

What Makes for Strong Letters of Recommendation

*What follows are responses to an informal survey of Truman Scholarship selection panel members asking: What do you like to see in a letter of recommendation, and what leaves you cold?** These comments are pertinent to most letters for major fellowships. Of course, not every strong letter may be able to support the applicant in each of these ways. **But all strong letters provide a vivid sense of what distinguishes the applicant and suggest a number of questions that could be the basis of a productive interview.**

What helps:

- **Provide specific information about the applicant**—information that committee members can use to determine the applicant’s strengths and that will help shape an interview.
- **Provide some context of how the writer knows the applicant**—class, research, work, civic, or other context—and for what period of time the writer has known the applicant.
- **Show that the writer knows the applicant personally.** For example, incidents or actions that are unique to this relationship are more credible than information that could be gathered from the resume.
- **Point to specific examples of what the applicant has done.** (If the student wrote a brilliant paper, mention its topic and why it stood out. If the student did outstanding work in another regard, explain the nature of this work and its particular strengths, especially as they relate to the goals of the fellowship.)
- **Discuss why the applicant would be a strong candidate** for the specific fellowship. How does this candidate exemplify the personal qualities or selection criteria specified by the fellowship? Specific examples are crucial.
- **Indicate what particularly qualifies the student** for the course of study or project that the applicant is proposing. Such letters provide the links between past performance and what is proposed.
- **Place the student in a larger context.** For example, a letter could compare the present applicant to others who have applied for similar honors in the past or who have succeeded in such competitions. If possible, the student can be compared to graduate students or professionals. Quantitative remarks and percentages may be useful: “among the three best students I have taught,” “top 5% of students in my 20 years of teaching.” The strongest comparisons have the widest reach: “among the best in my x years of teaching” is stronger than “the best in his/her section.”
- **Draw on the remarks of colleagues** for supporting evidence or the acknowledgement of specific strengths. Letters from professors may also draw on the comments from teaching assistants who may have worked more closely with the applicants.

What hurts:

- Letters that are too short, that fail to provide specific examples or instances of points mentioned.
- Generic letters or letters for another purpose sent without regard to the specific fellowship, course of study, or project proposed.
- Letters that merely summarize information available elsewhere in the application or that only present the student’s grade or rank in a class.
- Letters that focus too much on the context of how the writer knows the applicant (descriptions of the course or its approaches) and not sufficiently on the student and his or her accomplishments.
- Letters that consist largely of unsupported praise. Kind words that do not give committees a strong sense of how applicants have distinguished themselves are not helpful.
- Letters that damn with faint praise. It is not helpful to say that a student did what might be expected (completed all the reading assignments) or that point to qualities (punctuality, enthusiasm, presentability) not germane to the fellowship.
- Letters that focus on experiences that happened quite a few years ago. Even letters from writers with long standing relationships with the applicant need to be as current and forward-looking as possible.
- Letters that may be read as implying criticism (beware of left-handed compliments) or whose criticisms might be taken to indicate stronger reservations than stated. Letters should be honest—and honest criticism, if generously presented, can enhance the force of a letter—but committees take critical comments very seriously. It is best to be cautious when making critical remarks and to avoid any sense of indirection.

With thanks to Mary Tolar, Deputy Secretary of the Truman Scholarship Foundation

Tips on formatting letters of recommendation:

- Address letters to the individual who chairs the fellowship committee, if that information is provided, or to the committee as a whole (“Dear Marshall Scholarship Committee”).
- Make sure the letter is dated and printed on department or other appropriate letterhead.
- Letters for major fellowships are usually 1 to 2 pages single-spaced.
- Close with your signature (in a color other than black to distinguish the original from copies) and your full title or titles (e.g., “Assistant Professor of Anthropology” rather than just “Assistant Professor”).

Other considerations:

- You may want to ask your students who else is writing for them and what the other writers are likely to say. You can then provide information in your letters that will complement what is being written by others, so that together the letters will provide a more comprehensive picture of each applicant.
- If you are called upon to write letters for two or more applicants for the same fellowship, beware of using too much of the same language in each, especially if they will be read by the same committee (e.g., the same Rhodes State Committee or Marshall Regional Committee). Such repetition weakens the force of your letters. If you have questions about whether two or more students are applying through the same state or region, please contact Laurie Bell, SIUC Major Scholarships and Fellowships Adviser, at lbell@siu.edu 618-453-3471.
- Although we encourage students to provide their recommenders with detailed information about themselves, the fellowships, and their proposed projects or courses of study, faculty should beware of leaning too heavily on such material for their letters, since students give much the same information to each recommender and following this material too closely can lead to letters that sound too much the same.
- If you have written a letter in collaboration with another faculty member, be mindful about how you and your colleague use subsequent versions of that letter. We want to avoid situations in which a student is represented by different letters with largely identical language from two different faculty members.
- When to say “No”:
 - if you feel that you cannot be emphatically positive in support of a student
 - if you recall little more about a student than the recorded grades
 - if you think that you are not the best person to write a letter
 - if a student approaches you in a highly unprofessional manner
 - if you simply do not have the time or material to write a good letter for a student.

You can help the student to consider other possible letter writers, but agreeing to write for a student whom you cannot strongly support is good for no one.

Before meeting with students to discuss possible letters, recommend that they consult our page on **Requesting a Letter of Recommendation:** http://www.siu.edu/~msc/letters_rec.html