



## Writing Academic Reference Letters

Student Success Centre

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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While writing reference letters is a large part of the job of faculty and other professions, few individuals have training in letter writing. Skilled letter writing is typically learned through experience and exposure. One of the most enlightening experiences is serving on a faculty committee that evaluates these letters. Reading several samples, the strengths and weaknesses of letters become evident. Consequently, the best letter writers are often the most experienced letter readers.

Ideally the reference letter augments other common parts of applications: CV, personal statement/letter of intent, interview and transcripts. Letters of reference provide details about aspects that are not obvious on a curriculum vita or standardized test. Rather than solely relying on the applicant's self-reported accomplishments, reference letters offer more objective insights into the applicant's abilities.

## **MAKE STUDENTS DO THE WORK**

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Requesting material from students will ease the process of writing the reference letter. In addition to providing a minimum of 4 weeks' notice, sometimes longer with large grants, a student should provide their referees with the following basic information:

1. A copy of the student's academic curriculum
2. Information on the deadline; method of submitting reference letter
3. The purpose of the post/application and link

It may be helpful to request a copy of a final assignment and other documents that would have been assigned for your classes. Ideally, these would be copies with your final feedback on them. These documents can add detail to your general statements about the student's ability. Similarly other exceptional work (publication, posters, etc.) could be helpful. Moreover, you could request that students provide a list of accomplishments they are most proud of.

Finally, it may be beneficial to review all submitted material for the application, including letters, CV, and application documents. This will help your letter fit the rest of the application. You may wish to know who else is writing the reference letters, allowing you to focus on a particular ability of the student. By reading the other documents in the application, you can avoid redundancy.

### **Additional Information to Request**

1. What type of document is required? A letter of recommendation (all positive information) or a letter of reference (where there is an implied evaluation).
2. A summary of the application and the organization requesting it.
3. What values or insights are requested or valued by the organization? This information is critical for both the student and referee, as it will help anticipate what information is important to the reader.

### **SHOULD I WRITE A REFERENCE LETTER?**

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Referees should have a candid conversation when they are unable to write a strong letter of support. Ask yourself: *Am I in the position to comment on X's capacity to get into Y?* Consider that even a neutral letter can be damaging to the student's application.

#### **Examples of letters that are a disservice to the student:**

"Now forgive my ignorance I do not know exactly what position Moe is applying for in your organization or what your organization does..."

"I recognize the scholarship is looking for outstanding students that are leaders in their community. In my 2 years of knowing Sandy, I have seen him engaged only sporadically on campus. I have seen that he struggles in social settings, especially when working in team environments. I know he is working hard to improve this, but I feel that this makes him a weak candidate for the scholarship."

When declining to write a reference letter, use this as an opportunity to explain to the student the reasons. It may also be helpful to understand why the student selected you as a referee. What interactions or key events did the student think were important to this application? Since students interact with fewer faculty members than vice versa, they may have a better recollection of interactions and can help to spark your memory.

FOIP NOTE: All faculty and staff at the University of Calgary are required to get written permission from students before providing a letter of reference. A sample reference request letters can be found under "forms" at

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/legalservices/foip/policies-procedures>.

Faculty members should retain a copy of the agreement.

Confidentiality and reference letters: Students can request to see their letters of reference according to UCalgary access and privacy offices.

## **KEY FEATURES OF A REFERENCE LETTER**

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Most letters follow a common structure. They tend to start by asserting the credibility of the letter writer, followed by the evaluation of the student, which is reaffirmed in the last paragraph. It is important that letter writers follow the guidelines of the application. However the length of the letter is typically one to one and a half pages maximum.

### **First Paragraph: Your relationship with student and your expertise**

In the first lines of the letter, offer information that supports your ability to evaluate the applicant:

- Outline the purpose of the document: Who is writing the document and for what purpose
- Include how long you have known the student and in what context
- Describe your position briefly; stress the context and frequency with which you interacted with the students. When the relationship between you and the student might seem limited or not directly appear to the application, consider discussing why you were chosen to write this application. For example, *where did you first meet the student? Have you known the student as professor and/or in other functions? How long have you known the student?*

The following illustration demonstrates a typical layout of the reference letter.

 <b>UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY</b>	<b>FACULTY NAME (uppercase)</b>  Department Name 2500 University Drive NW Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4 ucalgary.ca
Date	
Addressee name	
Organization name	
Address	
City, Postal Code	
COUNTRY	
To the Hiring Committee :	
I am very pleased to write in support of Susan Mackenzie's application to your position as Writing Advisor. She would be an excellent fit. I met Ms. Mackenzie while in her first year of undergraduate in the rhetoric class at the University of Calgary. Subsequently, we developed a rather unusual academic relationships which speaks highly of her degree of professionalism and ability to be very competent in several areas.	

The following illustration demonstrates weak and strong first introductory paragraphs of a reference letter. A strong example is when the referee introduces the candidate and explains in what context they first met, and the length of time they have known one another.



**FACULTY NAME (uppercase)**

Department Name  
2500 University Drive NW  
Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4  
ucalgary.ca

November 1, 2015

3M National Fellowship  
260 Dalhousie St., Suite 204  
Ottawa, ON, K1 N 7#4

To the Hiring Committee

**Examples:  
Paragraph 1**

***Weak***

I am writing to endorse Constantine Murphy's application for the 3M National Fellowship. Ms. Murphy has been a student in two courses I taught in the past academic year: LIT 101 and LIT 202. These are second year courses for Linguistic Majors. Ms. Murphy has performed exceptionally well in these courses, and has shown clearly an interest in, as well as aptitude for scholarship in linguistics. I am very pleased to recommend her to you.

***Better***

It is my pleasure to write on behalf of Ms. Murphy's application for the 3M National Fellowship. I was a member of Ms. Murphy's supervisory committee for her fourth year honors thesis. Her research is on track and she is coming up with some interesting findings. I am delighted to commend her to you as one of the ablest young scholars I have encountered in some 22 years of teaching. She has an inquisitive mind. I am very pleased to recommend her to you.

***Best***

I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for Ms. Murphy's application for the 3M National Fellowship. I provided this letter as Ms. Murphy's supervisor for an upcoming undergraduate summer research project through a SSHRC award, and her former instructor of LIT 102 (Linguistic Fundamentals). I have known her for approximately 8 months. Of the 5,000 students I have taught over the past twenty-two years, Ms. Murphy is in the top 5% of the group.

The 3M National Fellowship is geared towards students who have done exceptionally well in a senior course. As Ms. Murphy's lab instructor for her current class, LIT 510 in the winter of 2014 in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Calgary, she performed above average in the class, and did well in the lab component of the above mentioned course.

## Body Paragraphs: Assessment of Student

In the body of the letter, the reader expects an evaluation with concrete examples that support the student. When determining the content of this section, two key factors should be considered: *What information is useful or important to the reviewers? What aspects of the student's ability are you in a position to evaluate?*

What to include:

- Outline the quality or aspects of the student's performance discussed in the first sentence of the paragraph. You may wish to have multiple paragraphs to separate academic quality from general behavioral quality.
- Include a ranking of the student in reference to other students in their cohort or classes. This will help to ground your evaluation. Ideally, include a brief reference to some quantitative example that doesn't heavily rely on repeating information in the transcripts.
- Refer to a particular situation, assignment, or project that demonstrates this quality to further clarify your evaluation.

<b>Examples: Paragraph 2</b>	
<b><i>Weak</i></b>	Although Cindy has been without our team for a relatively short time, she clearly demonstrates her capacity to understand and contribute to research as well as effectively connect with the participants. Cindy is often described as meticulous, efficient and patient. She understands the importance of ensuring that the data she enters is valid and demonstrate this through her work precision.
<b><i>Better</i></b>	Cindy is an articulate, patience, and hard-working student. Within the classroom content of our class, she has demonstrated critical thinking skills and an ability to tailor other communication skills to meet the needs of her client. Cindy is a caring, genuine, respectful and visionary in the areas that she presents for discussion. She shows the promise of a student that can represent not only the Faculty of Nursing, but also the University of Calgary, and the nursing profession.
<b><i>Best</i></b>	Although I have known Cindy for a considerably short time, I have been impressed with several important facts of her performance that attest to her professional and scholarly development. As her class professor and clinical supervisor, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Cindy for the first semester of the nursing program, in which she has introduced to the community nursing practice, critical thinking, decision making, and team building. In the first component of the course that I taught Cindy, she was one of eight nursing students who were situated in a community setting with a small group of women who had recently immigrated to Canada. Cindy demonstrated a mature and open approach to learning and communication in team working and within the meeting with the community members. In two other components of the course that I taught Cindy, she studied and worked with peers on joint presentations. Cindy is becoming proficient in basic skills that are taught to students at this beginning level of nursing education.

**Body Paragraphs: Prompting Questions:**

Academic-Oriented Skills:

- How would you rate the applicant’s intellectual characteristics? What situations have you seen them demonstrate creativity, analysis, or logic? How does the applicant deal with complex or abstract material?
- How has the student demonstrated their preparedness for this new experience? What experiences does the student have with research, methods, or other skills needed?
- How would you rate the student’s ability to communicate their knowledge? What situations or examples demonstrate this ability? Have they been to conferences, presented posters, or submitted publications? If they have participated in prestigious events, please note this.

Behavioural Skills

- How would you describe the individuals’ skills or strength? What situations where they presented in? How did these skills result in their success? What growth or improvements have you noticed?
- How would you rate the students industry or self-discipline? What example have you observed that demonstrates their motivation and diligence? Is the student aware of their strengths and weakness?

**Example of adjectives to describe applicant behaviors**

<b>Category of Behaviors</b>	<b>Commonly Used Adjectives</b>
Interpersonal Behaviors	Good-natured, accommodating, congenial, likeable, cooperative, generous, friendly, personable, patient, sincere, placid, respectable, earnest, engaged, tactful
Intellectual Ability	Imaginative, insightful, knowledgeable, intelligent, quick to comprehend, inquisitive, discerning, perceptive, original, analytical, farsighted, intellectual, bright, astute, informed, logical skills, wise, adaptable, well-rounded, resourceful, self-reliant, thoughtful, judicious, astute, adaptive, innovative
Communication/ Expression	Social, fastidious, adventurous, refined, expressive, open, assured, precise, clear, concise, articulate, poised
Motivation	Hustling, active, energetic, self-driving, rigorous, self-stating, speedy, quick, enthusiastic, diligent, productive, independent, enterprising, ambitious, industrious, persistent, determined, eager, proficient
Ethics/ responsibility	Methodical, determined, resolute, serious, detailed-minded, orderly, prompt, efficient, critical, calm under pressure, compassionate, independent, involved, reliable, committed, accurate
Level of experience/skills	Accomplished, concreted, completed, completed, conceptualized, discovered, developed, delivered, designed, directed, enhanced, exceeded, established, generated, implemented, instituted

**Final Paragraph:**

The last paragraph is typically the shortest of the letter and features a restatement of your support for the applicant.

- Reaffirm your support for the applicant. Consider using language such as whole-heartedly, without reservation etc.
- Invite the committee to contact you if they have further questions or concerns.

The following are three common closing statements for inclusion in reference letters:

- I am therefore very pleased to be able to recommend [name] for...
- Based on my time working with [name], I recommend her very highly for...

<p><b>Examples: Conclusion</b></p> <p><i>Weak</i></p> <p><i>Better</i></p> <p><i>Best</i></p>	<p>Charles is an individual of exceptional talents. He most certainly has a bright future ahead. There is no doubt that this young man will do well in the challenges that lie ahead. I wish him a most prosperous future. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.</p> <p>Based on Charles’ commitment to helping others, his strong interpersonal skills and self-motivation, I strongly urge you to consider him for the scholarship. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.</p> <p>Charles has a great deal of leadership potential and is already on the road to success, academic and otherwise. Not only would his professional and personal growth benefit from the support and guidance of the Scholars Academy community, given his drive and enthusiasm, Charles is very likely to make positive contributions to his peers. As such, I support his application whole-heartedly. I would be happy to communicate with you directly should you require additional information or have any questions.</p>
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## RED FLAGS

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While most letter writers aim to help their students succeed, they may inadvertently create a negative reaction for the readers. Try to avoid the actions listed below.

- ***Distancing language:*** When letter writers use language that distances or qualifies their assessment of the students, readers tend to see this as implicitly negative. By highlighting their limited ability to speak about the students; the writer is reducing the credibility of their assessment. Reconsider phrases like “to the best my knowledge” and “as far as I know.”
- ***Ambiguous negative content:*** When choosing to include negative material, it is important that this information is very clear. When negative information is briefly mentioned in passing or is alluded to, readers tend to assume the worst. In particular, they imply that the writer is trying to warn them about something important. If you choose to include negative information, it is recommended that you are detailed and explain why you included this information in the letter.
- ***Failing to address poor transcripts:*** While negative information is difficult to include, failing to address poor grades in transcripts, specifically those where you were the instructor, can also be problematic. It would be helpful to clarify the situation and be as objective as possible.

## WORD CHOICE AND STYLE

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- ***Superficially positive letters:*** A common critique of reference letters is that all students seem to be exceptional. As a result, positive statements are given little weight on their own. A glowing letter that says generally positive things about the students is received poorly. In part, this is because excellent, brilliant and other normally positive adjectives are subjective and thus open to individual interpretation. The following are samples of vaguely positive statements to avoid:
  - Good, solid, fine work
  - She is one of the most intelligent students I’ve ever taught
  - I can’t object
  - The student is a sure thing
  - The student is competent
- ***Avoid qualifiers:*** While modifiers or qualifiers can detract from letters of support, unfortunately the majority of letter readers will interpret qualifiers and implicitly negative statement. Below are a series of phrases with and without qualifiers.

<b>With Qualifiers</b>	<b>Without Qualifiers</b>
The student generally performs well.	The student performs well.
The student tends to score above average	The student scores above average.
The student mostly engages with course material	The student engages with course material

- **Acknowledge cultural differences:** There are also differences in the levels of formality used, particularly between American and British letters. For example, a British committee is likely to expect a balanced letter, where an American committee could negatively view a listing of flaws. It is therefore helpful to know whether the letter will be reviewed by a North American committee.

### **Co-authoring Letters of Reference: TA, RA, Instructors and Coordinators**

As large class sizes continue to be the norm, it can be difficult to write letters for students with whom you have had little interaction. One solution may be to co-author a letter with a teaching assistant or other colleague, who may have had more contact with the student. Co-authorship allows for the individual with more contact with the student to address the details of the student's skills; it allows the more senior faculty member to support the evaluation by adding the weight of their reputation and status. This is an ideal learning experience for future faculty members who will move into positions where they will become the sole author of letter of references.

When drafting co-authored letters, the preferred pronoun is we.

### **Writing multiple reference letters**

For prestigious scholarships with a small evaluation committee, you may also need to be aware that writing letters of support for more than one applicant could negatively impact both students' applications. In these circumstances, adjudicators will likely compare your letters of support are likely to be compared to determine, seeing which applicant you favor more strongly recommend. Furthermore, copied letters with similar phrases will also be seen as a negative evaluation of the students.

The following is an example of how a professor skillfully commented on two students from the same class:

Having by now taught seven students who have been admitted to the program, and written on behalf of a handful of so far unsuccessful applicants, I am very pleased to write this year on behalf of two wonderfully strong applicants from this year's class. I would rank them in the top 15% of students for whom I have written for this award, and the top quarter of students who have made it in.

With 60% of the final grade accounted for, Student A stands second in the class, a mere one percentage point behind Student B. student A has stood out in his contributions to life of the class. He is always ready to be the first to contribute and to keep a discussion progressing fruitfully, and does so in the spirit of his palpable and exhilarating enthusiasm for life and learning.

To return to a theme sounded at the outset: I think that both Student A and Student B would be outstanding recipients of this award. If you decide that you can only pick one of them, I can't give you an overall preference of my own. The best I do is to say that intellectually, Student B is perhaps a shade further on than Student A: while Student A's social skills and leadership potential are second to none.