

Writing Academic Letters of Reference for Graduate Students Applying for Scholarships

1. Preamble:

In the review process for graduate scholarships, several criteria rank almost equally in adjudicating files for awards and scholarships:

- i. high grades
- ii. student's research record
- iii. reference letters

These three criteria provide evidence of potential for the scholarship and, even if the grades and research history are stellar, one weak reference letter will likely knock a student out of the competition.

2. Elements of Letters of Reference:

Opening Statements – Paragraph 1

The opening statements should:

- i. State the name of the person being recommended.
- ii. Explain why you are the person writing the letter.
- iii. Indicate how long you have known the applicant
- iv. Indicate how you know the applicant

Assessment Statements – Paragraph 2

Provide specific assessment of the performance, characteristics, and attributes of the person being recommended. Normally an assessment statement will be followed up by one or two specific performance-related examples backing up the statement just made.

Following are three generic typical assessment statements for inclusion in letters of reference:

- “[name] is a hard-working self-starter who invariably understands what research is all about.”
- “[name] consistently produces high quality reports in a timely fashion.”
- “The only area of weakness noted in [name]’s performance was...”

Closing Statements – Paragraph 3

The closing statement in a letter of reference should be brief and clearly summarize the assessment that flows from the points raised earlier. Closing statements are generally positive, but in some circumstances they may be qualified, or sometimes, even completely negative.

- “In closing, I highly recommend [name] for...”
- “Based on my work with about 30 graduate students over the years, I would rank [name]..”
- “In conclusion, while [name] has a good background, I must in all honesty say that I cannot offer the highest recommendation for ...”

3. Tips:

- i. Before writing the letter, be familiar with the student's application as the letter must pertain directly to the application (i.e., proposed program of study & research)
- ii. Letters should:
 - be restricted to objective comments about the program of research;
 - focus on research skills and potential not on the person; (Reviewers for scholarships may not care if this is nice person or not! This is not to minimize the importance of good communication skills)
 - comment on the student's academic achievements, as they are seen as the best indicator of potential;
 - provide comment on theoretical aspects of proposal – i.e., how significant it is, appropriateness of methodology, quality of publications; (Reviewers rely on your expertise to rank journals in which students have published)

- be superlative only if you can back it up with evidence from applicant's proposal;
 - take in consideration, the student's stage in program; (e.g., 1st year Ph.D. students are not expected to be at the same stage as students in the 4th year who are close to completion)
- iii. Be prudent in your writing of letters.
- Be judicious in the number of references you provide for one scholarship competition.
 - Similar letters from one faculty member for 3 different candidates are not respected.
- iv. An effective way of conveying quality of applicants is to rank them in the class (e.g., top student in my class of 100, top 5% of the class).

The Power of Specific Examples

A statement of overall reference, such as "I can recommend her highly," has little persuasive power for most reviewers; after all, most letters of reference make some sort of statement like this. Be specific: give examples of why the candidate is worthy of reference and provide enough evidence to feel confident that the reviewers can now compare other applicants competing for the same award, and that you have illustrated strengths.

- v. Must be typed and error-free; minimum length – 1 page; maximum length 2 pages

4. Power Phrases/words from Awards Guides:

Awards guides often ask reviewers to comment on specific traits. Mentioning them in the letter is an effective way of addressing specific traits. Instructions from a tri-council award handbook:

- i. Achievements and Activities of the Applicant
- Publication activity
 - Other research activity/ Previous awards/ Evidence of leadership
- ii. Characteristics and Abilities of the Applicant
- Critical thinking/ Independence / Perseverance/ Originality/ Organizational skills/ Interest in discovery/ Research ability/ Communication skills
- iii. Training Environment
- Training program for the applicant/ Scientific activity of the supervisor/ Research resources available/ Training record of the supervisor

5. Students' responsibility:

Faculty should expect students to:

- i. Make requests early, in writing.
- ii. Provide the research proposal, transcripts, addresses, student identifier numbers (if required), and a clear indication of the deadlines, both internal and external.
- iii. Provide the material in electronic format to enable quick copy and paste for preparation of letters. This is most valuable when there are multiple letters requested.
- iv. Reminders! The students must take responsibility to ensure that the letters are provided by their referees. Gentle reminders with emails are useful.

Advice for students: Students may ask faculty members directly where they would rank them in relation to other similar applicants. If you, as a faculty member indicate that the student would be only a very good applicant as opposed to outstanding, you should be honest and even suggest that s/he find another referee.

FIPPA provisions regarding letters of reference: Faculty and Staff at Western must comply with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA). The student academic record is personal information. UWO states: "It is recommended that faculty members or staff ask students for a written consent before writing a letter of reference or providing an oral evaluation. Ensure that the student has clearly explained what he or she wants the faculty or staff member to discuss (e.g. entire academic record, performance in one course, etc.)". A template is available on the forms section of the Faculty of Graduate Studies Web site.

http://grad.uwo.ca/current_students/forms.htm