallowing your pride, but grateful for the people helping you and the services you could rely on. Don't go into how you got there yet.
 2. A short (SHORT) paragraph about background. Mention donkey stalls, first-gen college status, holding multiple jobs over the years, barely keeping your head above water, and pursuing further education so you could extend and deepen your impact.
 3. A short (SHORT) paragraph explaining how things fell apart and how you ended up on social programs.
 4. "Things have come a long way from there..." Healthy son, good jobs, work and study you love and can contribute through...
- BUT...then spell out the realities of these choices (child-care costs, low attorney salary, etc), and why you need support.

wept. And then I hired a local health insurance agent to talk me through it. He took one look at our family status (baby on the way, one recent graduate with no job yet and another full-time student) and told us that we were eligible for everything: Medicaid, food stamps, and WIC (the Women, Infants and Children program). I will forever be grateful for the local Social Services department. Those are some of the kindest, most overworked people in America, and they conduct their jobs with a grace I will forever strive to emulate. They told me something that I'll never forget: "You're here, using these benefits in the exact way that they are designed to be used: for people that fall on tough circumstances and need some temporary help. So we're here to help you." I'm so grateful that the birth of our son, [REDACTED] was covered instead of costing us \$30,000 that we didn't have.

After [REDACTED] was born in [REDACTED], I was lucky to get hired to begin work full-time as an [REDACTED] Fellow at the [REDACTED] in October 2016. I was thrilled to make ~\$52,000 per year for our family of three. After my son turned one, I picked up a second job making \$35/hour at [REDACTED] University as a research assistant. Before [REDACTED] turned one, we no longer received State benefits. I was grateful to have had them, but was also proud of working hard to be able to no longer need them.

I have now switched to [REDACTED] full-time as a PhD student and the [REDACTED] part-time, working 20 hours per week. As hopefully has come through in my application materials, I see this decision to pursue a PhD as a calling. I am committed to the work. However, the financial strain it is putting on our family is real, especially since the cost of daycare in our area is more than most public college tuitions. My PhD assistantship pays me a small stipend, and I'm grateful to be allowed to also work part-time to help make ends meet while my husband is working full-time. [REDACTED] is now two, healthy, and an absolute joy, but his daycare costs are greater than public tuition costs for college in the state of [REDACTED]. My husband, a first-generation college student and hard-working man who has risen above constraints in his own right, is now \$100,000 in debt for his [REDACTED] Degree, but has taken the reins of his life into his own hands. He has a job in a Law Firm with a low starting salary (lower than the salary he made when he left the [REDACTED], in fact!), but he is valued in his new role, he is well-utilized, and there is room for him to grow.

I was brought on to my current PhD program with guaranteed funding from [REDACTED] only for my first year (2018-2019). After May 2019, I must find my own funding for this degree. As can be evidenced from previous paragraphs, I am not sure that continuing beyond 2019 without funding would be possible for me or my family given our current financial situation and my husband's school loans.

I have always worked, and I have always worked hard. I never imagined that I would need State benefits to feed my family. I never imagined that I would be the family that received the daycare's scholarship due to our status as the lowest-earning family in the entire school. But I also never imagined that I could possibly be competitive for a scholarship like this, until I spoke with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] Scholar that encouraged me to apply. Perhaps now is the time for me to start believing in the unimaginable—it happened to me before in a way that was shattering—maybe now it can happen in a way that is enabling.

Second Draft: Sentence-Level Editing

I could tell from the way he pushed the tissue box across his desk that I wasn't the first pregnant woman to cry in his office. Quietly, the social services consultant said, "You don't need to be ashamed. You're exactly who this program is for: someone who fell on tough circumstances and needs a little help to pull out of them." And that's how I used the services I received-- Medicaid, food stamps, and WIC: as a way to pull myself out of a low spot and continue to persevere. This was a defining moment for me, and it highlights ~~what I hope you'll deem worthy of receiving the~~ spirit worthy of the [REDACTED] Scholarship.

I'm no stranger to hard work. My first job at 14 was cleaning donkey stalls at a farm down the road, where I walked from my rural [REDACTED] home. I've worked ever since, including having at least one job through 9 years of higher education, and ~~almost~~ ^{nearly} always holding two jobs at all other times, ranging from teaching and coaching soccer to waiting tables and being a seasonal Wedding Planner's assistant. ~~I worked part-time while earning my undergraduate degree, full-time while earning my first master's degree, and part-time while earning my second master's degree.~~ Now, as I pursue my PhD, I am also working as a part-time Fellow at the [REDACTED].

However, as many Americans know, hard work does not always translate to financial security. ~~I worked part-time while earning my undergraduate degree, full-time while earning my first master's degree, and part-time while earning my second master's degree.~~ Now, as I pursue my PhD, I am also working part-time as a Fellow at the [REDACTED]. When my husband's law school changed their insurance policies midway through his degree and my pregnancy, none of our hard work and planning mattered. It was, as the kind social services consultant reminded me, a circumstance totally out of our control.

Thankfully, things have come a long way from that defining afternoon in the social services office. Thanks to Medicaid, my son [REDACTED] is now healthy after needing intense medical care, including surgeries that we never would have been able to afford, during his first year of life. My husband, a first-generation college student, has graduated from law school and found a job he loves that values his talents. I am working part-time at the [REDACTED] in a role that is perfect for me and where I feel well-utilized. Furthermore, I am doing something that I never would have thought possible while mucking out donkey stalls over 15 years ago: pursuing a PhD in a field that I am extremely passionate about and can contribute to in valuable ways.

~~However,~~ ^{Of course,} the opportunity to pursue higher education ~~at~~ comes at a price. My husband is a first-year attorney with a salary lower than public school teacher's. Law school loans have left us \$100,000 in debt, and we are paying the equivalent of in-state college tuition for child-care costs. I was brought on to my current PhD program with guaranteed funding from [REDACTED] for my first year only (2018-2019). After May 2019, I must find my own funding for this degree. Continuing beyond 2019 without funding ~~would~~ ^{will} be impossible given my family's current financial situation.

~~I have always worked, and I have always worked hard.~~ I never imagined that I would need State benefits to feed my family. I never imagined that I would be the family that received the daycare's scholarship due to our status as the lowest-earning family in the entire school. But I also never imagined that I could possibly be competitive for a scholarship like this, until I spoke with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], a [REDACTED] Scholar ~~that~~ who encouraged me to apply. ~~Perhaps now is the time for me to start believing in the unimaginable—it I've encountered the unimaginable before—happened to me before in a way that—and it was shattering—m. aybe now it can happen in a way that is enabling.~~ My hope is that now I can encounter the unimaginable again--this time, in a way that allows me to _____ (make significant contributions to the field? Pursue my passion for _____?)

Third Draft: More Big-Picture Feedback

I could tell from the way he pushed the tissue box across his desk that I wasn't the first pregnant woman to cry in his office. Quietly, the social services consultant said, "You don't need to be ashamed. You're exactly who this program is for: someone who fell on tough circumstances and needs a little help to pull out of them." And that's how I used the services I received-- Medicaid, food stamps, and WIC: as a way to pull myself out of a low spot and continue to persevere. This was a defining moment for me, and it highlights a spirit worthy of the [REDACTED]

I'm no stranger to hard work. My first job at 14 was cleaning donkey stalls at a farm down the road, where I walked from my rural [REDACTED] home. I've worked ever since, including having at least one job through 9 years of higher education, and nearly always holding two jobs at all other times, ranging from teaching and coaching soccer to waiting tables and being a seasonal wedding planner's assistant. I worked part-time while earning my undergraduate degree, full-time while earning my first master's degree, and part-time while earning my second master's degree. Now, as I pursue my PhD, I am also working as a part-time Fellow at the [REDACTED]

However, as many Americans know, hard work does not always translate to financial security. When my husband's law school changed their insurance policies midway through his degree and my pregnancy, none of our hard work and planning mattered. It was, as the kind social services consultant reminded me, a circumstance totally out of our control.

Thankfully, things have come a long way from that defining afternoon in the social services office. Thanks to Medicaid, my son [REDACTED] is now healthy after needing intense medical care, including surgeries that we never would have been able to afford, during his first year of life. My husband, a first-generation college student, has graduated from law school and found a job he loves that values his talents. I am working part-time at the [REDACTED] in a role that is perfect for me and where I feel well-utilized. Furthermore, I am doing something that I never would have thought possible while mucking out donkey stalls over 15 years ago: pursuing a PhD in a field that I am extremely passionate about and can contribute to in valuable ways.

Of course, the opportunity to pursue higher education comes at a price. My husband is a first-year attorney with a salary lower than public school teacher's. Law school loans have left us \$100,000 in debt, and we are paying the equivalent of in-state college tuition for child-care costs. I was brought on to my current PhD program with guaranteed funding from [REDACTED] for my first year only (2018-2019). After May 2019, I must find my own funding for this degree. Continuing beyond 2019 without funding will be impossible given my family's current financial situation.

I never imagined that I would need State benefits to feed my family. I never imagined that I would be the family that received the daycare's scholarship due to our status as the lowest-earning family in the entire school. But I also never imagined that I could possibly be competitive for a scholarship like this, until I spoke with [REDACTED] of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], a [REDACTED] Scholar who encouraged me to apply. I've encountered the unimaginable before--and it was shattering. My hope is that now I can encounter the unimaginable again--this time, in a way that allows me to _____ (make significant contributions to the field? Pursue my passion for _____?) |

Commented [2]: I think this paragraph can be cut down significantly, because it feels repetitive to me. But I didn't feel qualified to cut / match up jobs with time-periods, so I'll let you tackle that. :) But I do think it's important to tighten this paragraph up, so you don't lose your audience before you get to the turning point about why you need their help.

Commented [3]: Could you add a sentence in here about how you also never imagined you'd find work you were so passionate about?

Commented [4]: This is a defining statement here, and one that will leave the taste you want in the mouth of your reader. So I'll let you work on it.

Final Statement, Submitted to Scholarship

I could tell from the way he pushed the tissue box across his desk that I wasn't the first pregnant woman to cry in his office. Quietly, the social services consultant said, "You don't need to be ashamed. You're exactly who these services are for: someone who fell on tough circumstances and needs a little help to pull out of them." And that's exactly how I used Medicaid, food stamps, and WIC: to pull myself out of a low spot and continue to persevere. This was a defining moment for me, and it highlights a spirit worthy of the [REDACTED] Scholarship.

I'm no stranger to hard work. At 14, my first job was cleaning donkey stalls at a farm down the road from my rural [REDACTED] home. I've worked ever since, including through 9 years of higher education. I've held two jobs at nearly all other times, ranging from teaching high school science and coaching soccer to waiting tables and working as a Wedding Planner's assistant. In that spirit, now as a PhD student, I am also working at the [REDACTED].

However, as many Americans know, hard work does not always translate to financial security. When my husband's law school changed their insurance policies to remove dependents midway through his degree and my pregnancy, none of our hard work and planning mattered. It was, as the kind social services consultant reminded me, a circumstance completely out of our control.

Thankfully, things have come a long way from that defining afternoon in the social services office. Thanks to Medicaid, my son [REDACTED] is now healthy after needing expensive surgeries during his first year of life. My husband, a first-generation college student, has graduated from law school and we are both in roles that utilize our skills. Furthermore, I am doing something I would have never thought possible while mucking donkey stalls years ago or purchasing groceries with food stamps: pursuing a PhD in a field that allows me to follow my passion, feel valued as a scientific contributor to society, and impact community in meaningful ways.

Of course, the opportunity to pursue higher education comes at a price. My husband is a first-year attorney with a lower starting salary than a [REDACTED] public school teacher's ([REDACTED]th in teacher salaries). Law school loans have left us \$100,000 in debt and childcare costs exceed those of in-state college tuition. I began my PhD with funding for a limited time; continuing beyond 2019 without funding will be impossible given my family's current financial situation.

A lifelong hard worker and careful planner, I never imagined that I would need State benefits to feed my family. I never imagined that my family would receive the childcare scholarship reserved for the lowest-earning family in the entire school. But I also never imagined that I could be competitive for a scholarship like this, until I spoke with [REDACTED] of the [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] a [REDACTED] Scholar, who both encouraged me to apply. I've encountered the unimaginable before—and it was shattering. My hope is that maybe now I can encounter the unimaginable again, this time in a way that allows me to use my skills and experiences to make positive environmental and social changes right where I know how: in schools, with teachers, with students, and in communities just like the community that helped me.