**Writing Letters of Recommendation**

Writing a letter of recommendation is a crucial component of the mentoring process and a major contribution to the student’s development. The writer acts as an intermediary between the student and the organization offering the opportunity, and both parties depend upon the honesty and integrity of the letter writer for a thorough assessment of the student’s ability and fitness for the opportunity.

**Ethics**: Refuse to write a letter if you cannot write honestly yet positively on the student’s behalf or if the student refuses to waive his or her right to review letter. Do not reveal any irrelevant information in the letter that could lead to discrimination against the student. Confine yourself to assessment of the student’s ability, character, and fitness for the opportunity. Do not ask students to draft letters themselves because it puts them in a difficult situation.

**Format:** Letters should be written on institutional letterhead. They should be addressed to an individual or to a committee, such as “Dear Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee,” not “to whom it may concern.” The signature line should include the writer’s name and full title. Most letters should be around 750 words and rarely as long as 1000 words or one and a half to two pages long.

**Student:** The student should provide you with the information you need to complete the letter. They should tell you what opportunity they are applying for and provide links or details about it, they should share information with you about their applications and any application materials—such as a resume or personal statement—they have prepared, and they should tell you how to submit the letter. The student should allow you at least two weeks to write the letter.

**Content:** The letter, like any piece of persuasive writing, is an argument. The objective in this case is to convince the committee that the student is an appropriate candidate for the opportunity. Learn what you can about the opportunity and its selection criteria, and explain how the student fits the criteria.

The majority of the letter should consist of anecdotes based on your experience with the student that illuminate the student’s academic ability, character, and potential for growth. Explain how long you have known the student and in what contexts and describe any opportunities you have had to observe the student. You might also describe the student’s contributions in class or lab, assess examples of the student’s work, relate stories about your interaction with the student, share observations about the student’s engagement with others, compare the student’s ability and performance to other students in your experience, and provide your opinion about the student’s likelihood of success. As much as possible, align your comments with the nature of the opportunity. If, for example, the student is applying to law school, comment specifically on the student’s analytical ability and ethical principles. If the student is applying for a competitive fellowship, describe exactly how you think the student fits the selection criteria for the fellowship. In the sciences and engineering, it is expected that the student be ranked in terms of abilities, as in, “This student falls within the top 5% of students I have taught over 10 years in organic chemistry, and is easily in the top 1% of chemistry majors I have worked with at Mercer University.”

When describing the student, avoid hyperbole. The expression “the best student I have ever taught” often rings hollow and undermines the letter’s credibility. Concrete examples and stories about the student will make a stronger impact on the readers.

Not every student is exceptional, and writing letters for average students or students you do not clearly recollect can be especially challenging. In a situation where you feel inclined to write a letter for a student about whom you feel ambivalent, be as honest about the student as you can. The letter may focus primarily on the ways in which you feel the fits with the opportunity without dwelling on the student’s shortcomings. For the sake of maintaining your credibility and the integrity of the process, it is best not to overstate the student’s ability. In cases where a former student from some years past requests a letter, it may be worthwhile to have a conversation with the student to rekindle your memory of the student and to generate material for the letter.

The letter should focus almost exclusively on the student. In some cases, a writer spends a significant amount of time describing themselves, their research, or their accomplishments, possibly as a means of enhancing their credibility. Most selection committees, however, are concerned only with the writer’s relationship to the student and their assessment of the student’s ability.

In some cases, the student will have an issue, problem, or weakness in their transcript or their background. A good letter of recommendation might address this issue and provide context or explanation for the problem, especially if the situation is an anomaly. The letter may point out a weakness or offer some criticism of the student when warranted, but in most cases, the letter will focus on the student’s strengths.

Be aware of how the student’s gender influences the letter. Research shows that “recommenders used significantly more standout adjectives to describe male candidates as compared to female candidates, even though objective criteria showed no gender differences in qualifications. It is likely that evaluators place higher weight on letters that describe a candidate as the most gifted, best qualified, or a rising star” (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2572075/>). This language gives male candidates an advantage over female candidates. Try to be consistent about how you describe the students.

**Style:** Keep the audience in mind. Don’t use disciplinary jargon if you aren’t writing to members of your own discipline. Write about the student warmly, using his or her preferred name. Don’t feel the need to be excessively formal or detached. Think of the audience as professionals and colleagues who have read dozens, if not hundreds, of letters. They will appreciate a gracious and engaging letter.

**Resources**: Having a colleague proofread a letter is always a wise idea, and the Director of Fellowships will gladly read a letter for a fellowship candidate. For more advice and for many examples of letters, see <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/121>. You can find example letters for [graduate school](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/drupal6/files/wrlo/Ch5pdf3.pdf), [Marshall scholarships](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/drupal6/files/wrlo/Marshall.pdf), [Rhodes scholarships](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/drupal6/files/wrlo/Rhodes.pdf), [Truman scholarships](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/drupal6/files/wrlo/Truman.pdf), and [other awards](https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/node/138).