

Prestigious Fellowship and Scholarship Opportunities**Writing Letters of Recommendation**

The following comments are applicable to most recommendation letters for major fellowships and scholarships*. Strong recommendations provide a vivid sense of an extraordinary applicant who has achieved as a student and as an individual. The letter of recommendation should demonstrate an extended teaching and mentorship acquaintance with an applicant over several years and courses, and imply discussions and questions that a reviewing committee might include in an interview with the applicant. Short, cursory “to whom it may concern” letters are perceived as “no comment” or negative recommendations.

As applicants represent not only themselves but the university and its faculty to the international community, we invite our highest achieving students to apply for these highly competitive opportunities for graduate study and research; the University Honors program offers advising and mentorship to these students to assure that they can well represent the University. Only students with excellent application packages, including essays and recommendations, are given University endorsements.

A high-achieving student has asked you, as a teacher/mentor, to write a recommendation for one or more of the top international competitive opportunities. As most of the awarding foundations require a university endorsement, the Provost’s office has designated the University Honors program as a conduit for coordinating and submitting recommendations and endorsements. To prepare a well-balanced application package, we suggest that each student’s recommenders serve as an ad-hoc committee to support that individual student; we advise each applicant to meet with each person from whom they request a recommendation and ask that each recommendation address a particular aspect or field of study that the applicant has pursued with the recommender. Recommenders are encouraged to meet with each other to coordinate appraisals of the student’s studies and activities that they will discuss in their individual letters. The Honors advisor will be happy to arrange and coordinate an informal meeting of recommenders upon request.

Each application for a major fellowship/scholarship is reviewed by a series of international panels and committees, which comprise recognized leaders in education, business, science, and the arts. As these are not specialty committees in any particular field, recommendations should be written for an educated lay audience.

The Honors advisor is available to review a draft of your recommendation letter; this review will better coordinate each student’s application to provide a full set of perspectives on the applicant’s studies, achievements, and potentials. If a University endorsement is required by the fellowship/scholarship sponsor, a complete package of essays and recommendations must be reviewed by the Honors office to expedite the endorsement.

What Helps

- Provide specific information about the applicant that review committee members can use to determine the applicant’s strengths and can use to 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. Incidents or activities that are unique to this relationship are more credible than information that is listed on the applicant’s resume.

- Point to specific examples of what the applicant has done. (Mention a student's brilliant paper, its topic, and why it stood out. Explain the advanced nature of a student's work and its particular strengths, especially as they relate to the specific 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 for future study and research.
- 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 should 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 and for acknowledgement of specific strengths. Letters from professors may also draw on the comments of staff teaching assistants who may have worked closely with the applicants.
- Identify and introduce yourself as the writer to give the committee some idea of your professional and academic status. Don't wait until the signature line at the end of the letter; you can use a short sentence or phrase at the beginning of the letter: "Mary Joe Smith is one of the top two students I have taught and mentored during my ten years at Harvard and twenty years at Texas State ..."

What Hurts

- Letters that are too short, that fail to provide specific examples or instances.
- 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 over-emphasize the context of how the writer knows the applicant (long descriptions of courses) and don't sufficiently portray the student and his or her accomplishments.
- Letters that consist largely of unsupported praise. Kind words such be supported by a strong sense of how applicants have distinguished themselves.
- 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 routine qualities (punctuality, attendance) rather than showing how a student exceeds standards 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 back-handed compliments) or

whose criticisms might be taken to indicate stronger reservations than stated. Letters should be honest; honest criticism, if generously presented, can enhance the force of a letter, but committees take critical comments very seriously. Be very cautious when making critical remarks and avoid any sense of indirection or diversion—an implied negative is can be cause for rejecting an applicant during the first cut evaluations for these highly competitive awards.

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. (Note, however, that some recommendations will be submitted as online text, not as .pdf or .doc files.)
- Letters for major fellowships are usually 1 1/2 to 2 pages, single-spaced, 11 or 12 point type; use a standard typeface (Arial, Times, Cambria, Verdana, etc.)
- Close with your signature (in a color other than black to distinguish the original from copies; give your full title or titles (e.g., “Assistant Professor of Anthropology” rather than just “Assistant Professor”).

Other Considerations

- Ask the applicant who else is writing recommendation letters and what the other writers are likely to say. You can then provide information in your letter that will complement what is being written by others, so that together the letters will provide a comprehensive picture of each applicant.
- Most scholarships and fellowships are moving to online submission of recommendations; some accept only online submissions. When applications open, each applicant submits the names and contact information for recommenders. Either the applicant or the awarding organization will contact recommenders with information, final due dates, and passwords for logging in to submit recommendations. The University endorsement can be expedited if the Honors advisor reviews your recommendation before submission. Be aware that websites are usually overloaded during the week before submission deadlines, resulting in substantial delays and sometimes rejections of submissions. Where possible, all applications, including recommendations, should be completed two weeks prior to the deadline announced by the awarding organization.
- If you are called upon to write letters for two or more applicants for the same fellowship, beware of using 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 the Honors Fellowship and Scholarship advisor.
- We ask applicants to provide their recommenders with detailed information about themselves, the fellowships, and their proposed projects or courses of study. Please don’t accept a “draft recommendation” that a student might offer with the intention of making your writing easier; committees are quick to disqualify applicants who draft their own recommendations. Students usually give the same information to each recommender; following this material too closely leads to letters that are very 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 an unprofessional manner;
- if you simply do not have the time or material to write a good letter for a student.

You can suggest that the student consider other possible letter writers. A weak, perfunctory recommendation usually results in an immediate rejection of a student's application.

- Before meeting with students to discuss possible recommendation letters, suggest that they consult the Honors postgraduate fellowship and scholarship page at <http://www.txstate.edu/honors/involvement/fellowships.html>

- The Honors Fellowship and Scholarship advisor can review a draft of your recommendation letter and offer suggestions for revisions that—through coordinated recommendations—will present a full set of perspectives on the applicant's studies, achievements, and potentials. This review will also allow the University endorsement letter to be framed as an overview rather than a repeat of individual recommendations.

Letters of Recommendation for UK and Irish Scholarships

Scholarships such as the Marshall, Mitchell, and Rhodes are extremely competitive, and letters of recommendation play an important role in a student's application. If you feel that you cannot write an unequivocally supportive recommendation for the student, please decline to write a letter at all. Also, if you do not know the student well enough to write a detailed letter, or if you simply do not have the time to write a detailed letter, please decline. Students asking you for a letter should give you information about the scholarship(s) for which they are applying, as well as copies of their personal statements, proposals of study and information about extra curricular activities. They should also have outlined, and preferably discussed with you, why they are applying for the scholarship and things they would like you to remember about them when you write your letter.

Wherever possible, give details or examples to support any claims made. Since all of these scholarships are looking for exceptionally well-rounded people, discuss a student's personal characteristics as well as his/her intellectual ability.

Unless a student is first in a class, don't state a class ranking. However, if a student could be said to be best, or among the best, in some particular way (the most insightful or imaginative in 15 years, for example), do say this and follow with a brief explanation.

On references for UK universities: the adjective "quite" does not connote "very" in British usage; instead it means "somewhat." British readers often question the credibility of unrelentingly glowing (and unsubstantiated) praise; a thoughtful qualification can make for a more credible letter of support.

Writing for the Gates

The Gates/Cambridge selection process calls for two different kinds of letters. Both should emphasize the suitability of study in the selected degree program at Cambridge for this student. If you are writing a recommendation for University admission, focus on the student's academic achievement and suitability to undertake the proposed course of study. The required recommendation for the Gates Cambridge Trust should present the broadest possible picture of the candidate including leadership potential, social commitment, and "any other factors relevant to the application. Leadership potential and a commitment to help society will be as important as outstanding academic merit in identifying and short listing the best candidates."

Criteria your letter should include:

- Exceptional achievement in academic studies;
- Evidence of potential to make a significant contribution to chosen profession;
- Potential to assert leadership in addressing global problems relating to learning, technology, health, and social equity (Gates Foundation's priorities).

You can find further information about the Gates, including profiles of current and past winners, at: www.gates.scholarships.cam.ac.uk

Writing for the Marshall

(Note: the Marshall online application systems will not accept letters longer than 1000 words)

Letters should address not only the applicant's intellectual and professional promise but also his or her potential to perform well in a program in the UK, where students are not likely to find as much support, encouragement, or on-going academic feedback as they have at Texas State. The Marshall Scholarships are intended to foster good relations between the US and the UK, and its Scholars are expected to be good ambassadors to the UK and to represent the UK well in the US. The scholarship is intended to be for people who will be leaders in their fields. Please comment on specific attributes of the candidate that are relevant to these considerations.

Criteria your letter should address include:

- Distinction of intellect and character as evidenced by both a student's scholastic attainments and by his or her other activities or achievements;
- Adequate preparation for the proposed course of study, particularly upper-level course work, and demonstrated strength in a major field;
- Ability to play an active part in the life of a United Kingdom university, and the potential to make a significant contribution to his or her own society.

The recommender should know the candidate well, believe the candidate is truly exceptional, be willing and able to write an outstanding letter (of 750 to 1000 words), and be able to testify to one or more specific experiences of outstanding accomplishment or performance by the candidate.

A strong letter will:

- Explain why the student stands out above others and why you have confidence in his/her personal and professional promise;
- Offer specific support for the appropriateness of the applicant's UK academic program and why he/she should study in the UK;

- Present your assessment of the student's character and what you know about the esteem in which others hold the student;
- Include detail about your personal connection with the student and his or her contribution to this relationship.

You can find further information about the Marshall, including profiles of current and past winners, at: www.marshallscholarship.org

Writing for the Mitchell

The mission of the Mitchell scholarship is "to educate future American leaders about the island of Ireland and to provide tomorrow's leaders with an understanding about, an interest in, and an affinity with, the island from which 44 million Americans claim descent." By tomorrow's leaders, the US-Ireland Alliance means not only political leaders, but also anyone who is likely to be a leader in his or her field. Mitchell Scholars are expected to be outstanding cultural ambassadors to Ireland, and it should also be clear that the applicant has the potential to perform well in his or her chosen Irish program of study, knowing that students are unlikely to find as much support, encouragement, or on-going academic feedback in an Irish university as they have at Texas State.

Mitchell Scholars do a lot as a group, and because there are only twelve of them each year, a student's ability to contribute as a member of a team is particularly important. At the same time, potential Mitchell Scholars must also be independent and able to fend for themselves, since each is likely to be one of only two awardees placed at a particular Irish university. Students with interests in Irish-European-US relationships and making people-to-people connections across borders have an advantage in the selection process. Please comment on specific attributes of the candidate that are relevant to these considerations.

Criteria your letter should address include:

- Demonstrated record of intellectual distinction, leadership, and extra-curricular activity, indicating a strong potential for future leadership and contribution to society;
- Honesty, fairness, and unselfish service to others;
- Strong preparation for the proposed course of study.

The recommender should know the candidate well, believe she or he is truly exceptional, be willing and able to write an outstanding 1½ -2 page letter, and be able to testify to one or more specific experiences of outstanding accomplishment or performance by the candidate.

You can find further information about the Mitchell, including profiles of current and past winners, at: <http://www.us-irelandalliance.org/>.

Writing for the Rhodes

As one Rhodes Selection Committee chair puts it, "We are looking for students who exhibit well-rounded excellence with a 'bulge'—some distinctive quality that really stands out from the many other excellent applicants." Thus, the most helpful letters provide detail not only about the applicant's general intellectual achievements but also what makes him or her a genuinely remarkable individual. Rhodes Scholars are expected to be good ambassadors to the UK and to represent the UK well in the US. The scholarship is intended to be for people who will be leaders in their fields and contribute to the well-being of others. It should also be clear that the applicant has the potential to perform well in his or her chosen program at Oxford, where students are unlikely to find as much support, encouragement, or on-going academic feedback as they have at Texas State. Please comment on specific attributes of the candidate that are relevant to these considerations.

Criteria your letter should address include:

- Proven intellectual and academic achievement of the highest standard;
- Integrity of character, and demonstrated interest in and respect for his or her fellow beings;
- The ability to lead, and the energy to use his or her talents to the full.

Rhodes Scholarship Committees are especially respectful of letters that are glowing and genuine, with concrete evidence to support the writer's assertions about the applicant. Since committees may be skeptical of letters that are too effusive or unqualified in their praise, recommenders are encouraged to take a forthright tone.

Thus, a strong letter will:

- Address only the criteria most relevant to your relationship with the student;
- Explain the significance of the student's particular achievements, beyond "just the facts";
- Address the applicant's strengths in applying for the particular Oxford course of study;
- Present the student as a prospective leader, one whose influence will extend beyond the professional realm;
- Where possible, offer concrete examples of altruism, activism, and service to others;
- Offer evidence that the applicant has the physical vigor and emotional resiliency to take advantage of opportunities offered and adapt resourcefully to unexpected circumstances;
- Not hesitate to mention areas in which there is potential for growth

The recommender should know the candidate well, believe she or he is truly exceptional, be willing and able to write an outstanding 1½ -2 page letter, and be able to testify to one or more specific experiences of outstanding accomplishment or performance by the candidate.

You can find further information about the Rhodes, including profiles of current and past winners, at: www.rhodesscholar.org

*The terms "fellowship" and "scholarship" are often used interchangeably. According to the Internal Revenue Service, a fellowship is to benefit "an individual to aid in the pursuit of study or research" and a scholarship is to benefit "a student at an educational institution to aid in the pursuit of studies". Thus "fellowship" is a broader term that includes both study and research, while "scholarship" is a narrower term that requires enrollment in a degree program at an educational institution and covers only study. To avoid repetitious wording, we use "fellowship" when referring to broader categories that include both study and research. If study in a degree program is the objective, substitute "scholarship" for "fellowship" as you read our descriptions.

For more information, contact:

John Hood

Honors College Fellowship and Scholarship Advisor

407 Lampasas | honors@txstate.edu | 512-245-2266