

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

# Tips for Writing a Scholarship Reference

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# Improving Scholarship Letters

- Does not mean embellishing or being dishonest
- Allows reviewers to properly evaluate candidate



# Low Quality Scholarship Letter (Assuming Strong Candidate)

- Very General
- Does not address all of the criteria
- Superlatives without examples
- Hard to find relevant information



# Assumptions

- Highly competitive
- Reviewers will be reading many, many letters
- It will be easy to frustrate reviewer



# Preparation

- Are you the right person to write this letter?
- Research the criteria on which the student will be evaluated
- Meet with student– are there relevant activities of which you are not aware?
- Obtain relevant documents (transcripts, CV, research proposal, etc...)
- Volunteer as a reviewer in another competition (read a lot of letters)



# Write directly to criteria

- Don't re-use a previous letter if criteria are different– Tailor to the competition
- Make it easy for reviewers to know what criteria you are addressing (Headings?)
- Read instructions for letter writers
- Can often download instructions for reviewers ([http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/\\_doc/Students-Etudiants/SelectionCommitteeGuide\\_e.pdf](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/_doc/Students-Etudiants/SelectionCommitteeGuide_e.pdf))



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*Investir dans les gens, la découverte et l'innovation*

## **Selection Committee Guide for Postgraduate Scholarships—Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowships Programs**

Table 1: Relative weightings of selection criteria

Selection criterion	Weighting %	
	Scholarships	Fellowships
Academic excellence	30	–
Research ability or potential	50	70
Communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities	20	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The following elements are examples of what should be considered in the evaluation of communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities:

**Professional, academic, and extracurricular interactions and collaborations with supervisors, colleagues, peers, students and members of the community**

- teaching, mentoring, supervising and/or coaching
- managing projects
- participating in science promotion, science/community outreach, volunteer work and/or civic engagement
- chairing committees and/or organizing conferences and meetings
- participating in departmental or institutional organizations, associations, societies and/or clubs
- industrial work experience

**Awards for papers, reports, posters, oral presentations, teaching, and/or volunteer/outreach work**



# Who is going to be reviewing application

- Experts?
- Non-experts?
- Both?
- Think about what reviewer will know, and what they will not know



# Emphasize Strengths

## Use anecdotes

- Provide context for awards (how many in competition, how imp't in your field, etc.)
- Draw comparisons to peers (how many peers over how long)



# Don't spend time writing about what is already obvious

- Things that are already obvious from transcript
- Things that the student has already described in detail
  
- What are you in a unique position to comment on (e.g. communication skills)



# Address obvious areas of concern– minimize concern

- Poor grades in certain classes
- Lack of publications
- Staying at same school
  
- But don't raise areas of concern, if they are not real concerns



# Write about importance of research

- Don't write about yourself (other than research environment)
- How will this research be received in the field?
- How will it affect others?
- Degree to which it will advance the field



# Potential of Student

- Independence
- Where do you see their future career going?
- Relative to others



# Specifics Trump Superlatives

## **Example 1**

- *[Weak] The applicant writes and speaks very well.*
- *[Average] The applicant's writing skills shown in her undergraduate thesis compare with mid-program Ph.D. students. Her speaking skills are highly polished as evidenced by her award for her talk at an undergraduate conference.*
- *[Strong] The applicant's writing skills are exceptional. She can provide drafts of manuscripts that are nearly publication ready with the most recent citations. They are concise with regards to content and still stylistically fluid. Her speaking skills parallel this. She gave a 20 minute talk at a national meeting where the audience included several international leaders in the field. Two of these scientists commented afterwards that her talk was superb.*



### **Example 2**

- *[Weak] The applicant made very good progress on a research project while working with a senior graduate student.*
- *[Average] The applicant developed a firm grasp of the project from the outset and advanced the work with minimal supervision. Problems were encountered and he would seek advice appropriately. He always came with a proposed solution rather than simply wanting answers. He is a natural researcher.*
- *[Strong] The applicant was given a challenging project. He quickly came up to speed on the relevant literature and, before the end of the summer, had mastered the different analysis techniques core to the research. He showed tremendous enthusiasm, often working extra hours so that the project could be completed before his summer was up. We will be submitting a paper to a top journal shortly with him as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, he ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.*



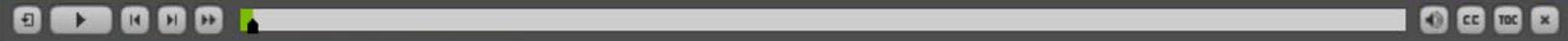
# Things to Avoid

- Generic letters– not personalized
- Similar letters for multiple students
- Summarizing application rather than providing additional information
- Jargon
- Supervisor instead of student
- Superlatives without examples
- Not commenting on potential
- Gender bias



# Bias in Peer Review

Canadian Institutes of Health Research  
Instituts de recherche en santé du Canada





## Evidence of Gender Bias by Linguistic Analysis

[11,12]

Researchers have found evidence of unconscious gender bias in recommendation letters. It is, therefore, important to evaluate each candidate's entire application, and not rely too heavily on only one element.

### Letters written for females

shorter

less focused on accomplishments

used more gendered terms

included more grindstone adjectives

included more doubt raisers

more references to personal life

### Letters written for males

longer

more focused on accomplishments

included more standout adjectives

more references to CV, publications or patents

-Trix F, Psenka C. (2003) Exploring the Colour of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty. *Discourse & Society*, 14(2), 191-220. doi:10.1177/0957926503014002277

-WISELI. (2012) Reviewing Applicants: Research on Bias and Assumptions.

## National Center for Women & Information Technology **P R O M I S I N G P R A C T I C E S**

### **Avoiding Unintended Gender Bias in Letters of Recommendation (Case Study 1)** Reducing Unconscious Bias to Increase Women's Success in IT



**Undergraduate**



**Graduate**



**Career**

#### **REDUCING UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION**

Consider the following when checking letters you write for bias.

- Focus on comparing the applicant with the requirements of the job.
- When describing stereotypically female traits, ask yourself if these characteristics are relevant to the job and if you are missing other strengths.
- Avoid overuse of gendered or grindstone adjectives.
- Avoid unnecessarily invoking a stereotype (“she is not emotional...”).
- Use title and surnames for both men and women instead of first names, unless using first name is standard in your field.
- While it is usually important to talk about the personality and interpersonal skills of the applicant, avoid overly focusing on them.



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