Tips for Letter Writing
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National/International Fellowships & Scholarships
Office of Faculty and Organizational Development

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Scholarships and Fellowships

• Undergraduate Awards
  • Goldwater, Udall, Hollings, Boren, and others

• Graduate Awards
  • Rhodes, Marshall, Gates Cambridge, Boren, Churchill, Truman, NSF GRFP, Beinecke, and others

* Have interest in a particular scholarship? Contact us, if not covered by us we can point you to the appropriate office.
NIFS Resources

- Assist students in developing and submitting applications
- Experience working with the nuances of individual scholarships/fellowships
- Knowledge of the preferences of external scholarship committees
- Conduct internal assessment of students for endorsed scholarships
Endorsed Scholarships

- NIFS works with student to develop internal application
- Internal application is assessed by a faculty panel
- Student is informed if they have been endorsed or not
- If endorsed, student works with NIFS office to make committee suggested changes
- Final student application is sent by NIFS office to scholarship

* Note: the Boren scholarship/fellowship is not an endorsed scholarship but students must go through the internal process to receive a ranking used in the Boren’s decision
Letter Format

• Address letter to fellowship committee
• Begin by providing context of how you know applicant
• Letter should be dated
• Type on professional letterhead
• 1-2 pages single-spaced (unless told otherwise)
• Close with signature and full title(s)
  • i.e. Assistant Professor of Economics (not: Assistant Professor)
Who should be writing the letter?

• If the scholarship asks for an academic letter:
  • Letter should be from a tenure-track faculty
  • Graduate student/post doc can write the letter but must be endorsed by a professor

• Students should not be writing their own letter
  • Tend to over/under sell abilities
  • Lack professional writing skills
  • If needed, ask student for additional information you need to write the letter
What elements make a strong letter

• Provide *brief* context about who you are and how you know the student

• Quantifying
  • Rankings: i.e. “top 1% in all students ever taught”

• Supportive examples

• Applicable characteristics/qualities
  • Provide examples and connect how these attributes will/have made the student successful
Strong words to use when applicable

- Leader
- Fortitude
- Maturity
- Demonstrated potential for graduate school
- Passion
- Commitment
- Collegiality
- Overcoming adversity
- Change agent
- Creative (innovative, entrepreneurial)
- Curious
What elements weaken a letter

• Heavy focus on your class or personal research

• Low rankings
  • i.e., “top 1% in a class of 15 student”

• Personal/gender biased statement
  • i.e., describing a female student as nice

• Statements without supporting examples

• Leading with a negative story to demonstrate growth

• Not addressing specific scholarship/opportunity
Common mistakes to avoid

- Mentioning incorrect scholarship or student
- Incorrect university and/or graduate program
- Not using letterhead
  - Never send the letter in the body of an email
- Late submissions/missed deadlines
  - Speak with the NIFS office → an extension *may* be available
Common Questions

1. Should I show the student the letter of recommendation?

That is up to you. Remember, even if you do send the student your letter, you must submit the letter personally.

2. What if my graduate student knows the student best?

You may have the graduate student write the letter, but it should be endorsed and signed by both of you.
Common Questions

3. What if I have negative information about the student that I would like to discuss in the letter? For example, the student only asked me to write the letter two days before it was due.

Say no. Although NIFS can provide tips on who/how to ask, it is ultimately the students responsibility. If you feel like you cannot write a strong positive letter for the student tell him/her no.
Common Questions

4. If the program I led was intensive and needs to be explained in more depth, how can I do this while focusing on the student’s achievements?

You could discuss what the student did in the program. For example, if there was something required by the program how did the student go above and beyond that expectation.
National/International Fellowships and Scholarships (NIFS) Office

1. Go to the NIFS homepage (http://nifs.msu.edu)

2. Click “Letter Writers” to access information about specific scholarships
The National/International Fellowships & Scholarships (NIFS) Office

We are located in Bessey Hall, room 186.

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