

Office of Fellowship Advising Guidance on Composing Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are a critical component of successful applications for prestigious awards. Your letters offer important information for selection committees from the perspective of a faculty or professional mentor who can provide a candid assessment of a candidate's suitability for the fellowship. The insight you provide in a letter of recommendation cannot be gleaned from other application components, and strong letters of support weigh heavily in selection committees' consideration of candidates.

Considering Requests for Recommendations

When a candidate for a nationally competitive scholarship asks you for a letter of recommendation, please consider the following:

- After reviewing the selection criteria for the award in question, do you feel confident that you can compose a letter that provides strong support for the student?
 - o We suggest to our fellowship applicants that they furnish you with information about the award, and to share information provided by the awarding foundation that serves as guidance to referees. Further, we ask applicants to share resumes/CVs and relevant materials to assist you writing a compelling letter on their behalf. In addition, we encourage applicants to give their recommenders plenty of time to compose letters--at least three weeks in advance of submission due dates and, if possible, more than that.
- As your letter will play such an important role in the selection process for an award, **we encourage you to decline the request when:**
 - o You are not familiar enough with the student to provide a substantial letter for the award competition.
 - o In your opinion, the student does not have adequate preparation to perform the project they propose in their application or does not meet the criteria for the award.
- If you can't provide an applicant with a strong letter, you are welcome to offer advice on approaching an appropriate referee. Alternatively, we will work with the candidate to consider other recommenders.
- Occasionally, recommenders ask applicants to write their own letters. **We reject this practice** for the following reasons:
 - o Writing one's own letter of recommendation is unethical; the National Association of Fellowships Advisors Code of Ethics explicitly states that applicants should "Neither compose their own letters for faculty to sign (even at the request of faculty) nor ask faculty members to show them their own letters of recommendation."
 - Letters composed by the candidate violates the implicit agreement that it is providing the honest, accurate, unmediated opinion of the recommender.
 - o Asking an applicant to compose their own letter undermines their candidacy. Selection committees rely upon your professional opinion because they trust that your knowledge

can contextualize the applicant's standing among other high-achieving, outstanding students with whom you have worked. Selection committees trust you to situate your student among others to evaluate their prospects for future success. The application serves as the student's letter of recommendation for themselves. It is unfair to expect an applicant to compose a letter that will add relevant perspective and context that will advance their candidacy.

Composing Recommendations

- Review the materials the applicant provides you (e.g., information about the award, résumé/ CV, essay drafts, etc.)
- Letters are to be written with the specific scholarship/fellowship opportunity in mind, addressing the applicant's strengths, abilities, and experiences, as they relate to the award for which the student is now applying
- We suggest you start by providing context of how you know the applicant.
- Place the student in a larger context, providing a specific comparison (e.g., to other students you have taught or mentored, to other students who you know that have applied for or received the award to which they are applying).
- Quantitative remarks and/or percentages are incredibly helpful to selection committees, e.g., "this student ranks among the top 5% I have mentored, this student is among the top 1% in my 20 years of teaching undergraduates, etc."
- Questions to keep in mind as you continue to write:
 - o How did the student translate their coursework into research, internship, or other relevant experiences to other relevant areas?
 - o How have you seen the student grow—intellectually, personally, and/or professionally?
 - o Has the student demonstrated superior skills in areas relevant to the goals of the fellowship? E.g., leadership potential, service to community, academic and intellectual prowess and curiosity, research, verbal and written communication, commitment to the goals of the granting organization, etc.
 - o If you know of the candidate's personal qualities, how do they complement their personal, academic and professional goals?
 - o How do the candidate's experiences prepare them for the award for which they are applying?
- Aim to add new context only you can provide and avoid repeating information the reader will find elsewhere in the application.
- Letters should be between one and two single-spaced pages, signed and on departmental/organizational letterhead, when possible, and include your full title.