

Advice to Faculty:
Recommendation and Endorsement Letters
For
National Fellowships and Scholarships

Keep in Mind:

- Letters are a critical component of the application package.
- Most fellowships require three letters; some as many as eight; most strict limit; Boren 2 + optional 3rd.

Format:

- Signed, on letterhead, and uploaded or sent in hard copy.
- Form with specific questions downloaded, filled in and uploaded.
- Cut and pasted into online application portal (not on letterhead) – Marshall, word limit.
- Some have word limits, character counts.
- For highly competitive fellowships (e.g. the Marshall, Rhodes, Schwarzman – general expectation is 2 full, single-spaced pages).
- In general, one, full single-spaced page.

Timing:

- Fellowships' deadlines – firm.
- Internal deadlines – may be month earlier so that recs can be reviewed by campus committees – usually need to see recs to make decisions about endorsement.
- Preliminary and polished stages – depending on timing, I may want to see “content only” recs for internal deadline, and polished recs by later deadline.

Content: Does the candidate fit the fellowship? Speak to that!

- Examples: Marshall (Ambassador, Academic, Leadership); Boren; Udall; Fulbright (ETA)
- No matter what the requested format is, every fellowship will provide good information about what it wants to achieve (student requesting the letter of recommendation should provide this information).
- Okay for a letter writer to be able to address only two out of three desired characteristics, as long as the letters collectively cover the sought qualities.
- A student who cannot find recommenders able to attest to the desired qualities may be pursuing a fellowship that is not a good fit for him or her.
- Check that both the name of student and the fellowship are spelled correctly.

Content--Common Components of Letters:

- Description of how writer knows the candidate (how long, how well).
- Evaluation of his or her scholarly work and suitability for future academic plans.
- Commentary on how candidate fits fellowship aims: character, personality, leadership, and professional goals.
- Comment on and support claims in essay.
- Comparison to other students in the writer's experience.

Content--Claim and Proof:

- Superlatives are great but only if substantiated and specific to

applicant.

- Many fellowships support graduate study – committees want to know if student can handle the level of study and is well suited to the program – detail about his/her coursework/research helps here; for others, academics matter for other reasons – Boren (study abroad); Udall.
- Statistics – some writers, especially with a long history of teaching, can helpfully “rank” a student.

Content - What to Avoid:

- Letters should supplement, not summarize what is already in the application (The student should provide drafts of application essays to the recommender.)
- Resume reviews or summaries of her many A’s are not helpful, unless the writer can add context to it. (If relevant, include tough grading in the course or the college; talk about difficulty of doing X/Y/Z activity.)
- Writer’s credentials – some background is helpful, some misses the point of the letter (highlight the student). If the recommender has had the award that the student is applying for, however, mention that.
- Assurances that the student met the basic standards of the course/internship.
- Tag lines – “if you want more information, call me.”
- Negative comments. But, if such comments must be made, they should be contextualized as "room for growth, but student is aware and working in this area." The key is to demonstrate that the student has the work ethic to overcome deficiencies and to contextualize any academic or other shortcomings.

Advising Students about Choosing Recommenders:

- Seek writers who can speak to most recent academic work and accomplishments. (If you don't think you are the best person to write the letter of recommendation, please tell the student.)
- Choose writers who know you best over writers who have the most impressive credentials.
- Consider any special requirements of each letter and find the right match (Marshall, Goldwater, Truman all have stipulations, as do some others).
- Among non-faculty writers, make sure they have the capacity to write an impressive, convincing letter.
- Make sure writer is willing/able to get the letter in on time.
- Find those who can independently attest to your work (student org advisor who can discuss in detail what you did to lead an organization).

Advising Students about Requesting Letters:

- Begin the conversation informing the potential writer about the fellowship, its criteria, and why he/she wants to apply.
- Always ask, "Do you feel that you could write me a strong letter at this time?"
- Specify what "angle" she seeks from the letter by this recommender,
- Ask for the letter, giving 3-4 weeks' notice, and clear instructions about submission.
- Make sure student provides the recommender a draft of personal and grant purpose statement, along with a resume and a list of courses with dates that the student had with recommender.

Recommendation vs Endorsement Letters:

- Both discuss the student's attributes in light of the fellowships' aims.
- Format for both can be signed, letterhead, Q&A form, or cut and paste online doc; most have word limits.
- Who writes it? Foundations will make requirements clear.
- Writer must carefully review packet of letters, student's resume, transcript, and think about what to highlight that has been said (try not to borrow someone else's bon mot), what to point out that hasn't been said, and explain any problems or anomalies.
- Provide institutional context – don't assume they know your institution.

Providing Institutional Context:

- Every application reviewer will have an idea in his mind about well-known institutions. It may be right or wrong. They may know nothing about yours. And they likely won't know details such as the structure of student orgs, the opportunities for research, the political/social climate of the institution.
- Briefly describing the general attributes of your institution will help put the candidate in context.
- Letter may need to describe a drawback about opportunities on your campus in order to highlight how significant your student's accomplishment is!

Consider explaining Academics/Location/Climate/Awards:

- What is a standard course load?
- What is required for writing a thesis/capstone?
- In your candidate's department, is writing a thesis/capstone unusual?
- How difficult is it to design a special major?
- Is it common/uncommon to double-major, have a minor, add a certificate?

- Where does candidate's GPA fall in relation to the rest of the class? In her major?
- How available are research opportunities (sciences, humanities, social sciences)?
- Are awards plentiful at your institution? In candidate's department? What are criteria?
- Is special effort needed to take courses at neighboring institutions?
- Do you have a graduate school?
- How easy is it to get an internship?
- What opportunities exist for volunteer service on/off campus?
- How hard/unusual is it to take a stand about X political, religious, social issue?

Where to Find Information:

- Webpages (descriptions of programs)
- Institutional Research (demographics, statistics)
- Registrar (GPA spread)
- Service Learning, Religious Life

Information Courtesy of The National Association of Fellowship Advisors (NAFA) 2015 Workshop