

Tips for Writing a Scholarship Reference

Students applying for competitive scholarships are usually required to include letters of reference with their applications. If you are asked to write a reference letter for a student, you should be aware of your responsibilities.

Before you start

- You are not obligated to fulfil the request. If you don't feel you can write a letter of reference that will enhance the student's application, say no. It is better for the student to have time to find another letter writer.
- Be aware of the deadline for the letter. A letter submitted late, or not at all, will harm the application and may result in its withdrawal from the competition.
- Discuss the application with the student. Ask for specific details about their work that will make your letter more personal. You can also use this opportunity to determine where the applicant is already strong relative to the adjudication criteria.
- Collect background materials that will assist you with the letter, such as the student's CV, transcripts, and examples of the student's work.

Consider the criteria

Each competition has its own set of criteria but, regardless of agency and regardless of discipline, the criteria do not stray far from:

- Academic excellence
- Research ability or potential
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal and leadership skills

Perhaps also

- Research environment
- Research fit with strategic themes

Group your comments in relation to the criteria of the award. You may use headings to delineate this for reviewers.

Consider the selection process

Will the application be reviewed by experts and non-experts in the field? If non-experts, you need to more clearly explain the impact of the student's research and contributions.

Write a strong letter

- Address the criteria of the award and how the student fulfils them.
- Emphasize the student's strengths.

- Provide specific anecdotes of things the student has done that are impressive. Point out key features of the application that may be missed by a reader (presentation prize, departmental award). Draw comparisons to their peers or, for the very best, their counterparts over the years.
- Use your comments to complement the rest of the application. For example, if the student has a straight A+ transcript and gave a great presentation in your class, use your space to comment on their communication skills, not the fact they have good grades. It's not catastrophic to point out weaknesses but you can also point out if there has been improvement.
- Address the potential of the student and the importance of the proposed research
- Be concise and clear. Provide context.
- Follow the guidelines for length and format.
- Never assume someone is a shoo-in for an award
- Specifics easily trump superlatives. Superlatives without support are meaningless. See the examples below:

Example 1

- *[Weak] The applicant writes and speaks very well.*
- *[Average] The applicant's writing skills shown in her undergraduate thesis compare with mid-program Ph.D. students. Her speaking skills are highly polished as evidenced by her award for her talk at an undergraduate conference.*
- *[Strong] The applicant's writing skills are exceptional. She can provide drafts of manuscripts that are nearly publication ready with the most recent citations. They are concise with regards to content and still stylistically fluid. Her speaking skills parallel this. She gave a 20 minute talk at a national meeting where the audience included several international leaders in the field. Two of these scientists commented afterwards that her talk was superb.*

Example 2

- *[Weak] The applicant made very good progress on a research project while working with a senior graduate student.*
- *[Average] The applicant developed a firm grasp of the project from the outset and advanced the work with minimal supervision. Problems were encountered and he would seek advice appropriately. He always came with a proposed solution rather than simply wanting answers. He is a natural researcher.*
- *[Strong] The applicant was given a challenging project. He quickly came up to speed on the relevant literature and, before the end of the summer, had mastered the different analysis techniques core to the research. He showed tremendous enthusiasm, often working extra hours so that the project could be completed before his summer was up. We will be submitting a paper to a top journal shortly with him as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, he ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.*

Things to avoid

- Generic letters that are not personalized for the student
- Writing similar letters for multiple students
- Summarizing the materials in the application instead of providing additional information
- Using jargon. Readers may not be in the same field

- Emphasizing the supervisor's skills instead of the student's skills
- Relying too much on the material provided by the student
- Superlatives with no examples
- Commenting on the student's past experience rather than potential

International Considerations

Committees are typically sensitive to cultural differences in writing letters but if your background is international, you may want a colleague to read your letter for tone. Ultimately, concrete and specific examples of the student's achievements will speak for themselves.

If the student for whom you are writing has an international background, adjust your letter to address this. If the grading standards are very different in the student's home country, comment on that (for example, 70% in the UK is a very good grade). If you are able, also comment on the significance of national or international test scores. You can also comment on any limitations on travel, publishing etc. in their home country if they exist.