How to Write a Scholarship Reference Letter

by Lisa Higham (with revisions by Saul Greenberg)

About the Author

From 1991 to 1994, Lisa Higham served on the NSERC Engineering and Computer Science Scholarships and Fellowships committee, chairing it in her final year. Subsequently, she served on the Alberta Heritage Scholarships Committee for 3 years and then the Alberta Ingenuity Scholarship committee. She also evaluated theses recommended for the NSERC Canadian Doctoral prize and for the Engineering Canadian Prize. These committees have given her plenty of exposure to every imaginable style of reference letter, so she felt that she could offer the following advice on preparing letters of reference for students who are applying for scholarships or other competitive positions.

Your Job as Referee

HIGHLIGHT THE STRENGTHS AND EXPLAIN THE WEAKNESSES OF THE SCHOLARSHIP APPLICANT

How to do it

It is critical to WRITE about the student. Some applications provide a form for you to rank the applicant on several attributes. These forms allow for further (sometimes "optional") comments. You will seriously disadvantage your applicant if you do not give comments to support your evaluation. No matter how strong your applicant, there will be others with equivalent ranking and grades etc, but with some exceptionally strong comments particular to her. These will certainly strongly influence the committee.

Most committees ranking scholarships have specific criteria that they look for in every application. These criteria should be addressed in your reference letter. Ideally, you should use clearly labeled headings to emphasize each criteria. For example, in 2005 NSERC provided the following table of criteria to the scholarship committee on how they should rank MSc students (PGS M), PhD students (PGS D), and Postdoctoral students (PDF). While the committee may be able to judge academic excellence from transcripts and research ability from publications, it is usually only the reference letter that talks about research potential, about oral and written communication skills, and about interpersonal & leadership abilities. If you omit these, the student will likely receive a very low rating in these areas. See the last page of this form for further details from NSERC about these criteria.

TABLE II - Relative Weightings			
	PGS M	PGS D	PDF
Academic Excellence	50	30	15
Research Ability/ Potential	30	50	60
Oral & Written Communication Skills	10	10	10
Interpersonal & Leadership Abilities	10	10	15
Total	100	100	100

Support your claims with evidence that is as specific and concrete as possible. Rather than "this student has great research potential" (which presumably says nothing more than the ranking you just gave) write (for example):

> "George completed an undergraduate project on ... under my supervision. During this project he uncovered a substantial error in .... and was able to suggest a correction. After an additional summer of work on the problem, we jointly published ... , which describes new results in ... that were inspired by George's undergraduate work."

Do be clear about the size and level of comparison groups, and don't inflate your rankings. A list of "outstanding" evaluations for all attributes will be highly suspect. This can only fly if your written comments clearly and extensively support it.

Deal openly and honestly with shortcomings. It is common to see a record with a poor start in first year or one lousy term. Explain it if possible. Point out the improvements. State what the student did to overcome problems. For scholarship applications, it is crucial that you explain GPAs or other criteria that are lower than the standard expected for the scholarship (this assumes that they can be explained, e.g., the student took an exceptionally heavy course load, etc). If they are not explained, it is unlikely that the application will succeed.

Committees seem to be looking more and more for the "extra" excellence of a student, often demonstrated by extracurricular activities. Volunteer service or participation in community activities should be acknowledged. Anything that highlights communication skills is important. Personal hobbies or sports should be mentioned but not overemphasized. When all else is equal, these qualities will tip the scales.

The application must be neat, clean and readable. A messy application sends the signal that the applicant either doesn't care or didn't take enough time --- neither will the committee. Similarly a hand written scrawl for a reference letter sends the message that the referee doesn't think this applicant is worth much time.

Even if you use the same general comments for several letters for the same student, you should direct your letter to the specific committee by editing the "to" field.

You might ask students for whom you are writing an evaluation to supply information that will make your job easier. I always ask for a CV, a draft of the research proposal, the student's academic record, and a personal statement that includes career goals, interests, and non-computing activities. I also instruct the student to come back at a prearranged time to ensure that I have done my letter.

Rationale

If a student asks you to write a letter, that student is putting their trust in you that you will do a diligent job. A badly written reference letter for a good student will have as much (or more) impact as a bad grade. Of course, it is important to be honest and complete. The scholarship committee is also putting their trust in you to help them make their decision.

Remember that deciding between applicants is incredibly difficulty, as normally only students who have achieved some measure of excellence apply. The committee looks at your reference letter as a true critical appraisal.

TABLE 1: SELECTION CRITERIA AND INDICATORS FOR PGS & PDF, Competition 2005 **FORM 200**

CRITERION	INDICATORS	EVIDENCE
Academic Excellence	Academic record	• University Transcripts
	Duration of previous studies	• Page 1 - Academic background • Page 4 - Thesis completed or in progress
	Scholarships/awards (competitiveness, amount, duration and prestige)	• Page 5- Scholarships and other awards table
	Departmental/University ranking and comments	• Appendix 2 - Parts II and III
Research Ability or Potential	Academic training and relevant work experience (co-op included)	• Page 1 – Work experience • Applicant's statement • Appendix 1
	Justification for location of tenure	• Page 3- Justification for location of tenure(TA)
	Contribution to research and development (publications, patents, reports, posters)	• Page 4 – Thesis completed or in progress • Articles published • Most significant contributions to R&D • Applicant's statement • Appendix 1
	Research Proposal (feasibility, merit and significance)	• Outline of proposed research
	Critical thinking, application of knowledge, judgement, originality, initiative, autonomy, enthusiasm for research	• Applicant's statement • Appendices 1 and 2 (Parts II and III)
	Ability to complete projects within an appropriate time period	• Page 1 – Academic background • Page 4 – Thesis completed or in progress • Appendix 1
Oral and Written Communication skills *Note: Consideration must be given to applicants whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, depending on how long the applicant has lived in Canada.*	Awards for papers, reports, posters or oral presentations	• Page 5- Scholarships and other awards (e.g., presentation of best paper at a conference)
	Quality of presentation of application	• Outline of proposed research • Justification for location of tenure (TA only) • Applicant's statement
	Participation in publication writing (e.g., statement of contribution)	• Most significant contributions to R&D • Appendix 1
	Rating and detailed evaluation of applicant	• Appendices 1 and 2 (Parts II and III)
Interpersonal and Leadership Abilities	Professional and extra curricular interactions and collaborations with supervisors, colleagues, and peers (e.g., teaching, mentoring, supervising, project managing, chairing committees, organising conferences/meetings, elected positions and industrial work experience)	• Page 1 – Work experience • Applicant's statement • Appendix 1
	Rating and detailed evaluation of applicant	• Appendices 1 and 2 (Parts II and III)