



Best Practices for Writing Letters of Recommendation

Thank You

The National Scholarships & Fellowships Program team reads hundreds recommendation each year, across dozens of award cycles and for a variety of audiences. We've compiled some guidance based on what we observe as more- and less-effective. While this guide is written with competitive awards in mind, much of the advice applies widely in genre.

Consider the Audience

Letters you write in support of applicants to scholarships and fellowships are often looking for more than academic merit or preparation for graduate school.

Considering the audience may be obvious advice, but if the letter-writer has a clear understand of the award criteria or other details of the opportunity at hand, it can make for a really focused, helpful letter of support.

Often, competitive awards aren't looking for the same criteria as graduate and professional programs, and it is clear to selection committees when a letter has been previously written for that audience with little revision to address the award's criteria.

Consider highlighting the characteristics and experiences of the applicant that best match the award criteria even if it means removing or moving some sentences or paragraphs that focus primarily on academic success.

Ensure you've spoken with the candidate and received information from them on the criteria for the award. Make sure the candidate has provided you with a draft of their application essay(s), so you can connect key experiences and strengths of theirs to their motivation for applying.

As the Truman Foundation notes in their guidance, "It is always disappointing when a letter fails to mention things that are clearly significant to the applicant."

Don't Bury the Lead

This is a letter about the applicant's qualifications and fit for the opportunity they are applying to. Ensure your letter opens by centering on that subject, and that goal, right away. Put crucial and summative details early in the letter.

Avoid long descriptive or contextual detail, especially before you have properly introduced why you are writing, for whom, and the key merits that support your confidence in their success/fit.

The Order of Information Matters

Resist narrative chronological order; often, that is not the most effective way to introduce the reader to the applicant. The opening portions of your letter should center aspects of the candidate that align with the award's criteria.

Use the first paragraph strategically to highlight the key strengths of this applicant, or which qualifications or experiences you will be speaking about in your letter. If possible, avoid lengthy contextual paragraphs—a few key details about a project may be all a reader needs to understand an applicant's contributions.

Quality of information is more important than letter length. Focus on details about the candidate rather than extra details about the lab, course, project, or other context.

Center as Much First-Hand Knowledge as Possible

Award committees will always find your firsthand experience the most compelling portion of your letter. While it may sometimes be appropriate to include details based on colleagues' or the applicant's experience, ensure firsthand knowledge is central to your claims. (example)

Additionally, selection committees will find far more value—when comparing dozens or even hundreds of applicants—a concrete claim that supports the strengths of the candidate. Readers will find details more compelling than adjectives.

As the Truman Foundation notes, "Our 'outstanding' may not be the same but 'mobilized more than 100 students to volunteer on Saturday morning' is the same for everyone."

Comparisons are Helpful When Appropriate

The organizations that award nationally competitive scholarships and fellowships are reading a large variety of applicants, from hundreds of university contexts, majors, career goals, and experiences. Sometimes, comparative claims can help contextualize the applicant's strengths and fit with the award.

If you make comparisons, provide context about the comparison group (e.g. students in a class you taught or organization you manage) and your rationale.

You are welcome to use comparisons beyond the standard "top 10% of students I have taught," if other kinds of comparisons are helpful for your context.

Avoid Rehashing their Resume

Only include resume details if you have something specific or generative to add that will contextualize an experience you did not observe firsthand. Nearly all applications ask for either a resume/CV or have applicants input relevant academic, professional, and extra-curricular experience and achievements.

Repeating or narrating details from their resume where you do not have meaningful details only gives committees more to read, with less value-add—and can look like padding, which has the opposite intended effect.