



Writing Strong Letters of Recommendation

This document is intended to assist you to write the best possible letters to support your students to be competitive for scholarship funding. The suggestions have been integrated from a variety of sources.

1. You should agree to write the letter if you:

- a. Can write a positive letter and wholeheartedly recommend the student
- b. Can write a detailed discussion of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make the student perfect for the scholarship
- c. Have adequate time to write the letter
- d. Have access to the materials you require to write the letter

2. In order of priority, what assists you to write a strong letter?

- a. A transcript
- b. A curriculum vitae or resume
- c. Some exposure to the student's research activities and a copy of the student's description of the research plan
- d. Criteria for the application and time to read the materials so you can target your letter
- e. A meeting with the student to discuss the materials
- f. Examples of the student's work
- g. Standardized test scores, such as the GRE
- h. Overview of the student's career goals

3. What components are critical in a strong letter?

- a. Using the designated categories in the rating form, tell a story about the student and his/her accomplishments
- b. Comparing the student with others you have known, e.g. in the top 1% of the 15 students I have supervised or in the top 5% of the 10 subject classes taught
- c. Providing specific, concrete examples that illustrate the points you are making, e.g. a paper topic and what made it stand out
- d. Emphasizing not only current accomplishments but potential you see
- e. Drawing on other areas of accomplishment or excellence, e.g. extracurricular activities or sport if they illustrate qualities being assessed, e.g. communication skills or leadership qualities
- f. Addressing any weaknesses/shortcomings in the application rather than ignoring them
- g. Emphasizing the student's strengths
- h. Commenting on the importance of the student's proposed research in terms of contributions and quality and, if applicable, quality of publications



- i. Explaining why you are the person writing the letter, e.g. how long and how you have known the applicant
 - j. Emphasizing the high quality training environment and how the student will benefit but also how the environment will benefit from the student
 - k. Taking the time to type the letter and attend to format, language, and spelling and staying within the guidelines
 - l. Asking the student to check about letter completion at a pre-arranged time
- 4. What will disadvantage the student in the competition?**
- a. Using terms like good student or hard worker without examples
 - b. Commenting only on past accomplishments without commenting on potential
 - c. Inflating your rankings or writing superlatives with no evidence
 - d. Taking on too many reference letters so adequate time cannot be spent on each student
 - e. Writing similar reference letters for multiple scholarship applicants
 - f. Writing a generic letter that does not speak to the areas for assessment
 - g. Focusing the application on the supervisor's characteristics rather than the student's characteristics
 - h. Using language or jargon that is specific to an area and will not be understood by academics from other disciplines
 - i. Including personal information that is irrelevant to the application
 - j. Using faint praise or consistently implying criticism
 - k. Relying too heavily on material provided by the student
 - l. Only summarizing the materials in the application

Prepared by Wendy Hall, Associate Dean, Faculty and Program Development

Drawn from:

- Higham, L. (2005). How to write a scholarship reference letter. Graduate Affairs Guidelines, Department of Computer Science, University of Alberta.
- Kuther, T. (2011). Writing a letter of recommendation: Getting started. URL: <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/askingforletters/a/recletter.htm>
- Kuther, T. (2011). Writing a letter of recommendation: All about recommendation letters. URL: <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/askingforletters/a/recletter.htm>
- Sims, S., & Benyon, C. (2007). Writing academic letters of reference for graduate students applying for scholarships. Western Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Western Ontario.
- Yale College (2010). Writing letters of recommendation. Yale College Office of Web Strategy & Utilization, URL: <http://www.yale.edu/yalecol/academics/fellowships/application/writing.html>
- Zimbio Scholarship recommendation letters. URL: <http://www.zimbio.com/Scholarship+Recommendation+Letters>