

◆ Crafting A Winning ◆ FRC Woodie Flowers Award Essay

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Step 1: Brainstorm, Research, and Plan

Your team has likely decided on your candidate for the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award. Your job is to present your candidate's best qualities to the Woodie Flowers Award judges to show them how very deserving he/she/they are of the award. The WFA essay is not judged by Regional or District Judges, but by those who have won the Woodie Flowers Award in the past. Imagine that you have only a few sentences to convince these individuals that your candidate is worthy of being among their ranks. Since you will want to present the best information possible, I recommend that students first do a bit of brainstorming and research among their team to learn about their candidate.

❖ Understand what the Award Represents

It is critically important that you read through the entire criteria of the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award. The Award criteria is very specific about the type of person they are looking to honor, and you should compose your essay with this at the forefront of your focus. As of 2021, the Judging Criteria for the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award is as follows:

Two aspects of this award are important: (1) the accomplishments in communication by the mentor and (2) the student's ability to communicate clearly and concisely through their nomination.

A specific judging criterion is based upon the team's description of how the mentor inspired each member of the team in some or all the following ways:

- ◆ *"Level of student participation;*
- ◆ *Creativity of effort;*
- ◆ *Clear explanation of mathematical, scientific, and engineering concepts;*
- ◆ *Demonstration of enthusiasm for Science and Engineering;*
- ◆ *Encouragement to work on projects as a team effort;*
- ◆ *Inspiration to use problem-solving skills;*
- ◆ *Inspiration to become an effective communicator; and*
- ◆ *Motivation through communication.*

Each FIRST team completes a product development cycle as it designs a concept, develops a prototype, and builds and debugs a unique machine. This requires teamwork, attention to detail, scheduling and hard work. The award-winning essay should answer this question; "How did the candidate inspire your team throughout this process?" If the judges determine the essay best describes how this individual excels above all others as he or she inspires the team, then that mentor truly deserves to be recognized with the award that honors Professor Woodie Flowers and his contribution to engineering, education, and communication."¹

This should give you a specific understanding about how to craft the tone of your essay. Think of each of these bullet points as questions that you are working to answer. Write down each of these bulleted items, along with the question in the provided paragraph. Either alone or with your fellow students, write down how your nominee shows each of these qualities. Don't worry about character count or grammar just yet. This is just to brainstorm how your candidate qualifies for the award and will be useful later when you are trying to think of examples or run into writer's block.

Lastly, create a calendar leading up to the deadline. I suggest that you begin writing your outline no later than one month prior to the due date, and you work to have your final draft completed two days before the deadline. You may want to have a few drafts done prior to the final draft. Does that sound like a lot of work? Don't worry. Trust me: your hard work will pay off once the essay is read aloud at your Regional or District Championship. You can do it.

¹ <https://www.firstinspires.org/resource-library/frc/submitted-awards#woodieflowers>, January 2021

❖ Gather Research and Talk to Others

Interview other teachers, mentors, and students on your team to learn their opinions about the nominee and what they feel is the candidate's most important quality. You may also want to give each of these interviewees a copy of the Woodie Flowers Award criteria to browse before your interview, so that they are familiar with the award and the very specific foundations that the committee is seeking in an award winner. Here are some questions to help you get started:

- ◆ How many years has the nominee been involved with *FIRST* programs?
- ◆ Does the nominee ever volunteer for other *FIRST* involvement, or have they in the past?
- ◆ If you had one nice thing to say about the nominee, what would it be?
- ◆ What is your favorite memory of the nominee?
- ◆ How has the nominee taught you or inspired you?
- ◆ What's something the nominee has told you that has stuck with you?
- ◆ Why do you think this nominee is a Woodie Flowers Award winner?
- ◆ Why are you proud to have this nominee on your team?

Include quotes from those that you interview. With the interviewee's permission, you may also want to record the conversation so that you may reference it again later when writing your essay. Remember that you are looking for anecdotes that will make your nominee stand out among a crowd.

Next, distill this information into useful bits. Dictate recordings, being careful to accurately report or record what others have said. Highlight especially unique or personal interactions, memories, or quotes. Collate similar answers or sort data by which question was asked. This will help later when you begin writing.

❖ Read Other Winning Essays

You can review ChiefDelphi and find many winning WFA essays in the White Papers section. You can also reach out to teams to ask for a copy of their essays. You will find that they have packed in lots of information in few words, ensuring that their essay is cohesive, succinct, and strong. Highlight where they have matched the judging criteria, or very unique, memorable passages. These are the keys to a winning essay and seeing excellent examples will help you to craft your own. Here are a handful of my go-to examples of WFFA and WFA essays. (I would love to have more examples of women, but unfortunately few are available.)

Chris Fultz, 2010 Woodie Flowers Award Winner

<https://www.chiefdelphi.com/t/paper-chris-fultz-2010-wfa/105336>

Allen Gregory, 2019 Woodie Flowers Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/14-3847-allen-gregory-iv>

David Kelso, 2004 Woodie Flowers Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/77-131-david-j-kelso>

Joe Perrotto, 2004 Philadelphia Woodie Flowers Finalist Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/73-365-joe-perrotto>

Steve Florence, 2006 Buckeye Woodie Flowers Finalist Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/98-461-steve-florence>

Karthik Kanagasabapathy, 2005 Waterloo Woodie Flowers Finalist Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/86-1114-karthik-kanagasabapathy>

Dina Campagna, 2007 Maryland Woodie Flowers Finalist Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/127-341-dina-campagna>

Bruce Charbonneau, 2017 Dallas Woodie Flowers Finalist Award Winner

<https://www.ewcp.org/resources/woodie-flowers-essays/23-1296-bruce-charbonneau>

Step 2: Outline & First Draft

It's not easy to simply sit down and write. However, you should now have a clear sense of your nominee's worthiness and at least a few things to say about this person. Verify that you know the correct spelling of their name and their preferred pronouns (he/him, she/her, they/their, or others) as well as their preferred prefix/greeting (such as Miss, Ms., Mx., Mr., Mrs.), if any. Next, open Microsoft Word, Google Docs, or even just a regular notebook and create an outline. This can be very, very rough. Throughout the rest of this guide, I will pick a few names to give you adequate examples.

❖ Sample First Outline

- Introduction to Ms. Ana Gonzalez
 - Ms. Ana is pretty great, and she's taught us a lot
- Team Involvement
 - Mentor for Team #12345, the Robotic Etch-A-Sketches, for 5 years (ask Mr. Thomas)
 - Works for Lockheed Martin as a Sr. Software Engineer (someone verify her title?)
- WFA Stuff
 - Explains programming really well, Demarius and Kayla both learned a lot from her
- Conclusion
 - We all really like Ms. Ana and we think she deserves this

Once you have started your basic outline and finished up your research, try fleshing out the outline even further during your next meeting. Figure out what snippets and quotes you like best from those conversations with your teammates, and work on extending it out to a point where you can start writing freely. Try to think of one important piece of information that stood out, or maybe something that your teammates repeated about your candidate during their interviews. Work with the information you have. Don't worry about how long it is, or what you may need to cut out later. Just start writing and continue writing until you've included everything that you feel is important.

❖ Sample Full Outline

- Introduction to Mx. Riley Williams
 - Riley is a thorough mentor and teacher who has taught us problem solving and the importance of working together as a team
 - Through their 3 years on Team #53421, Team Titanium Wheelz, we have all grown more confident thanks to Riley's way of making us feel special
- Mentorship
 - Riley mentored Team #13245 for 7 years before joining us in 2018
 - Is this important?!
 - They are the Physics and shop teacher at our school, St. James High
 - Riley is usually at school early to help us with homework (not just Physics) and the last one out of the robot lab at night
 - Alysha likes the way Riley doesn't talk down to her when explaining a problem
 - Mr. Agarwal says Riley is respected among their teaching peers
- Judging Criteria
 - Riley uses memes to make us laugh when we're learning something new, it keeps things relevant
 - They also are really down to Earth and low key funny, so it keeps things light-hearted
 - We didn't have a shop teacher, so Riley got certified so we could use the mill and lathe again!
 - "I used to be afraid to use the power tools so I just never really volunteered to build the robot. Riley took me aside and asked me what they could do to make me feel more comfortable. Together,

we created a certification course where everyone learned everything about the tools in the shop and became certified to use them – with adult supervision, of course. It was so above and beyond but like, I wouldn't expect less of Riley. They always work hard to make everyone feel included.” – Adam

- They are great at teaching Physics in a way we can all understand
 - They offer after-school tutoring if we need it, even with our other homework
- Talk about how Riley split us up into teams for different subsections of the robot
- Other?
 - Riley won a teaching award in 2017 for our district
 - (ask Mrs. Nwosu about the specifics)
 - The team unanimously voted to nominate Riley for the WFA
- Conclusion
 - Riley is nice and exactly what you would expect from a Woodie Flowers Award winner. They are welcoming, informational, creative, and the pillar of our team.

From here, start putting your bullets into sentences, and turn those into paragraphs. Voila! Your first draft is ready to go. For instance, in our introduction about fictitious mentor Riley, this might be our starting draft paragraph:

Team #53241, Team Titanium Wheelz, is not your everyday team and our mentor, Mx. Riley Williams, is not your everyday mentor. A teacher by day and an E-Sports gaming superstar at night, Riley connects with their students on a true down-to-earth level, making us all feel special and unique. Riley was a substitute teacher that eventually decided to go into teaching full time after realizing how much they could connect with their students. Riley steps up to every challenge – even taking on mentorship of the robotics team in their first year at our school. Through all of our challenges, over the last three years they have taught us the importance of being a team, of accepting everyone for who they are, and for the role that problem solving can have in our lives.

From here, we can begin writing out the rest of the essay. Again, this paragraph could definitely be more succinct and we can “tighten” up the language a bit – more on that below. However, this is a great way to make sure that you understand what you are writing, detail what you want to convey to the judges, and make sure you are covering what your team feels is important to put into the essay. Don't worry too much about character count, or even punctuation and grammar. Just start writing!

❖ A Note about Character Limits

Side note: It may sound counterintuitive, but my strong recommendation is that you should NOT worry about character limits until at least the third or fourth drafts of your essay. You will rephrase, edit, and chop up these first outlines and drafts into many little bits. Why worry about a character limit so soon? Wait until you need to start cutting out irrelevant phrases or information, and let your creativity and phrasing run wild for these first few steps.

Think of this as your opportunity to write as much as possible so later you can chop it up and get the absolute best of what you have written and collected. If you are struggling to get enough items that you think are quality material to put into your essay, ask a few more people if you may interview them.

Step 3: Refine and Read Aloud

You may start to notice a theme or recurring information about your nominee. Think about what will make them stand out among all other nominees, or the strongest of their traits. I recommend a “Sandwiching” approach – this theme should be one of the first and last things that the judging committee reads in your essay. The way I usually tell students to think about their introduction and conclusion is a little bizarre, but I think it gets the point across – your first few sentences should “punch you in the face”. It should be so decisive, so strongly worded, and so **ATTENTION-COMMANDING!** that the reader will not forget it.

❖ Average vs. Award Winning

Average:

Mr. Avi Patel is our Math teacher and Robotics mentor on Team #32415.

Award-winning:

Avi Patel exemplifies excellence in teaching via his creative methods to motivate, challenge, and encourage his students through STEM education.

Average:

The Robotic Etch-a-Sketches are proud to be led by our incredible mentor, Ms. Ana Gonzalez.

Award-winning:

Through her tireless community mentoring efforts, Ms. Ana Gonzalez has transformed our school, team, and city with her commitment to champion our next generation of software engineers.

Average:

After a tough year and an uncertain future, our Physics teacher Riley Williams is our hero after stepping up to save our team.

Award-winning:

A hero is someone who puts forth incredible effort in the face of absolute adversity, advocates for others, and refuses to give up no matter the circumstances. Riley Williams is more than just our hero – they are the quiet warrior that relentlessly fights for our right to STEM education despite many personal sacrifices.

What is attention-commanding about this person’s contributions? How can you relate that to the WFA judging criteria? If you are struggling, write down a short list of your nominee’s traits. Look up those words in a thesaurus and write down additional, stronger words that you can use to command your reader’s attention. Don’t lie or exaggerate but do use the strongest words that you can. You may also use the list of adjectives I’ve provided in my accompanying Grammar Guide.

Once the first draft is finished, it is time to read it out loud. You may do this with multiple students reading one paragraph each, or you can stand in a quiet room and read aloud to yourself. With a pen or highlighter, mark each sentence where you stumble upon your words or where something may not sound quite right. Do not fix things as you read – just mark it and fix afterward so that it reads more smoothly. This is one of the most important steps. I know some students are uncomfortable reading aloud because they think they aren’t very good at it, or because they have trouble with spoken English. Do not worry. Even if you stumble over your words a bit, it keeps other readers engaged, listening, and evaluating closely what you are saying as they read along. There is no need to be self-conscious if you are a slower reader or find it more difficult. I promise what really matters is your commitment to writing a great essay.

Step 4: Edit Relentlessly

Likely, you have at least a few highlighted trouble spots from reading your essay out loud. Great! Now is the time to make some changes, re-write those passages, and re-read your essay repeatedly until you no longer find any stumbling points. The strong likelihood is that you are over the submission limit of 3,000 characters at this point of writing.

(Remember, spaces count as characters!) If you are short of the limit, I recommend that you start back at Step 1 and gather further information about your candidate to add to your essay. You want as much material as possible at this point because you want to strip out unnecessary information and leave only the very best writing in your essay. If you are running short on characters, it tells me that you have not quite put forth enough effort.

I like to think of this editing like a chopping block on a cooking show – only the finest ingredients make it into the dish. The quality of the refinements in your editing is exactly what will make your essay come to life for the end reader.

❖ Character Elimination

Here are a few easy ways to start refining your writing and to cut down your character limit.

- ◆ Strip down any lists, such as awards or skills, and only focus on major highlights. Don't waste space and characters with a bulleted list – incorporate these into sentences.
- ◆ Check your essay for repeated use of the same adjectives or adverbs, and use Thesaurus.com to find new, stronger ways to phrase what you want to say.
- ◆ If a sentence does not seem to come together in a way that you like (maybe it is hard to read or requires too many commas), challenge yourself to rewrite the sentence(s) completely in an even stronger way.
- ◆ Beware run-on sentences. These are sometimes easier to identify when you are reading your essay aloud.
- ◆ Watch out for “phantoms” – words that aren't what you intended to write, but are still proper English words that spellcheckers won't catch. Example: writing about someone's “niche” but writing “nice” instead.
- ◆ Eliminate double-spaces after periods, and do not indent your paragraphs.

❖ Comma Elimination

If you are not sure if you should use a comma, here are a few examples to help you out.

- ◆ Use a comma to separate clauses joined by *and* or *but* if they otherwise do not make sense.
- ◆ Use commas to separate a series or list of things or actions. The last comma in a list of three or more items, the Oxford comma, can be left out if the sentence meaning is not changed. *She finished packing, made a sandwich, and fed the dog.* is a different sentence than *She finished packing, made a sandwich and fed the dog.* In the second example, it could be interpreted that she fed the sandwich to the dog. Make sure you're writing clearly or choose to err on the side of caution and include the comma.
- ◆ Use commas with a quotation. *“That's correct,” said Mia.* uses the comma in the quotation since the sentence isn't yet over. This is helpful when quoting your fellow students or mentors.
- ◆ Use a comma after an introductory phrase if a pause is intended. *As usual, he was the last to leave the building.* or *Of course, he was the last to leave the building.* Both have a pause built in.
- ◆ Use commas around additional information that could just as well go in parentheses. For example: *Ms. Ana, a teacher for 35 years, became our mentor in 2016.* This helps to separate extra information.
- ◆ Use commas around a ‘which’ clause, but not around ‘that’ clauses. *The yearly fundraiser, which usually raises enough for our enrollment fee, came up significantly short.* versus *The fundraiser that paid for our enrollment fee didn't cover enough for our second regional, so we had to fundraise again.*²

² List of conditional comma usage from *Woe Is I* by Patricia T. O'Conner. Proper citation available in the upload description.

I will take another moment here to extoll the virtues of using a Thesaurus, or even better, Thesaurus.com³. I have edited so many different student essays where a stronger, shorter word was available, but the student continued to use the same overused terms – “unique”, “important”, “creative”, etc. After providing a list of similar words to what you have entered, Thesaurus.com also expands on their own suggestions – keep scrolling to the bottom. My secret? I type in a word that describes the person or thing that I am referencing. Then I let Thesaurus.com guide me in making a list of words that I may want to use in my writing. I check them off as I use them. Sometimes a different word will fit better in one place than another, so I will add it back to the bottom of the list again if I swap it out.

❖ Sample Word List

courageous	effortless	dependable	successful	convincing	significant
dedicated	undaunted	substantial	virtuous	extensive	diligent
perceptive	heroic	energetic	tireless	considerable	earnest
resilient	resolute	lively	vital	commanding	exceptional
assertive	intrepid	vehement	consistent	dynamic	impassioned
tenacious	compelling	effectual	unflinching	mighty	robust
unyielding	persuasive	conclusive	compelling	guiding	resilient
influential	indomitable	productive	take-charge	prominent	substantial

The point of using the word list is NOT to use the longest word you can find. Let me be the one to tell you in your life: more obscure words do not make you seem more intelligent. Famous writers, essayists, and poets are famous because they know when to use the *right* words at the *right* times, not because they have found the most obscure substitutions. Find the word that best fits your situation. It should fit what you are trying to say, and it should flow very well when using it in a sentence. Sometimes simply changing an adjective makes a world of difference in your writing. Try it!

❖ A Quick Note for ESL/non-English Speaking Teams

The WFA and WFFA essays must be submitted in English per the submission rules. There are many teams that are willing and excited to help you edit your words into English, and I usually offer to review essays as well each year. Check ChiefDelphi.com and consider asking another team to help you edit your final essay. Peer review, especially with your native English-speaking peers, is very important. However, I like to believe that the WFA/WFFA judges understand that the *FIRST* Robotics Competition is diverse and that you are writing in English as best as you can. It makes your award submission no less valid and important. So long as you are putting forth effort to submit an essay, you should be very proud of what you have written!

³ No, really. Check out <https://www.thesaurus.com> as it'll be your best friend for this essay, schoolwork, college applications, etc.

Step 5: The Hardest Part - Final Editing

So many students wait until the last possible second to do the final trimming and submission of their essay, but that kind of rush editing leads to substandard award submissions. I advise that your team submit the essay at least one day before it is due, if possible. Of course, all of this is easy to say and harder to actually *do*. I am a procrastinator too – I get it. Try setting firm dates for your team to work through the necessary editing, and make sure to give yourself plenty of time.

❖ Remember the Criteria

First, remember to re-incorporate the award criteria wherever possible. Be very deliberate. Go through the list and ask yourself if the judges will be able to understand how your nominee relates to each piece of criterion. If that path of reasoning is not clear, do what you can with the wording in your essay to make that more obvious.

❖ Eliminate the Easy Stuff

Secondly, do a final sweep through the essay to get rid of indentations, double spaces after periods, unnecessary commas, extraneous punctuation, phantom words, poor wording, run-on sentences, etc. These sometimes weasel their way back into your essay as you make minor edits, so this type of checking should be done frequently until you finally submit the essay to *FIRST*.

❖ Tighten Up Your Language

This is the hard part. *The sentence-by-sentence torture must be completed*. This will help you to reach your character limits and make your essay much more cohesive and compelling. But don't say I didn't warn you: this type of editing is brutal. You will want to give up. You will shut down with intense writer's block. I have seen teenagers cry at this stage. Just know that it is worth it. Get up, get a snack, and go back to it. This is where award-winning essays are made. Consider this example:

First draft, 177 characters:

Avi is a great person and teacher who leads through example, and he helps strengthen our team with his positive attitude and extensive training classes on a variety of subjects.

Intermediate draft, 118 characters:

Avi leads through example, and helps to strengthen our team with his positive attitude and extensive training classes.

Final draft, 106 characters:

Avi leads by example, motivates with positivity, and strengthens our team with extensive training classes.

Make sure you are saying the most with the fewest words and characters. It takes a maximum amount of focus and brain power, so take it step by step and sentence by sentence. Having writer's block, feeling overloaded or overwhelmed, or becoming frustrated is normal. Breaks and snacks help. If you have allowed yourself enough time, edit 1-2 paragraphs each day. This helps to split up the burden and makes it a bit more manageable.

Your brain is a muscle and it takes repetition, like every other muscle, to do something well. The first time you edit something so in-depth, your brain practically hurts from trying to rephrase or emphasize your points in a million different ways. The more that you do this, the easier that it is to begin writing in more concise ways, eliminating the need to do a lot of editing down the line. This is how you become a better writer over time.

❖ Last Character Elimination Tips

If you have trimmed down your sentences, taken each of these suggestions, and are still over the 3,000-character limit, here are a few miscellaneous tidbits that may help:

- ◆ If the essay includes an acronym, consider whether spelling out the acronym is necessary. Some acronyms are more universal or commonplace, like PTA, STEM, or NASA, or more familiar to *FIRST*ers in particular. However, the judges may not know specialty acronyms, such as initiatives that are specific to your school or community.
- ◆ If you are including quotes, specify how that person relates to your team. You can say this concisely in several ways: *Student Ayesha says, "...* or *Carson, a mentor, says that Ms. Ana's greatest strength is her positivity.*
- ◆ If a long yet important quote is using up your character limit, try working with your source to reduce the quote. Spoken English has no character limit – we're not evaluated on our brevity, only on our ability to communicate effectively – so many quotes can be too wordy for an essay like this. Your teammates or mentors may be able to help you abbreviate their quotes. It is important that their point is made as intended, that their intent is not exaggerated from the original quote, and that their words are not distorted or replaced in an egregious manner. It is not acceptable to significantly revise or rewrite someone's words, especially without explicit permission.
- ◆ Don't make bold claims without verifying them first – for instance, saying that someone started a multitude of robotics teams, made major contributions in the community, or holds significant roles. Fact check everything.
- ◆ If you do need to make a list of robotics teams, I would include the team numbers without needing to include the team names and locations. Try to be as concise as possible with any and all lists of information.
- ◆ If stating the nominee's name repeatedly is eating into your overall character count for your submission, use more pronouns. For an essay this short, that is a bit more acceptable.
- ◆ Do not be too colloquial, because this is a formal essay. Spell out contractions unless shortening words is necessary to meet the character limits.
- ◆ Make absolutely sure that you haven't added extra spaces between sentences/words. The easiest way check? Highlight your entire essay, hit CTRL+F for the Find & Replace box. Type in two spaces in Find and one space in Replace. It is magic and this can make or break a submission at the last minute! Check frequently if you can.
- ◆ Don't stop editing at 3,000 characters – edit to 2,998, just in case there are issues with the submission box.

Okay. Are you still above the character limit?

From here, take the most important information, supplement it as best you can, and strip out unnecessary information until you hit the character limit. I know your nominee might have a ton of reasons why they should be the Woodie Flowers Finalist Award or Woodie Flowers Award winner. Take the strongest, most relevant (to the judging criteria) passages of your essay and consider those permanent, and slowly take away the weaker, less relevant information until you hit your character limit. Make sure the essay still flows and makes sense, and of course, read it out loud. Allow your peers to review in case it has now become a bit too choppy.

There's No Step 5A...

But if there were a step 5A, it would be to congratulate yourself on a job well done. By doing this much research on how to write your essay, I can guarantee that you will produce something that will make your teachers, mentor, and team very proud. I hope that this guide has helped you to become a better writer and communicator both in *FIRST* and beyond. The way that we interpret and communicate ultimately shapes our entire lives – keep this knowledge with you.

This award is important, and the time and effort that you are putting into your essay to recognize another individual is selfless and admirable. Please know that I am very, very proud of you.