

# Tips for Scholarship Applications Including Writing Reference Letters

By Dr. George Shimizu

A student you have some familiarity with has asked you for a letter of reference for a scholarship.

Before you start to write:

1. Know the nature of the competition
  - What are the criteria the agency is weighting?  
e.g. Vanier awards are 1/3 weighted to leadership.
2. Ask the applicant for information/interview them.
  - gives you more specifics on which to comment
  - makes your letter more personal
  - Allows you to see where the application is already very strong relative to the adjudication criteria
3. Set aside time to write a meaningful letter.

# Criteria for Selection

Each competition has their own set of criteria but, regardless of agency and regardless of discipline, the criteria do not stray far from:

**Academic excellence**

**Research ability or Potential**

**Communication Skills**

**Interpersonal and Leadership Skills**

Perhaps also:

**Research environment**

**Research fit with strategic themes**

# Advice for a Meaningful Support Letter 1

Think about the competition and the other applicants. Is this letter for admission to graduate school or for the top scholarship in the country?

Think about the selection process. Will the application be reviewed by experts and non-experts in the field?

- If non-experts, you need to more clearly explain impact of research and contributions.

Think about the perspective of a member of the selection committee.

You have dozens of applications to read/rank and 2-3x that number of letters to read.

- Address the criteria of the award.
- Be concise
- Be specific
- Give context

*Never assume someone is a shoo-in for an award.*

# **The Selection Procedure (TriCouncil –NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR):**

## **Step One:**

### **Departmental Evaluation**

**-Screening and ranking of applicants by a  
Departmental Committee**

**-People in your discipline who would know  
the jargon**

## **Step Two:**

### **University Evaluation**

**Ranking of applicants by Faculty of  
Graduate Studies Comm.**

**For sure, a few people who are peripheral  
to or even outside your discipline.**

**The University has a quota so you need to satisfy this second committee!!!**

# **The Selection Procedure (TriCouncil –NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR):**

## **Step Three: TriCouncil Evaluation in Ottawa**

**Awards based upon votes from a committee of researchers (acad, ind, gov) in the discipline from across the country.**

- **Each application is pre-reviewed by two members of the committee prior to the meeting in Ottawa (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> readers). Each member will have to read ~100 applications and prepare a BRIEF summary.**

- **Each application is discussed for 4-5 minutes divided into a 2 min summary by the 1<sup>st</sup> reader, a 1 minute comment by the 2nd reader then 2 min for questions comments by the remainder of the committee (4-6 people).**

- **Each member votes independently on three criteria and the scores are then weighted by criteria and averaged.**

**\*\*Most will have only seen your application for 5 minutes\*\***

- **Ultimately, a ranked list is produced and a line is drawn where the budget runs out.**

## Advice for a Meaningful Support Letter 2

1. Clearly state the context in which you know the applicant and how well you know them.
2. Group your comments in relation to the criteria of the award. You can even use headings to delineate this for the reviewer. This will likely include comments on their interpersonal skills and character.
3. Use your comments to complement the rest of the application. e.g. If the student has a straight A+ transcript and gave a great presentation in your class, use your space to comment on their communication skills, not the fact they have good grades. In a fair manner, note the applicant's weaker points.
4. **Give anecdotal support to affirm your statements. Give more than adjectives.**

*Specifics trump superlatives.*
5. Point out key features of the application that may be missed by a reader (presentation prize, departmental award).
6. Draw comparisons to their peers or, for the very best, their counterparts over the years.

## e.g. **Specific Comments on Communication Skills**

1. The applicant writes and speaks very well.
2. The applicant's writing skills shown in her undergraduate thesis compare with mid-program Ph.D. students. Her speaking skills are highly polished as evidenced by her award for her talk at an undergraduate conference.
3. The applicant's writing skills are exceptional. He can provide drafts of manuscripts that are nearly publication ready with the most recent citations. They are concise with regards to content and still stylistically fluid. His speaking skills parallel this. He gave a 20 minute talk at a national meeting where the audience included several international leaders in the field. Two of these scientists commented afterwards that his talk was superb.

## e.g. **Specific Comments on Research Ability**

1. The applicant made very good progress on a research project while working with a senior graduate student.
2. The applicant developed a firm grasp of the project from the outset and advanced the work with minimal supervision. Problems were encountered and he would seek advice appropriately. He always came with a proposed solution rather than simply wanting answers. He is a natural researcher.
3. The applicant was given a challenging project. She quickly came up to speed on the relevant literature and, before the end of the summer, had mastered the different analysis techniques core to the research. She showed tremendous enthusiasm, often working extra hours so that the project could be completed before her summer was up. We will be submitting a paper to a top journal shortly with her as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, she ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.

## General Comments

1. The letter should meaningfully place the applicant in the context of the competition. It does not need to assure them receipt of the award.
2. Specifics easily trump superlatives. Superlatives without support are meaningless.
3. Committees have memories and professors can develop reputations for hyperbole. Conversely, other letters will carry a lot of weight.
4. Make sure the letter corroborates the application. (Papers submitted or accepted?)
5. Adhere to the competition guidelines.
6. For high level awards, there is no reason to give any aspect of an application the benefit of the doubt.