



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

# Writing Effective Scholarship References

## Top things the adjudicator wants to know:

- What is this person going to do?
- Is the research feasible?
- What will be the outcomes and their impact? Is it new? Who will care?
- Do I have a picture of who this person is?
- Is this a good investment?



## **Top Reasons Good Students Don't Get Funded:**

1. A generic letter of reference. The letter is positive but gives no specifics and does not address criteria.
2. Content, context and/or impact of research not clearly stated.
3. Not following instructions –i.e. addressing criteria, or stretching rules.
4. Frustrating evaluators by making material hard to find.
5. Diluting genuinely important/impressive material by describing generic material at length.
6. Not addressing possible weaknesses in the application.



## Know the Criteria for Selection

Each competition has their own set of criteria but, regardless of agency and regardless of discipline, the criteria do not stray far from:

**Academic excellence**

**Research ability or Potential**

**Communication Skills**

**Interpersonal and Leadership Skills**

Perhaps also:

**Research environment**

**Research fit with strategic themes**

*Help the student highlight how their achievements address criteria as this is what the committee must score on.*



A student you have some familiarity with has asked you for a letter of reference for a scholarship.

Before you start to write:

1. Know the nature of the competition
  - What are the criteria the agency is weighting?  
e.g. Vanier awards are 1/3 weighted to leadership.
2. Ask the applicant for information/interview them.
  - gives you more specifics on which to comment
  - makes your letter more personal
  - Allows you to see where the application is already very strong relative to the adjudication criteria
3. Set aside time to write a meaningful letter.

# Advice for a Meaningful Support Letter 1

- Think about the competition and the other applicants. Is this reference for admission to graduate school or for the top scholarship in the country?
- Think about the selection process. Will the application be reviewed by experts and non-experts in the field?
  - If non-experts, you need to more clearly explain impact of research and contributions.
- Think about the perspective of a member of the selection committee. You have dozens of applications to read/rank and 2-3x that number of references to read.
  - Address the criteria of the award
  - Be concise
  - Be specific
  - Give context
- Tailor the letter to the student in question. Do not use a generic boiler plate letter.



## Structure of a meaningful letter

1. Clearly state the context in which you know the applicant and how well you know them.
2. Group your comments in relation to the criteria of the award. You can even use headings to delineate this for the reviewer. This will likely include comments on their interpersonal skills and character.
3. Use your comments to complement the rest of the application. e.g. If the student has a straight A+ transcript and gave a great presentation in your class, use your space to comment on their communication skills, not the fact they have good grades. In a fair manner, note the applicant's weaker points.
- 4. Give anecdotes to support your statements.**
5. Point out key features of the application that may be missed by a reader.
6. Draw comparisons to their peers or, for the very best, their counterparts over the years.



**e.g. Comments on Communication Skills (Grad student)**

1. The applicant's communication skills are outstanding.
2. 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.
3. 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.



## e.g. **Comments on Research Ability (Senior UG)**

1. The applicant's research skills are the best I've even seen.
2. 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.
3. 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 her 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.

- The reference should meaningfully place the applicant in the context of the competition. It does not need to assure them receipt of the award.
- Specifics easily trump superlatives. Superlatives without support are meaningless.
- Committees have memories and professors can develop reputations for hyperbole. Conversely, other letters will carry a lot of weight.
- Committees are typically sensitive to cultural differences in writing letters but if you are not sure, you may want a colleague to read your reference for tone.
- Be mindful to use gender neutral language.
- If the student's applications demonstrates any weaknesses, you may be able to alleviate concerns of the committee if you can explain how the student has improved in this area.
- Make sure the reference corroborates the application (Papers submitted or accepted?).
- Adhere to the competition guidelines.

# Advice for Meaningful Support

- Clearly state the context in which you know the applicant and how well you know them.
- Group your comments in relation to the criteria of the award. You can even use headings to delineate this for the reviewer. This will likely include comments on their interpersonal skills and character.
- Use your comments to complement the rest of the application. E.g., If the student has a straight A+ transcript and gave a great presentation in your class, use your space to comment on their communication skills, not the fact they have good grades. In a fair manner, note the applicant's weaker points.
- Give anecdotal support to affirm your statements. Give more than adjectives. *Specifics trump superlatives.*
- Point out key features of the application that may be missed by a reader (presentation prize, departmental award). You may be able to provide specifics about these awards that emphasize their importance.
- Draw comparisons to their peers or, for the very best, their counterparts over the years.



## From a Current NSERC Scholarship Committee Member:

How to be a good supervisor to NSERC applicants:

- **Superlatives without specifics are white noise.** At this stage of the competition everyone is “highly motivated, self-driven, and passionate about research”. Give concrete examples for each. Demonstrate you know the student.
- **Speak to the criteria.** When reviewing proposals, read the instructions, then ensure each point is address explicitly. Repeat the language back. Use bold text to help the reviewer find this information.
- **Use plain language.** Expect the reviewer is a knowledgeable non specialist. Ensure the student communicates their research without jargon. Place the specifics into a larger context
- **Leadership is important.** Help the student emphasize things they have done that demonstrate their interpersonal skills. We do read and weight these sections.



From a Current CIHR Scholarship Committee Member:

Reference letters are 40%. Be sure the referees know the student, and know what they should be writing about  
Research environment

– what UNIQUE aspects of the environment will help student reach their research and training goals

Proposal specifics less important than student and environment



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Bias in Peer  
Review





Canadian Institutes  
of Health Research

Instituts de recherche  
en santé du Canada

Canada

<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/lms/e/bias/>



## Avoiding gender bias in reference writing

Got a great student? Planning to write a super letter of reference?  
Don't fall into these common traps based on unconscious gender bias.

### Mention research & publications

Letters of reference for men are 4x more likely to mention publications and twice as likely to have multiple references to research. Make sure you put these critical accomplishments in every letter!

### Don't stop now!

On average, letters for men are 16% longer than letters for women and letters for women are 2.5x as likely to make a minimal assurance ('she can do the job') rather than a ringing endorsement ('she is the best for the job').

### Emphasize accomplishments, not effort

Letters for reference for men are more likely to emphasize accomplishments ('his research', 'his skills', or 'his career') while letters for women are 50% more likely to include 'grind-stone' adjectives that describe effort. 'Hard-working' associates with effort, but not ability.

### We all share bias

It is important to remember that unconscious gender bias isn't a male problem. Research shows that women are just as susceptible to these common pitfalls as men. This is a problem for all of us - let's solve it together!

### Keep it professional

Letters of reference for women are 7x more likely to mention personal life - something that is almost always irrelevant for the application.

Also make sure you use formal titles and surnames for both men and women.

### Stay away from stereotypes

Although they describe positive traits, adjectives like 'caring', 'compassionate', and 'helpful' are used more frequently in letters for women and can evoke gender stereotypes which can hurt a candidate. And be careful not to invoke these stereotypes directly ('she is not emotional').

### Be careful raising doubt

We all want to write honest letters, but negative or irrelevant comments, such as 'challenging personality' or 'I have confidence that she will become better than average' are twice as common in letters for female applicants. Don't add doubt unless it is strictly necessary!

### Adjectives to avoid: Adjectives to include:

caring	successful
compassionate	excellent
hard-working	accomplished
conscientious	outstanding
dependable	skilled
diligent	knowledgeable
dedicated	insightful
tactful	resourceful
interpersonal	confident
warm	ambitious
helpful	independent
	intellectual

[https://wff.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/avoiding\\_gender\\_bias\\_in\\_letter\\_of\\_reference\\_writing%20copy.pdf](https://wff.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing%20copy.pdf)

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Commission on the Status of Women

Research from Trix, F & Psenka, C. Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. Discourse & Society, 2003; and Madera, JM, Hebl, MR, & Martin, RC. Gender and letters of Recommendation for Academia: Agentive and Communal Differences. Journal of Applied Psychology, 2009.



Follow us at: [www.facebook.com/uacsw](http://www.facebook.com/uacsw)

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- **Step One: Departmental Evaluation**
  - Screening and ranking of applicants by a Departmental Committee
  - People in your discipline who would know the jargon
  
- **Step Two: University Evaluation**
  - Ranking of applicants by Faculty of Graduate Studies Committee
  - For sure, a few people who are peripheral to or even outside your discipline

The university has a quota so you need to satisfy this second committee!

- Step Three: TriCouncil Evaluation in Ottawa
  - Awards based upon votes from a committee of researchers (academic, industry, government) in the discipline from across the country
  - \*\*Most will have only seen the application for 5 minutes\*\*
  - Each TriCouncil has a specific adjudication process:
    - NSERC [http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/doc/Students-Etudiants/SelectionCommitteeGuide\\_e.pdf](http://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/doc/Students-Etudiants/SelectionCommitteeGuide_e.pdf)
    - CIHR  
<http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/33043.html>
    - SSHRC [http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/merit\\_review-evaluation\\_du\\_merite/adjudication\\_manual-guide\\_comite\\_selection-eng.aspx#evaluation](http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/merit_review-evaluation_du_merite/adjudication_manual-guide_comite_selection-eng.aspx#evaluation)



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EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO IMPROVE

# Specific Comments on Communication Skills

- The applicant writes and speaks very well.
- 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.
- The applicant's writing skills are exceptional. He 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. His speaking skills parallel this. He 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 his talk was superb.

# Specific Comments on Research Ability

- The applicant made very good progress on a research project while working with a senior graduate student.
- 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.
- The applicant was given a challenging project. She 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. She showed tremendous enthusiasm, often working extra hours so that the project could be completed before her summer was up. We will be submitting a paper to a top journal shortly with her as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, she ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.