

7 MISTAKES SMART AFRICANS MAKE WHEN APPLYING FOR SCHOLARSHIPS

By Rise Africa Scholars

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Introduction

There's nothing more frustrating than missing out on life-changing scholarships, not because you're not smart enough, but because no one ever showed you how to apply strategically.

This guide isn't for perfect people. It's for bold, smart Africans who are hungry for more but unsure where to start.

Whether you're a nurse in Nigeria, a teacher in Kenya, or running a side hustle in Uganda but dreaming of more, this is your playbook.

Inside, you'll discover:

- The 7 most common mistakes Africans make when applying for scholarships
- Real-life examples from people just like you
- Practical tools, mindset flips, and simple steps to get started

No fluff. No fancy English. Just the truth, and the tools to win.

Avoid these 7 mistakes and you'll already be ahead of 90% of applicants.

Mistake 1: Thinking Scholarships are Only for Top Students

"A+ students work for B+ students... who work for C students who own the company." ~African Uncle, probably at a wedding

🌟 The Real Mistake:

Many Africans still believe scholarships are only given to students with perfect grades or prestigious schools on their CV.

In reality, many scholarship programs are built for working professionals, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those creating community impact, not just exam champions.

✅ Key Scholarship Criteria (Beyond Academics):

- Leadership potential
- Community involvement
- Volunteer work or church programs
- Entrepreneurial initiative
- Personal hardship stories
- Alignment with the degree field

Real Example:

Esther, a mother of two from Eldoret, Kenya, didn't have perfect grades. But in her essay, she told a story about starting a WhatsApp group to help teen moms finish school. That story got her shortlisted, and eventually accepted into a global health program.

 *"They saw I wasn't perfect, but I was hungry, and that counted."*

Useful Scholarship Resources:

Rise Africa Scholars: <https://riseafricascholars.org/scholarships/>

Quick Exercise: Are You Scholarship Material?

Answer the following YES or NO:

Question



Yes



No

Do you actively participate in your community, church, school, or work team?

Have you overcome any personal or financial challenges?

Do you have a passion to give back or solve a problem in your country?

 **If you answered yes to at least one, you're scholarship material. Now it's just about telling that story powerfully.**

Common Pitfall:

"I haven't won awards or topped my class, so I won't get picked."

Reality: The world doesn't need more certificates. It needs people who can solve problems and create change. Show them that.

Do This Instead:

- *"I led a reading club for orphans in my village."*
- *"I taught basic Tech to women in my community."*
- *"I started a podcast for students stuck at home during COVID."*

These are gold! They will get you through the door.

Mistake 2: Waiting Until You Have "Enough Money" to Apply

Scholarships exist because you don't have the money.

Waiting until you're "financially ready" to apply for a scholarship is like skipping free nyama choma because you haven't eaten lunch yet.

And here's a hard truth no one tells you:

Expensive scholarships are like chasing poverty in a tuxedo.

You might look good while doing it, but your wallet stays crying.



Real Example:

Mary, a teacher from Nakuru, kept pushing her scholarship dreams "to next year." She wanted to get more stable first. Save up for application fees. Pay off some debt. Three years later, her colleague, with worse grades graduated with a fully funded Master's.

 "That could've been me. I waited myself out."

Sample Exercise: Cost Breakdown Myth Buster

Thought

Reality Check

“Scholarships have hidden fees”

Many scholarships offer 80% tuition coverage, plus monthly payment plans

“I can’t afford application fees”

Most online scholarship applications are completely free

“I need a bank statement to apply”

Not always, some just ask for a motivation letter and basic documentation

Common Pitfall:

“Let me save up before I apply.”

That’s like waiting to get muscles before you start going to the gym.

Do This Instead:

- Apply now. Let the scholarship handle the cost.

- Focus on writing a powerful essay, not calculating tuition.
- Ask questions. Many providers offer support or flexible payment options after acceptance.

 Flip the Script:

 *“I’ll wait until I have the money.”*

 *“Let me apply , this scholarship might be the money.”*

Mistake 3: Assuming Scholarships are Only for Young People

There’s a deep myth in Africa that says if you didn’t go to school straight after high school, your time has passed.

 That myth is a dream killer.

Many scholarship programs specifically welcome older students, second-chance learners, parents, and working professionals.



Real Story: Esther, 42, from Kenya

Esther had a job that barely paid the bills. She was doing side gigs , baking cakes, selling second-hand clothes , just to take care of her kids. One day she saw a Facebook post about a scholarship offering online degrees for working professionals.

Her first thought?

“Who has time for masomo ya uzeeni?”

But she applied. Today she’s earning in dollars as a remote healthcare coordinator for an international NGO.



Why Age Is Actually an Asset:

Older applicants...

- Have more real-life experience
- Are more disciplined and focused
- Demonstrate clear goals
- Are seen as highly committed



Did You Know?

A 2023 scholarship report showed:

- 1 in 3 scholarship recipients were over the age of 35
- The fastest-growing student group = age 40+

Exercise: “Experience Advantage” Inventory

List:

- 3 life experiences that shaped your values
- 2 times you overcame obstacles
- 1 way your job or community is better because of you

Now ask: “Could a 21-year-old say all that?” Boom , that’s your edge.

Common Pitfalls:

“I don’t remember how to write essays.”

“My kids come first.”

“My friends will laugh.”

Truth? Your kids will be proud. Your friends will ask how you did it.

Do This Instead:

- Apply to working professional-friendly [programs](#)

- Choose flexible [online](#) options
 - Talk about your age and experience with pride
-

Mistake 4: Applying Without a Clear Plan

Scholarship reviewers don't just want to give away money , they want to invest in someone with purpose.

What Reviewers Want to See:

1. What you want to study
2. Why it matters to you and your community
3. How you plan to use the degree

Real-Life Example: Daniel from Tanzania

Daniel applied for a [business degree](#). But instead of saying “I want to make money,” he wrote:

“My family has run a food kiosk for 16 years. I want to study business so I can transform our one-stall operation into a multi-location brand. I plan to mentor young food entrepreneurs.”

He got the scholarship.

Mini Workshop: Clarity Builder

Step 1: What degree do you want?

Step 2: What local issue does it help solve?

Step 3: What's your post-grad vision?

 Combine into one paragraph , boom, you've got your message.

Common Pitfall:

"I just want to improve myself."

 Too vague.  Too safe.  No impact.

Do This Instead:

- Be specific about a problem
- Connect your life experience to your academic plan
- Show what success looks like after graduation

Mistake 5: Ignoring Online Degree Scholarships

Online degrees are now the GOAT move for anyone juggling real life, real work, and real bills.

Fact Check:

- Top global universities offer online programs (Harvard, Oxford, etc.)
- Skills + credentials > lecture halls
- Online = no visa drama, more flexibility

Real Example: Nancy from Ghana

Nancy was a full-time nurse during COVID. No chance of traveling. She earned an MSc online and now manages a regional hospital.

 *“The degree was online. But the impact? Very real.”*

Self-Test: Is Online Learning Right for You?

- Do you have a job you can't leave?
- Stable internet and laptop/phone?
- Want global education without relocating?

✗ Common Pitfall:

“Online isn’t respected.”

💡 Reality: An accredited degree is an accredited degree , online or not.

✓ Do This Instead:

- Pick legit [programs](#)
- Verify accreditation
- Own the flexibility like a boss

Mistake 6: Copy-Pasting Generic Applications

Scholarship reviewers read hundreds of applications. Generic = forgettable.

🎤 Real Example: Charles from Uganda

First application: rejected. Second application: he told his real story, using \$1 data to learn coding and mentor others. He got accepted.


Write Like You Talk

Instead of:

"I seek this opportunity to advance..."

Try:

"Growing up in Thika, my mum sold mangoes so I could stay in school. I'm applying because I want to use this degree to help small businesses like hers grow."

 Tools to Help:

- Grammarly
- ChatGPT (for structure, not story, your voice is the secret sauce. *Note: Do not write a generic story using AI, most reviewers will pick out a story that is not authentic. However, you can use AI to make your story as compelling as possible.*)
- Hemingway Editor
- A trusted friend

Common Pitfall:

"I don't have an inspiring story."

Yes. You. Do.

✔ Do This Instead:

- Be raw, be real
 - Talk about what shaped you
 - Show heart and hustle
-

Mistake 7: Not Starting at All (Letting Fear Win)

“What if I’m not good enough?”

“What if I don’t get picked?”

“What if I fail?”

💡 The Real Mistake:

Most scholarship dreams die before anyone even applies.

👤 Real Example: Amina from Mombasa

She closed the application tab out of fear, even though she was nearly done. Fear of rejection crept in. Her friend (who she used to tutor!) posted her acceptance letter. Amina never waited again.

🎉 She's now pursuing her MBA.

🛠️ Practical Tool: Fear Flip

Write this:

If I don't apply, I might miss out on _____.

Now read it. That's your why.

❌ Common Pitfall:

"Let me wait until I'm ready."

You'll never *feel* ready. Start anyway.

✅ Do This Instead:

- Fill one section of the form
- Write one sentence
- Ask one person for advice
- TAKE. ONE. STEP.

Flip the Script:

 *“I’m not ready.”*

 *“I may not be ready , but I’m going anyway.”*

Courage = Action + Heart. You’ve got both.

What Happens Next?

You’ve just seen the 7 mistakes. Over the next few days, we’ll email you real stories from Africans who overcame these same obstacles. You’ll see how they did it , and how you can too.

Every email will break down one of the mistakes with:

- A real-life story
- A deeper lesson
- And one powerful step to move forward

You’re already ahead of most people.
Now let’s keep that momentum.

Watch your inbox.

Final Word from the Scholarship Coach 🍲

“Scholarships are not for perfect people. They’re for bold people.”

Today could be the start of the story you’ll tell for years.

Ready?

🎯 Then this is your moment.

Unicaf is currently offering up to 80% in scholarship funding for Africans ready to level up. Learn online with international universities, on your schedule, while you work.

🌍 Degrees from the UK, Europe, and the US ([See the UK & US University Programs List here](#)).

📖 Study from anywhere in Africa.

💰 Affordable monthly payments after discount.

👉 [Click here to check your eligibility and apply today.](#)

But hurry , the next intake closes soon.

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