The Marshall Scholarship

Preference for the Marshall Scholarship is given to those students of high academic ability, mature character, and the capacity to play an active part in the life of their host United Kingdom University. Students must argue as to why their studies and proposed career would be best served by study at a UK University. Only the best students who apply will make it beyond a school’s internal selection committee to the regional review panel interviews, where about 130 students are interviewed out of 800 applicants, for about 40 awarded scholarships. Therefore, it behooves both the student and letter writer to work together closely and be sure that they have a good match. If you cannot be fully positive and detailed in support of a student, encourage the student to seek an alternative reference.

As instructed by the Marshall application, your college or university uses an internal review committee to designate one of the student’s references as the “preferred reference” and another as the “secondary reference.” If you are the preferred reference, it is especially vital that your letter is detailed, frank, and focused on the student’s academic performance and potential. Also, as the “preferred reference,” you should make it a point to review the student’s proposal.

Writing the Marshall Scholarship Recommendation

Criteria to address in a Marshall Scholarship recommendation letter include:

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

The selection committee is helped enormously by letters that are frank, concrete, and informed. Amplify on such matter as the student’s contribution to your relationship, the potential of the student in post-graduate life, and even how the student fares when measured by standards outside the context of university life. Additional detail that will enrich a student’s application includes an assessment of what others think of the student; the student’s self-esteem; your view of the student’s character; your confidence in the student’s professional future; your opinion of how the student would benefit from the Marshall Scholarship.

A common tendency in weak Marshall letters is to rely solely on a summary of the student’s performance in one class or a cursory review of the student’s transcript. Another common problem is dwelling on the student’s intellect and GPA. Keep in mind that about 75% of the finalists for the scholarship have GPAs of 4.0 or about (with A+ grades), so academic excellence is assumed.

The two sample Marshall Scholarship letters below provided are interesting to compare to each other, in that they are written for the same student but with different focuses. The first letter reaches deeply into detail about the student as a musician even citing pieces he performs on the piano, and discusses the student’s personality and character at great length. The second letter is more subdued in tone but equally emphatic, referring to the student as “a true Renaissance man.”
Both letters end on a note suggesting that the award of a Marshall Scholarship to this candidate would be, as the second letter puts it, a “mutual honor.”

The Role of Critique in a Marshall Scholarship Recommendation

Reading the highly positive sample Marshall letter, you’ll find the phrase “If I have any concerns about John’s future possibilities…” followed by commentary about potential limitation of the student’s background. This is in keeping with the desire on the part of scholarship selection committees—particularly those including evaluators from Great Britain—to read a credible evaluation letter mindful of the student’s weaknesses as well as strengths. Though most writers hedge about making even subtle negative comments, selection committee members rely on your candor.

Commenting on this issue in a 2004 listserv among members of the National Association of Fellowships Advisors, a fellowship advisor and member of the Marshall Scholarship selection committee had this to say: “…unless we attempt to promote a collective effort to avoid hyperbole and address genuine weaknesses honestly, it is going to difficult to scrape off the patina of perfection that often covers a candidate’s dossier.” In plain terms, as an evaluator, you are urged to exude good will but by all means tell the truth.


SAMPLE MARSHALL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION

November xx, 20xx

I am pleased to transmit to you the Marshall Scholarship application of a most extraordinary person, John Lerner, a senior in our Engineering Science curriculum.

The engineering science curriculum at Mythic University in an honors program that, in its inception, pre-dates the University Scholars program. It is a program whose rigor normally inspires students to stretch out their academic career by scheduling less-than-full loads. John Lerner has taken the opposite approach and attacked this program at full tilt. In every semester that he has registered at Mythic University he has taken at least the maximum number of credits permitted, if not more. One spring semester he took 20 credits, an overload of one, of which 12 credits or four courses involved honors work—a commitment above and beyond the standard syllabus. In addition to requiring rigor beyond that contained in an already rigorous program, the engineering science honors program also requires an honors thesis. Working with two of our professors, John has undertaken a program of senior-year research on the heterojunction of amorphous and crystalline silica, e.g., materials for solar cells, that is of a publishable caliber.

In the current Fall semester, John has maintained his impressive pace. A graduate course in applied mathematics jostles with a performance course in piano. Normally, the latter is restricted to majors in piano performance, but his ability led to the exception. These courses are
accompanied by two advanced courses in semi-conductors (transistors, solar cells, and the life),
his honors thesis, and a course in the Old Testament.

John’s approach to academics has a surprising consistency with something he said about himself
with respect to his talent as a pianist. In discussing his choice of the First Movement of
Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 as his competition piece for soloist for the Johnstown
Symphony in Pennsylvania, he admitted that it was a popular, if not overdone piece. But
responding to a question about choosing something more academic or esoteric, he said that “it’s
crashing chords” and broad sweeps appealed to him, that they revealed his nature. Instinctively,
and instantly as he spoke, his hands reached out, fingers spread, to reply to those chords. His
headlong fling at his coursework matches this view of his nature.

John suspects that his piano talents may have some bounds, but is confident that he has ample
talent to pursue a career in music rather than obvious successful engineering career predicted by
his grades. Aware that he carries within himself two academic successes, two potential careers,
he has been reading and studying above and beyond anything required by Mythic University to
help him to understand himself and, thence, to map and project the contribution that he can make
in the future. The program of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics that he has planned is ideal
for him. Without losing touch with his applied science background, the program will help him to
understand and, thus, to voice the complexities of today’s world. He is ready to contribute.

He senses that solar cells, on which he is working for a senior thesis, represent a passive
technology that can by used for betterment in the Third World without the cultural disruption
associated with more active technologies such as mechanized farming. He is intelligent enough
to know, however, that even solar cells—batteries that are never used up—can produce
disruption to some societies. He has said, and it is more than credible, that the answers for him
will come out of philosophy, political science, a dose of economics, and even a strong lacing of
theology.

Pleasant in demeanor, quiet in his approach, yet quick to smile, there is nonetheless firmness in
his purpose and steel in his resolve. It is eminently clear that John Lerner means to contribute of
himself in a selfless and substantial way. This giving is more than the ordinary charities that are
automatic to his agrarian and Mennonite background (the gathering of crops for the less able or
the provision of succor for the less well)—he is searching for the tools that will consolidate his
interests into a platform for the doing of good that is expected of him by his traditions.

If I have any concerns about John’s future possibilities, they are that he has so recently entered
the traditional academic and social world. Coming from a farming and Mennonite family in
Pennsylvania, John began his college career at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg,
Virginia. Pursuing mathematics and science at EMC, he began to sense his dual career
possibilities. A music teacher there, according to John, opened an ordinary talent into an
extraordinary one. At the same time, he became intrigued by engineering and fashioned his
move to Mythic University. Both engineering as a field and Mythic University were well
beyond the wall of his upbringing. He is firm in his tradition and his faith, but, clearly, he wants
to wed the best of what he is learning from beyond the cloister with the simple benevolence of
his culture came later to him than they do to others. Music and dance are newcomers to the
Mennonite tradition; he began his piano lessons only in the fifth grade (at age eleven). He reads to understand his own religion and those associated: Quaker, Shaker, etc. As he discusses what he knows of his background, he assumes a fragile solemnity, as if to say, “Do not find this trite, for it is too important to me to be so,” when he suggests that it is a Shaker axiom “to do the common things uncommonly well.”

The award of a Marshall Scholarship will ensure that John Lerner will do uncommon good.

Sincerely,
Janet Teacher
Janet Teacher
Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Vice Provost

SAMPLE MARSHALL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION

February xx, 20xx

Recommendation of John Lerner for the Marshall Scholarship

It is my pleasure to recommend Mr. John Lerner for selection as a Marshall Scholar. In my six years of association with Mythic University, I have not come to know a person as uniquely qualified as he is for the prestigious scholarship award.

I know John through both the formal contact of the classroom and research laboratory and the informal interaction of extracurricular and social functions. His exceptional competence, thoughtfulness, originality, and interest have shown brightly in each of these environments.

His performance in an Engineering Mechanics course I teach to sophomore honors students ranked at the top of the class. The course was rapidly paced and design-oriented, providing a genuine test of a student’s capability for using conceptual knowledge as a basis for devising solutions to practical problems. In two other courses I taught in the materials sciences, which also included a laboratory component, John demonstrated an innate ability to understand and use the diverse subject material. His term projects were well-researched, well-organized, and lucidly written. His oral presentation of the work to the class exhibited his ease in communicating technical information in a clear, concise, and interesting fashion.

John’s level of interest in his academic studies transcends the limited perspective held by students who view education as mastering only a defined amount of topical material and securing high grades for that accomplishment. The Engineering Science major is an honors curriculum, diverse in its subject coverage, and demanding in the accelerated and advanced (often abstract) approach to engineering education. John clearly enjoys the challenge of this creative program. He is secure in the knowledge that by sincerely applying his intellect through diligent, conscientious work, he will excel. And most certainly, he is an example of an excellent honors student.
I also served as a faculty adviser for a team of students who designed an experiment to be conducted during flights on the space shuttle. John took an active role in this project, which had as its only reward the knowledge gained and the satisfaction of completing a task. The experimental apparatus was conceived, designed and constructed by the students. Necessary research, funding and planning were managed by the team members.

In less structured forms of interaction, John’s exemplary character, vigor, and integrity have also been evident. A self-awareness and thoughtfulness shine in his conversation, discussion, and informal debate; a willingness to consider all sides of an issue and to then confidently take a stance. He is well-liked and respected by his peers, and interacts with them easily. Growing up on a farm has instilled in him a love of nature and the outdoors, as well as a respect for physical work. While at department outings in the park playing football and other sports, his athletic skill, strength, and coordination are as evident as his enjoyment. He loves music deeply, and is professional in both his demeanor and his quality of performance. Generous in spirit, he has invited me and others in the department to his piano recitals so that he might share with us his delight in music.

John is a complete person—a true Renaissance man—possessing an ability to see his talents and goals within the philosophical framework of one striving for excellence and a meaningful purpose in life. He is a rarity—a balance of extraordinary talents with a sincere responsibility to use these talents wisely and generously. His scope of interests is broad, but his strong sense of direction and careful setting of priorities will prevent his multidimensionality from interfering with his success.

I believe, without reservations, that John will contribute to the Marshall Scholarship program more than he takes from it. He will surely make his mark in the world without the experience, but he has shown that he deserves encouragement and support. What a mutual honor it would be for this extraordinary refined, bright, and original young scholar to become part of the Marshall Scholarship tradition!

Sincerely,

John Teacher
John Teacher
Associate Professor
Department of Engineering Science and Mechanics