

Guidelines for Letters of Recommendation *Rhodes*

Letters of recommendation matter. Many foundations rely on them more heavily than any other element of an application, and they read them very carefully. Details matter.

Effective letters of recommendation present concrete, specific evidence that an applicant fits the selection criteria. It is helpful to tell the selection committee how long you have known the applicant and in what capacity. Then provide concrete, specific evidence of the applicant's achievements and qualifications. Letters should generally be between one and two pages, single-spaced (1.5 is about right). The most effective letters balance narratives about the applicant in action (in and out of the classroom) with thoughtful appraisals of character and potential. They show *and* tell in a way that demonstrates that the writer knows the applicant well and is genuinely impressed. This is not always possible, of course. There is a time and a place for a more generic letter; a fellowships application is probably not one of them. (Please say no if you can't write a genuinely positive letter!)

Your comments must provide *concrete evidence* of the student's superior intellect, integrity and leadership potential. Help the committee to discern the distinction of the student's accomplishments, and give your opinion of the student's prospects to lead and to enhance the scholarship's reputation. Fellowships applicants have been advised to provide all the information available to them: work they completed, comments you shared, conversations you shared. When possible, they should also supply details about their application(s), including drafts and relevant program details.

If you need more specific detail or ideas about what to include in a letter, please ask the student for more information, and/or contact the Fellowships Office. We are always happy to help.

Letters should be formally addressed to the Scholarship Selection Committee. Signed copies for internal deadlines can be scanned and emailed or delivered via campus mail. Having letters for the internal process is crucial to presenting our best case in awards competitions. Letters will always be held securely and in confidence. In many cases recommenders will upload letters directly to a student's application by the national deadline.

Thank you,

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Important Alert

Be aware that research has uncovered unintended gender bias in letters of recommendation. For instance, a study by [Trix and Psenka \(2003\)](#) examined 300 letters of recommendation for medical faculty positions and determined that recommenders unconsciously described candidates in stereotypically gendered ways:

- Men were more often described as “successful” and “accomplished” and letters for male applicants contained more repetitions of superlatives such as “outstanding” or “exceptional.”
- Women were described as “nurturing” and “compassionate,” and letters for female applicants contained fewer superlatives.

Letters for female applicants tended to be shorter and less complete or comprehensive. Letters for men were better aligned with critical selection requirements and used stronger language like “excellent research record” and “ability.” More subtly, adjectives intended to describe women constructively (e.g. “hardworking,” “conscientious,” “dependable,” “meticulous,” “thorough,” “diligent,” “dedicated,” and “careful”) often ended up having a damaging effect instead, possibly because readers inferred, for example, that the candidate worked hard to compensate for lack of ability.

This kind of bias is pervasive and unconscious, and Oberlin faculty members—male or female—are not immune. By being aware, however, we should be able to do better.

Unfortunately, although the research data on the prevalence of this bias is compelling, the “best practices” for letters are not necessarily obvious or well-studied. Given this situation, it makes sense both to check your letters for specific kinds of bias, and to develop a detailed sense of your own style to ensure its consistency. Be aware of the choices you are making.

Some things to consider:

1. What are your preferred choices for naming students? Mike Struthers? Mike? Megan Struthers? Megan? Mr. Struthers? Ms. Struthers? Miss Struthers?
2. How do you tend to use superlatives or other descriptive adjectives in your letters? When, where, and how often?
3. If you describe a candidate in more personal terms, avoid biased phrases. Avoid describing female candidates as sensitive, concerned, empathetic, team-oriented, nurturing, compassionate, or their near equivalents. Doing so is likely to hurt more than it helps.
4. If a candidate has demonstrated effective leadership, show the results. Do not feel as if you need to qualify or characterize a leadership “style” for men or women. Do mention initiative, creativity, innovation, originality, or technical prowess whenever appropriate.

Thank you for your effort! It can seem like writing these letters is an endless and under-appreciated part of the job, but it really does make a difference.