

Scholarship Application Mistakes: What AELO Swiss Academy Reviewers See Too Often

Every scholarship cycle, a small group of us at AELO Swiss Academy sit down with stacks of files and read them twice. The first pass happens alone. Each reviewer scores the application independently, without discussion, so that no single voice dominates. The second pass is a calibration meeting where we compare notes and argue, sometimes at length, about the borderline cases. Between the two passes, we read several hundred files per cycle, and the patterns become impossible to ignore.

What surprises most applicants is what actually eliminates them early. It is rarely weak grades. It is rarely a modest background. More often, it is a cluster of avoidable mistakes that signal one thing to a reviewer: this candidate did not read the instructions, or did not take the process seriously. Those signals are fatal, because a scholarship is fundamentally a bet on how a person will handle responsibility. The application itself is the first test.

Below are the mistakes we see most often, why they matter more than applicants assume, and what the strongest files do instead.

The essay that could have been written for anyone

The single most common failure is the generic essay. It opens with a childhood moment, pivots to a passion for the field, praises the institution as "renowned" and "prestigious," and closes with a promise to "give back to the community." We read versions of this essay dozens of times per cycle. The words blur together. By file forty, a reviewer cannot remember whether this candidate wanted to study hospitality or materials science.

Specificity is the entire game. One applicant two cycles ago opened her essay with a description of a failed water filtration prototype she had built for a village workshop, including the exact point where the seal leaked and what she rebuilt over a weekend. We still talk about that essay in training sessions. It told us she had done real work, that she could diagnose problems, and that she would arrive on campus already knowing how to use our labs. No adjective could have accomplished that.

The opposite failure also appears, and it stings more. Occasionally a candidate pastes in an essay clearly written for a different institution. One candidate praised our marine research station at length. We sit in the foothills, an hour from the nearest lake. There is no graceful recovery from that. It suggests the application was assembled at speed and never reread, and it colors how we read everything else in the file.

Answering the question we actually asked

Prompts are designed with intent, and reviewers notice when they are sidestepped. If we ask you to describe a professional setback and what you changed afterward, we are testing judgment and honesty, not fishing for a success story in disguise. An applicant who reframes the question into a triumph has, in effect, told us they cannot tolerate examining failure. In a demanding academic environment, that is a red flag, not a selling point.

Word limits carry the same logic. A 400-word limit is not an inconvenience. It is a test of editing discipline. Candidates who run to 650 words and assume nobody will mind are wrong on both counts. We mind, because the limit exists to see whether you can prioritize. The strongest essays we read regularly come in just under the cap and feel complete, not truncated. That takes four or five revisions, not one.

A practical habit worth adopting: after drafting, read each prompt aloud, then read only the first two sentences of your response. If those sentences do not directly engage the question, the essay needs restructuring, however good the rest may be.

Letters of recommendation that hurt more than they help

We require two recommendation letters, and the difference between a useful letter and a useless one is enormous. The useless letter is three sentences long, could describe any student, and reads as though it was written in a parking garage. The famous-name letter is a close cousin: a well-known professor who supervised the applicant once, at a summer school, and remembers little. Applicants assume the name adds weight. It usually subtracts it, because the thinness of the letter tells us the relationship was thin.

The letters that genuinely move a file come from people who have watched the applicant work over time and can supply detail the essay does not contain. When a recommender describes how a candidate handled a specific lab crisis or renegotiated a project deadline, and that detail echoes something the applicant wrote independently, the file gains real credibility.

Applicants can materially improve their letters, and most never think to try. Hand your recommender a short package rather than a bare request:

- A current CV, so they can anchor dates and roles accurately.
- Your draft essay or a summary of your goals, so the letter complements rather than repeats it.
- The program description and the scholarship criteria, so they can speak to what we actually assess.
- One or two specific projects you completed under their supervision, to jog precise memories.
- The exact deadline and submission link, clearly stated, at least three weeks ahead.

That last point deserves emphasis. Every cycle, at least a few files arrive incomplete because a recommender was approached two days before the deadline and did not deliver in time. We cannot score what we cannot read, and extensions are granted rarely. From the committee's side, a late letter suggests the applicant's planning, not the recommender's busyness.

The paperwork problem

After essays and letters, the most common casualties are documents. Transcripts uploaded with pages missing. Scans too faint to read the grades. Diplomas submitted in the original language with no translation, or with an uncertified translation when our requirements ask for a certified one. Files named things like "doc2_final_FINAL(3).pdf," which tells us nothing and occasionally causes duplicates in the system.

None of these are character judgments in themselves, and we try to flag fixable issues where the timeline allows. But at several hundred files per cycle, with fixed review dates, we cannot always chase applicants for a readable page. A file that arrives clean simply gets a fairer read than one that arrives broken.

Grade conversion is a related trap. Applicants from systems with unusual scales sometimes report a self-calculated GPA without explaining the scale, leaving reviewers to guess. One line clarifying that your grade of 8.5 sits on a 10-point scale where 8.5 places you in the top five percent of your cohort solves the problem. Reviewers are not obligated to research your national grading system, and many will not.

The remedy is boring and effective. Build a document folder months before the deadline. Collect every transcript, certificate, and translation early, since certified translations can take weeks to arrange. Then, a week before submitting, open every single file and confirm it is complete and legible.

Money: the part applicants write around

This is the mistake with the highest stakes, because it surfaces after admission decisions, when it is hardest to fix. Swiss education is expensive to live through, not only to attend. Depending on the city, monthly living costs commonly land in the range of CHF 1,800 to 2,500 once rent, health insurance, and transport are counted, and more in Zurich or Geneva. Non-EU students should also know that visa-stage financial documentation is required, and that part-time work is restricted: students from outside the EU/EFTA area generally cannot work during their first six months, and even afterward, term-time hours are capped at fifteen per week.

A scholarship, even a generous one, rarely covers the full picture. So we ask applicants, directly, how they plan to fund the gap. The answers we cannot work with are the vague ones: "I will find a way," "I am confident opportunities will arise," or a silent blank where the funding plan should be. Hope is not a plan, and reviewers know what happens when students arrive underfunded: academic performance suffers, and everyone involved regrets the decision.

The answers that reassure us are concrete. Savings of a stated amount. Family support with a stated monthly figure. A documented external grant. An employer's letter confirming study leave and continued salary. You do not need the full amount sitting in an account, but you need a defensible arithmetic that adds up on paper. Candidates who show us honest numbers, including the shortfall and its plan, **FAA knowledge test** read as adults. Candidates who write around the money read as risks.

Timing and the eleventh-hour myth

Our application window for the autumn intake closes in early March. Every year, a surge of files arrives in the final thirty-six hours, and a meaningful share of those contain errors that a calmer week would have caught: a missing signature, an expired language certificate, a recommender who never submitted. Portal traffic peaks, upload failures happen, and support requests queue. Submitting at the deadline is not a strategy. It is a gamble with your own file.

Timing also matters beyond the portal. Swiss residence permits for non-EU students can take six to twelve weeks to process, depending on the canton and the season, and that clock starts only when your documents are complete. Applicants who build a realistic backward plan from arrival date, moving through visa documentation, housing, and funding confirmation, tend to start their studies settled. Applicants who discover the timelines in June tend to start them exhausted.

Over-polishing and the flattened voice

There is a quieter mistake we see in strong candidates on paper: essays so heavily edited, by teachers, consultants, parents, or repeated passes through writing tools, that the person disappears. The vocabulary is inflated. The rhythm is uniform. The voice in the essay does not match the voice in the recommendation letters, and reviewers notice the mismatch because we read them side by side.

We are not asking for imperfect prose. We are asking for a discernible person. When an essay claims a passion for structural engineering but contains no sentence a working engineer would recognize as authentic, we wonder who wrote it and what it is covering for. A useful test: read your essay aloud. If you would never say a sentence that way to a colleague, cut it or rewrite it until you would. Clarity beats grandeur every single time, and plain, confident writing is far rarer in our pile than ornate, hollow writing.

What the successful files share

Across cycles, the files that reach the final round tend to rhyme. There is a coherent thread from past work to the proposed program to a plausible next step, and the applicant can articulate why our program specifically fits that thread. The recommenders know the applicant well and add independent detail. The documents are clean and complete. The funding plan adds up. The gaps in the record, when they exist, are acknowledged in a sentence rather than hidden.

Nothing in that list requires privilege. It requires time, attention, and the willingness to be specific and honest on paper. Some of the most compelling files we have funded came from modest circumstances and modest institutions, but the applications themselves were meticulous.



Before you press submit

A short checklist, worth running the day before submission rather than the hour before:

- Open every PDF you plan to upload and confirm the pages are complete, legible, and correctly ordered.
- Read each prompt aloud, then check that your opening sentences answer it directly.
- Confirm each recommender has actually submitted, not merely agreed to.
- Verify word counts using the portal's counter, not your own software.
- Search every document for the correct institution and program names, twice.

A closing thought from the review table

Reviewers are not hunting for perfection, and we do not expect a twenty-two-year-old to have a fully formed life plan. What we are evaluating is whether the person behind the file takes commitments seriously, thinks clearly about their own path, and can be trusted with resources. The application is your first piece of evidence. Give it the same care you would give the work you hope to do here, and you will already be ahead of a large share of the competition. We look forward to reading what you build.