

HOW TO WRITE A GOOD RECOMMENDATION LETTER



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In my work as the Director of National and International Scholarships at Ball State University, I see dozens of letters of recommendation each year, the vast majority of them written by faculty. Over the past decade I've learned that some faculty members may view writing a letter of recommendation as a burden, as an interruption to their own research agendas or other activities they consider more important than supporting a student's application. These recommenders may dash off a letter in 15 minutes, using the same trusty boilerplate that they've used for a hundred other students.

Thankfully, though, I've learned that most of our faculty view letter-writing as a privilege, as an important way to help advance a student's academic and professional careers. These letter-writers easily spend an hour or more crafting and editing a letter, and these are typically the instructors who are asked again and again to provide letters for students' applications for scholarships, internships, and graduate school.

From the students' perspective, asking for letters of recommendation may seem like a crapshoot: letters are the one component of an application that isn't under their control, and it typically remains unseen, the content unknown. When the competition for a national scholarship is especially fierce, however, a strong letter can be the factor that ultimately determines a student's chances of success.

In the following pages I offer some general advice for writing strong, persuasive letters of recommendation for scholarship applications in general, along with some specific advice for STEM-based scholarship programs, particularly the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship and NSF Graduate Research Fellowship (NSF GRF), two of the most important and visible scholarships available to STEM students in the U.S.

1) TAILOR EACH LETTER ACCORDING TO THE SPECIFIC CRITERIA OF A GIVEN SCHOLARSHIP.

Resist the urge to rely on your go-to boilerplate when writing a letter for a major scholarship competition, and don't simply change the name of the scholarship when recommending the same student for more than one competition. The applicant should provide you with a list of the criteria for a given scholarship competition; if that hasn't happened, ask the student for the criteria or go to the scholarship program's website, where you may find overt guidelines and advice for letter-writers.

For STEM-based scholarships, research experience and future potential in research are often the most important criteria. Goldwater Scholarship applicants, for example, are explicitly advised to solicit letter-writers who can discuss their "ability, interest, and experience in conducting research." Recommenders should therefore focus much of their attention on past research experiences, whether in the lab or the field, and should also comment on an applicant's relevant personal traits: "the motivation, creative thought, stamina, and ability to collaborate that are characteristics of those successfully practicing" in STEM research.

For the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship, research experience and potential – including the feasibility and significance of the applicant's Graduate Research Plan Statement (one of two essays submitted with the application) – should again be focal points in a letter of recommendation. NSF GRF letter-writers are also asked to "include comments on the applicant's potential for contributing to a globally-engaged

United States science and engineering workforce" and to take special care to address the NSF merit review criteria – i.e., the Intellectual Merit and Broader Impacts criteria.

In addition to providing information about the scholarship criteria, applicants should have provided you with reminders of their past accomplishments and perhaps even a request to focus on a particular experience (e.g., "I'd appreciate it if you could discuss my leadership of the Human Genome Project"). They may even want you to discuss an experience or quality that they haven't had opportunity to elaborate on in their part of the application. And while it's always a good idea for recommenders to read essays that applicants have written for a scholarship application, doing so is especially important for the NSF GRF, as noted above.

2) DON'T SIMPLY SUMMARIZE THE APPLICANT'S ACTIVITIES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS; INTERPRET AND EVALUATE THEM.

Many letter-writers believe that eloquently paraphrasing a student's résumé is useful and persuasive. It isn't. Students already will have provided the content of their résumés in the application, so restating that same information in your letter provides no new information for the reviewers.

Instead, bring your knowledge and experience to bear upon your evaluation of this student, to help the readers understand what the applicant's activities and accomplishments mean, perhaps in the context of other outstanding students. How does this student stand out from the crowd of other brilliant, visionary, accomplished students you've known and worked with? Sometimes numbers are useful in making that case. For example, stating that a student is in the top 1% of all undergraduates you've taught over a 30-year teaching career conveys a powerful message. Or

favorably comparing the applicant to a previous student who went on to an illustrious research career can be useful, too.

Joe Schall, author of *Writing Letters of Recommendation*, states that good letter-writers "invite us to imagine ourselves in the presence of the student" and help us to "know the candidate well, in fact to admire the student." In creating this "invitation," consider what kind of impressions the student has made on other faculty in your department or on other students; you may want to quote one or two of them.

Even while inviting readers to admire the student, however, avoid grandiose hyperbole. Some scholarship review committees don't even like to read the word "perfect" in a letter of recommendation (i.e., "Jane Smith is a perfect candidate for the ___ Scholarship"). Readers don't expect any candidate to be perfect and without flaws – which raises the question of addressing failures and weaknesses in a letter of recommendation. Should you include them? If the student has significant weaknesses and unaddressed failures, you may first need to reconsider whether you feel comfortable providing a letter for him or her.

In general, however, you should discuss failures if they have led to positive growth or if they help explain a gap or weakness in a student's record. The Goldwater Foundation even offers this specific advice to recommenders: "If there are any special circumstances or challenges the student has had to face that have negatively affected the student's performance or that the student has faced and has successfully addressed and performed well in spite of these challenges, please discuss these in your letter." I would simply add the caveat that if such challenges are personal in nature, ask the student if you may mention them in your letter.

3) SUPPORT YOUR POINTS WITH SPECIFIC, ILLUSTRATIVE DETAILS AND ONE OR MORE

1. *The Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship is aimed at identifying and supporting sophomores and juniors who will become the next generation of our nation's top STEM researchers. The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship provides three years of generous support to outstanding graduate students (including those who will enter their first year of graduate school) in a wide range of the sciences, including social sciences. Both programs are federally sponsored and funded.*

PERSONAL ANECDOTES.

Don't leave your readers asking "How?" or "In what way?" If you say a student has tremendous initiative, describe an incident in which he or she demonstrated that initiative in a meaningful way. Flesh out evaluative statements – "Jane uses both her senses and her intuition well in the lab" – by offering an anecdote in which you saw Jane's senses and intuition at work. Help the readers experience that scene through engaging description; convey the surprise and pleasure you experienced when you first saw her talents in action.

You should also show readers that you know this student as more than simply a good test-taker or lab worker. Identify noteworthy character traits, adopt a warm and personal tone in your writing – there's no need to refer to the student as "Miss" or "Mr." – and be sure to employ memorable details. After the scholarship review committee members have finished reading several dozen application packets, what will they remember from your letter? The more that your voice comes through, the more compelling your letter will be.

4) CONSIDER THE STRUCTURE, LENGTH, AND OTHER FORMATTING DETAILS.

Unless you are instructed otherwise, I recommend the following general guidelines.

- a) Greeting: Address the foundation or committee, rather than "Dear Sirs," or "To whom it may concern."
- b) Opening paragraph:
 - State what you're recommending student for.
 - Indicate the length of time and circumstances in which you've known the student.
 - If needed, provide a brief statement of your qualifications for evaluating the applicant, but don't make the letter about you; the review committee will not care how accomplished you are.
- c) Readability:
 - Don't go smaller – or larger – than 11 or 12 point Times New Roman, 10 point Arial, 11 point

Calibri, or a comparable font and size.

- Single-space your letter, with adequate paragraph breaks.
- Don't use visual gimmicks. It's fine to boldface or italicize a few key words, but don't overuse either formatting tool, and don't use "splashy" fonts, in an attempt to draw attention. I once had a faculty member put a student's full name in 14-pt. Broadway font throughout his letter, thinking that he would help readers remember the student's name. Yes, the reviewers might have remembered the student's name, but not for the right reasons!
- d) Length: For most scholarships, aim for 1½ to 2 pages or about 1,000 words. A one-page letter may suggest you have little to say, and three pages may try the patience of committee members who are reading and evaluating dozens of applications.

Be sure to read the instructions for each specific scholarship program, though, as you may be given a character, word, or page limit. Recommenders for the NSF GRF are limited to two pages, and those for Goldwater Scholarship are allowed up to three pages. Other formatting guidelines are also specified by each program, too, including font options and the width of margins.

- e) Submission protocol: Because the vast majority of scholarship applications are now online, you'll likely be required to copy and paste your letter into a text box or to upload it as a Word or PDF file. When copying and pasting into a text box, you don't need to worry about letterhead or signature. When uploading a file, though, you'll usually need to have both letterhead and your signature.

For uploaded letters, you may be given the option of submitting a Word document, but I recommend going with a PDF instead. If you want to print out your letter and then scan it as a PDF, be sure to set your scanner resolution to 300 dpi or higher; 200 dpi will make the text grainy and potentially annoying to your readers. If you have your letterhead and signature saved as a .gif or .jpg (or other image file), however, you may find it easier to simply insert the letterhead and

signature into the Word version of your letter and then "Save As" a PDF.

- f) Proofread: Spell the student's name and the scholarship's name correctly. I've seen students called the wrong name in letters, have their names spelled two different ways, identified by the wrong pronoun, and recommended for the wrong scholarship!

For online submission of letters, too, be sure to preview the letter before hitting "submit," to check for formatting problems created by copying and pasting from Word into a text box.

5) TRY NEW STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION.

If you're not happy with the letters you've been writing, or if you've often found yourself at a loss to write a substantive letter for some applicants, these strategies might help:

- a) Meet with the student in person, to discuss the scholarship and the student's accomplishments and future plans. Even if the student sends you detailed written information, a 20-minute conversation may help you come up with convincing anecdotes or help clarify what you want to focus on in your letter.
- b) Think of a letter of recommendation as a rhetorical challenge: You're building an argument about a student's intelligence, insight, ambition, and potential to have a significant impact on his or her field of study, profession, and perhaps even society. You're also building a persuasive argument that this student is a good fit for this scholarship. What do you need to tell the readers to convince them of your broad statements about the student?

- c) If you simply feel "stuck" and can't figure out how to write more than half a page about a student, try this strategy: Identify three of the student's qualities that make him or her especially well qualified for the scholarship or otherwise stand out from the crowd. Write a paragraph or two about each quality, providing supporting evidence and at least one anecdote to illustrate each point. While the strategy itself may sound

formulaic, the results are usually distinctive and convincing, allowing the readers to get a clear picture of that particular applicant.

6) BE ETHICAL.

Never ask a student to draft his or her own letter of recommendation. But do ask the student to give you written information about the scholarship, plus reminders about past papers and projects and other relevant accomplishments that you're especially well-qualified to discuss.

If you can't write the kind of letter that will help a student be a strong contender for a scholarship – even after trying some of the strategies provided here – please say so from the start. Writing an unusually short or unenthusiastic letter only hurts the student.

Even though your letter is almost always considered confidential by scholarship foundations (you'd be alerted to any rare cases in which that isn't the case), and certainly letters for the Goldwater Scholarship and NSF GRF are kept confidential, you're welcome to share your letter with an applicant if you like. In fact, you may want to fact-check the content of your letter or simply let an applicant know how highly he or she is regarded. However, you should never comply with a student who asks you to hand over your letter without first confirming the scholarship application's protocol.

Writing a strong letter of recommendation takes time and careful thought, but for scholarship applicants your letter can be the deciding factor for a review committee debating between one or more equally qualified candidates. And even for those students who may not win a scholarship, your letter will likely provide a useful foundation for future applications, whether for other scholarships, internships, or graduate school.

The investment of time and energy is worth it, so throw out that boilerplate when recommendations really matter. Students will be grateful, and you may help provide them with an opportunity that will open door after door in their academic careers and professional futures in science.