

Writing STRONG LETTERS of Recommendation
University of Missouri
Fellowships Office

I. Collaborate with the Candidate

- Meet with student and make sure to get his/her résumé, *unofficial* transcript, and statement of purpose.
- Require a written description of program and/or evaluation criteria.
- Interview the student, asking him/her to describe not just the intended program, but to discuss personal objectives, both short- and long-term, a discussion that could well reveal alternate or additional pursuits for the student to consider.
- Find out who else is recommending the student and determine how your letter will complement others'.
- Urge the student to waive the right to read the letter, if that option is presented.

II. Use Material Specific to This Student and for This Purpose

- Know your audience and purpose—what criteria must a candidate meet to be considered for the award? (For example, Rhodes ≠ Fulbright and Marshall ≠ Mitchell.)
- Keep your focus on the student, not your course or your research, while providing a context for your knowledge of the candidate.
- Provide details about the student's achievements and the student's goals/intentions, for the intended program and long-term; "quantify" when appropriate (as in "___ is the most prolific undergraduate scholar I have mentored in 24 years at the University of Missouri, having authored or co-authored 12 articles before her senior year").
- Endorse the candidate's commitment to service and prospects for leadership/distinction in his/her chosen field.
- Revise and edit (don't be bashful about seeking assistance from colleagues and/or from the Fellowships Office).

III. Other Considerations

- Never take a request for a letter of recommendation lightly. If you are approached to write a letter and cannot in good conscience support the candidate, it is better to say no than to submit a half-hearted letter; another member of the faculty may have good reason to endorse the student's application.
- Balance praise with carefully stated criticism if appropriate.
- Comment beyond your field of expertise as you are comfortable, especially by describing transferable skills. Is the candidate
 - A leader?
 - Committed to serving the common good?
 - Willing to take on challenges and work diligently?
 - Deeply interested in conducting research?
 - An effective communicator (in speech and in writing)?
 - Creative in solving problems?
 - Able to work collaboratively?
 - Persistent?
- Try to demonstrate that the candidate is a doer and accomplishes what he/she sets out to achieve, connecting those accomplishments to the purpose of the program and, if possible, the criteria for evaluation. (See other side for sample terms to use.)

- **Employ specific terms of praise that demonstrate performance:**

Intellect	Work Ethic	Temperament	Vigor
imaginative	precise	good-natured	active
insightful	persistent	likeable	energetic
intelligent	resolute	considerate	self-starting
discerning	serious	affable	enthusiastic
knowledgeable	committed	patient	vigorous
original	orderly	tolerant	pace-setting
analytical	prompt	composed	eager
far-sighted	efficient	restrained	diligent
logical	responsible	earnest	zealous
skilled	persevering	bold	fast
astute	sure	gregarious	productive
adaptable	alert	polished	enterprising
resourceful	businesslike	adventurous	certain
self-reliant	thorough	team-oriented	speedy
thoughtful	confident	spirited	self-driving
judicious	tenacious	sociable	independent
perceptive	hard-working	open	ambitious
inquisitive	methodical	frank	on-the-ball
bright	determined	assured	industrious

Note: This list of terms is from Joe Schall at Penn State, who has written and presented extensively for faculty on writing letters of recommendation and for students (and their advisors) on writing personal statements.

For further information, please contact

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