

Recommendation Letter Guidelines

Recommendation and reference letters are key elements to a strong application. In their personal statements for various opportunities, students articulate their positive contributions to the College community and emphasize their strengths and readiness for the next role (graduate school, fellowship, or job.) Your letter validates and contextualizes many of these student examples. We hope the resources below will assist you as you think about ways to frame your relationship with and knowledge of the student.

Recommendation Letter vs Reference Letter

The main difference between the two is that a recommendation typically elaborates on the student's ability to do well and make meaningful contributions in an academic or professional setting, as demonstrated by their prior experiences and positive impressions they have made on the recommender. On the other hand, a reference letter focuses on the student's character, values and personal qualities as shown in specific evidence.

Talking to the Student in Advance

Many letter prompts ask for concrete examples that demonstrate the student's abilities. As you work with the student, you may wish to ask them the following questions to allow for you to write a specific letter. :

1. What course of study do you want to pursue? Why this fellowship? Why this graduate program?
2. Who else from Yale-NUS are you asking to write a letter? How do you view each of our letters fitting in with your larger application?
3. Is there anything you were hoping I could highlight specifically? If so, can you send me a few bullet points on this via email?
4. Can you send me your latest resume or CV and your personal statement for the program?

We ask that faculty to refrain from asking students to write a full draft of a letter for them. However, a healthy dialogue between student and faculty after the initial agreement to write a letter will be a great way to make sure the letter is specific.

Being Specific

Both graduate school and fellowship letters should be specific about the student's achievements. Providing background and examples that expound upon the students' stellar capabilities will support their candidacy much more effectively than making claims with no direct evidence.

For fellowships, your letter is a chance for the admissions committee to evaluate the fit and authenticity of the applicant. Therefore, a very specific and detailed analysis of the student in relation to the goals of the fellowship award will be most beneficial. To that end, CIPE encourages faculty to review the one-page document that outlines the goals of different fellowships. (See it [HERE](#)).

Saying “No”

In a small community, we get to know many students well. However, if you feel that you do not know the student well enough, have not worked with them long enough to confidently speak for their abilities, or do not have enough time to write the letter, please let the student know. A generic letter will not help and may even hurt their candidacy.

When talking to students who are applying for graduate school and fellowships, CIPE emphasizes that they should approach every potential recommender early and ask if they are comfortable writing a letter. Students are advised to leave room for “No” and expect it as a possible answer, for many reasons. This is also why you should not hesitate to decline a student’s request if you do not feel capable of writing a sincere letter of recommendation.

Regional Differences in Tone

Different academic cultures have different expectations in terms of tone.

A US-based institution often looks for a glowing commentary that compares the student favourably to their peers with positive, enthusiastic language, e.g. “one of the top 5 students I have had in my 15 years of teaching”, “in the top 5% of his/her class”.

This type of letter will fall flat for a British audience that is looking for an honest and direct commentary on the student’s capacity.

Avoiding Gender Bias

Studies show that gender bias in workplaces and recommendation letters (especially in the sciences) persists and that both male and female supervisors and recommenders can be affected without realizing it. Examples of subtle negative bias include: shorter letters, using too much passive voice to describe the candidate, and focusing more on their hard work than on their achievements.

A quick way to test your letter for bias is to change all the pronouns from “he” to “she” or vice versa, and read the letter out loud. If it sounds odd, chances are that the language used may be reflecting unconscious gender bias.

For helpful resources on avoiding bias, visit the CIPE Graduate School webpage [HERE](#) and scroll down to the “For Recommenders” section.

Guidance on Fellowship Letters from Peer Institutions

The [Yale Fellowships and Funding page](#) explains nicely some key points and takeaways in three sections: What Helps, What Hurts, and When to Say “No.”

Guidance from Fellowship Organizations

The Rhodes Scholarship provides funding to support academically exceptional students hoping to pursue a Master’s or PhD program at Oxford University. The New Zealand Rhodes office has guidelines for referees that provide advice specifically for the Rhodes. However, you should also review this document if you are writing a letter for applicants to other fellowships, as the guidelines still apply. (See it [HERE](#)).

The Schwarzman Scholars program supports global student leaders hoping to pursue a Master’s degree at Schwarzman College, Tsinghua University. They also provide a similar template (see it [HERE](#)).

Knowing the specific information needed by the admissions committee can be beneficial to ensure that all bases are covered in the materials we send in the process of recommending the student. For example, the Rhodes committee looks for candor on the student's weaknesses as well as articulation of their kindness or devotion to duty, while the Schwarzman asks for a cross-comparison of the student in relation to their peers and a commentary on their leadership abilities. We strongly encourage you to review these requirements on the fellowships' pages or, at the very minimum, to review the one-page document about fellowships (See it [HERE](#)).

Fellowships Guidance from an Expert

Have some time and want to read a bit more? Joe Schall is a highly recognized and well-reputed voice in the world of graduate school and fellowships advising. He has a helpful e-book entitled "[Writing Recommendation Letters](#)", which serves as a handbook for faculty recommenders. We encourage a quick read of [Chapter 3](#) for general tips and [Chapter 6](#) for information on writing a fellowships reference.

Sample Recommendation Letters

Below you can access sample reference letters from the Joe Schall e-book mentioned above. Schall made the letters anonymous for confidentiality purposes. These Mitchell, Fulbright, and Gates Cambridge letters were submitted on behalf of a student for specific awards in past application cycles.

[Fulbright Sample Letters from Joe Schall](#)

[Mitchell Sample Letters from Joe Schall](#)

[Gates Cambridge Sample Letters from Joe Schall](#)

- In the letters for Fulbright, you may note how the writer handles the conversation about national ambassadorial spirit and the ability to immerse in a new environment/country, which is a key concept for many of the fellowships awards (Fulbright/Rhodes/Schwarzman, etc.)
- The Mitchell letters present examples of how the faculty articulated their perspective on the students' leadership skills, the professor's view of her academic capacity, and the faculty motivation for selecting a student for an opportunity.
- The Gates letters showcase how the faculty's commentary can examine both the character and academic capacity of a student. The first essay is also an example of walking a committee through the shift in an academic trajectory and how that was a well thought-out process (one that a student of yours may also highlight in their personal statement, and that then becomes validated by the faculty contextualizing it.)

We hope that these samples can be a good foundation to understand the tone, length, style, and prose that these documents can have. However, please note that all graduate school and fellowships applications are closely monitoring the authenticity of the work. We ask you to use these solely for the purpose of reference and to please not modify or use any of the text when you write your own letters.

Other Resources

[Writing a Letter of Recommendation](#), by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and Burroughs Welcome Fund

[Writing Letters of Recommendation](#), by Yale Fellowships and Funding

[Avoiding Gender Bias in Reference Writing](#), by the University of Arizona

[Damning with Faint Praise](#), by Inside Higher Ed

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