

Writing Letters of Recommendation for

Graduate School, Professional School, and National Fellowships and Scholarships

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GRADUATE SCHOOL

You possess the **disciplinary expertise** needed to evaluate a candidate within the context of the discipline.

- Does she have the perseverance to complete graduate studies in your field?
- Does he have the intellectual curiosity needed to ask unique, interesting, and important research questions?
- Does she have the potential to be an excellent teacher or practitioner?
- Has he conducted any research that would signal to you his ability to meet the research standards of your field?

Admission committees want to know about the student, almost exclusively, from the perspective of **academic achievement**.

- How did his written work compare to his peers, to the students you've had over the course of your career?
- What was she like in class? Did she participate, ask thoughtful questions, synthesize previous comments, offer unique insights, or show a particular affinity for the material?
- Did he conduct research? If yes, what was the quality of that work?
- Was any of it conducted independently? If yes, how much supervision did he need? How much initiative did he show?
- Was any of it conducted with a team? If yes, what role did he play in the group?

You can help the committee, and the student, if you can tell them about **the context within which the student completed this academic work**.

- Was her choice of coursework (in and out of your department) particularly rigorous?
- Did he succeed despite difficult circumstance (e.g., learning disability, full-time work, family obligations).
- Did she succeed in your area while simultaneously managing numerous other activities (e.g., a second major, honors program, leadership in a student organization, significant community service)?

Letters of recommendation for graduate school are all about your assessment of the **candidate's potential** using whatever evidence you have from your direct experience.

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

A letter for a professional school or a graduate program outside your discipline will contain much of the same information as suggested above. There are a few differences to consider.

- Instead of tailoring comments to the discipline, identify the general skills, abilities, and personal qualities the student will bring to any advanced degree program (e.g., research skills, critical/analytical skills, emotional maturity, perseverance, writing, oral communication, etc.)
- When you have the information to do so, focus on the experiences the student has that have prepared him for this particular career (e.g., internship, community service, work experience, job shadowing).
- If it's true, you might say that this is the type of person you want as your doctor, lawyer, etc.

Overall, all letters of recommendation are used to confirm what the committee has seen in other parts of the application (grades, test scores, personal statement, other letters). Does what you say reinforce, and possibly expand on, what they've seen elsewhere in the application? Do you say anything contrary or that raises red flags?

NATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

The information you provide in a graduate school letter is appropriate for this type of letter also. There are two additional considerations which can make your letter much stronger.

First, ideally, you will know enough about the scholarship/fellowship program that you can talk about how the candidate is a particularly appropriate candidate for the award. All fellowships value academic achievement. But some are particularly interested in leadership, community service, independence, sensitivity to cross-cultural understanding, commitment to a research career, commitment to public service, etc.

Second, the best writers for these letters are the ones who know more about a student than what you see in the classroom. Ideally, you know something about where she comes from, her long-term aspirations, and her character. You can do more than flesh out her resume, you can help tell her story and in doing so tell them why she is special—not just an academic success but a uniquely worthy recipient of this particular award. Remember, she isn't being compared to other strong students in your discipline but students from a wide range of majors, a wide range of schools, who possess a wide range of talents, experiences, and aspirations. It's not biologists to biologists but biologists to historians to chemists to teachers to economists to journalists to musicians.

Although no one really wants to read a long letter (more than two pages), I think fellowship application readers are a bit more indulgent—but not much.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT—“To write or not to write?”

I start from the premise that no one is obliged to write a letter on behalf of a student.

Few scholarships are one-shot opportunities (Truman is the exception) and graduate and professional schools can be applied for well after graduation. Therefore, I believe it is legitimate for you to say, “At this point, I don't think you are a strong candidate for this award (or graduate program or professional school). Here's what I believe you need to do in order to become a strong applicant. . .”

Academic work—to demonstrate knowledge, research skills, perseverance, seriousness of purpose

Professional experience—to demonstrate commitment to and knowledge of the career field

Community service—to obtain more “real world” experience, to broaden one's horizons

Language study—commensurate with what is needed to pursue a degree or experience