

Goal

A truly great recommendation letter is a letter that sticks with you after you've read it, not one that fades quickly from memory. I think it sticks there because it's able to tell that reader something that no one but you is able to tell them about the student for whom you're writing.

The committee is already going to know the “what” of a student's accomplishments – they can get that so easily from the CV.

What they can get from you is the “how” and the “why” behind those accomplishments. How is it that a student tackles a particular problem? How is it that their mind works in ways that are special to them? Why is it that they are motivated to do the research they're doing? Why is it that they will bring something of tremendous value to the program for which you are recommending them? These are the things that are going to be much harder for a student to say about themselves.

Indeed, they might not even know these things about themselves, but you know them, and these are the things that are going to make your letter really stand out among other letters and that the committee will be the most interested to hear from you because only you can tell them these things.

Scholarship Recommendations vs. Other Types

The letter of recommendation for a scholarship should look quite different than the letter of recommendation for graduate school. A letter of recommendation for a scholarship is usually supposed to touch on several points. For instance, the student's leadership ability, or maybe their involvement with extracurricular activities, or maybe their promise in a certain area or in a certain discipline, or maybe a certain kind of research skill, or some certain trait that's specific to the person who's funding the scholarship.

I think the primary difference that when you're applying for a job and writing a letter for a student who's applying for a job, the reader wants to know can that student do the job right now. If you're writing a letter for a student who's applying for a scholarship, the reader wants to know: Does the student have the potential to grow over the time that he has the scholarship? Then you have to understand what the student is applying for. Are they applying for research, for one of the national or international kinds of scholarships? All of these scholarships have very different kinds of requirements, and it's good for you to really understand which qualities the scholarship committee is going to be trying to tease out of that application: leadership, research experience, broad and maybe very focused and narrow academic experience. These are the kinds of things that you should know.

Before You Write

Gather Information

I gather information from two sources. The first source is the student himself or herself. I ask them for a résumé, for the information that they sent to the scholarship people, or planning to send to the scholarship people. The second place that I gather information is from the website of the scholarship or the scholarship organization.

It's also important to know what the criteria are that this group might use to make a selection. And be sure to address both the values of the funding agency and the criteria in the letter.

You have to the path for the student ahead of time. If the student has had a meaningful experience, and it was sort of something that changed the student's goals, especially if there's something address about the student's achievements, grades, path of study, or career path in the letter, go ahead and take that opportunity. It will be exciting for the person reading the letter.

If You Don't Know Student Well

If I don't know the student very well, I will be honest with them and tell them, "I'm not the best person to write this letter of recommendation for you. You need to find someone who knows your work very well." If the student is not able to find someone else, I often will say to them, "I'm willing to write a letter, but it won't be

as strong as a letter from someone who has worked with you directly day in and day out.” If you give them that offer to, to write a letter as a back-up person also give them a deadline. Say, “I’m going to need two, two weeks to write this letter, so be sure you come back to me and let me know with plenty of time to write.”

Brainstorm with that student about who are other faculty or staff members here on campus that they’ve interacted with -- who perhaps the student has known longer or in a capacity that would more adequately describe and have experiences with those criteria. Now if they come back, if the student comes back and requests again that I be of assistance with this. It is important to note that there will be some limitations based on the level of interactions that we have had or we haven’t had; to where there will only be certain things that I’ll be able to speak to versus someone else who might have had more involvement.

Outline, Notes, Talk to Student

What I do is usually write an outline, take some notes regarding the student and how I -- based on the experience and my interactions with the student throughout the years -- have seen those qualities and characteristics come across. What areas of our interactions should be highlighted as well for the letter? What makes them a good candidate for that scholarship in their own words? Perhaps I ask the student for suggestions on what they would like to see me focus on, things that I have first-hand knowledge of them having

done through their time at Purdue. That helps me see what they're focusing on. Sometimes perhaps there are things that I have forgotten. And sometimes there may be things that I remember that they may not have included as well. Then it is my responsibility to ensure that I can express that in my own words and make sure that I put it within my perspective, um, based on the feedback that they've provided . . .

Structure

It's really critical to me to zero in on that student in the extreme particular. It always begins with when I met the student, how I came to know the student, and what first struck me about that student. It [the letter] then explains what kind of potential I saw in that student at the time, and where I felt they were going. Then it heads into a description of what they have actually done here, and it pulls up some bits from the CV and highlights them. I transition into what the student wants to do next. So, ideally it's a narrative that's going to pull all the way through the student's career at Purdue: from the time that they arrived here, how they developed, under what pressures they developed, and what they want to do with the energy they've accumulated while they were here during this time.

I ask myself what's the most striking thing about the student for whom I'm writing, what's the thing that most leaps out to me about them, and I lead with that. I focus on that trait, and then I try to trace how that trait has influenced all the things that they've done, and I use it to link together some of the most important things on the CV.

As I start with an outline, an outline of points I want to make in that letter, actually, the topics that I want to cover, and then specific points under each topic. Then I can go back, write a topic sentence for each paragraph, and fill in the information on the specific points. If you can't write something perfectly the first time, get something down on paper, you know, even if it's a stream of consciousness.

You get it on paper; you can always go back and revise and reorganize.

Provide Evidence

We want to know what is it that makes the student stand out from all of the others who are going to be applying for this scholarship, specifically, what is it that this student has done that proves that they are ready to grow and that this scholarship is going to be of value to them.

Go back into the student's story and find a moment where they've had a dream, a goal, an aspiration that has already been met so to project into the future the meeting of another goal. So if they've shown tremendous determination or grit or resilience or drive or leadership, I try to pull up very specific stories about how they have shown those traits and how I think that will propel them into the meeting of their next goal.

... Experience I have one on one with a student, seeing the student in a group, seeing how they advocate for themselves, seeing their communication skills in action, and sometimes even seeing things they've learned in the classroom and how they apply that to all areas of or the specific areas, within which we're interacting.

If you use an anecdote or some specific example about the student, that reflects on the excellence of the student and lets that excellence shine through. As an example, if I've had a student in class, and the student is asking me questions every single day, and they're not silly questions, they're very pointed questions that get deeper into the material and really tease out the finer points of the subject, I'll discuss that in the letter of recommendation.

... Mention the parts of the research that the student did independently or maybe some computations the student did that I wouldn't have done on my own, or some aspect of the project that the student teased out that I wouldn't have thought of.

It's these anecdotes, I think, that can sometimes fill half the page, when you have a short letter, and you want to make it medium length, or it's medium length, and you want to make it a killer letter.

... There's a notion of a cut-and-paste sentence: a sentence that's so generic, you could cut and paste it out of the letter, and put it in someone else's letter, and it would be just as effective. All of those sentences must be removed.

... There are so many things you can focus on. You can talk about some of the students' characteristics, for example, their persistence or their willingness to take the initiative, or you can talk about some of their non-technical skills: their ability to communicate, their, willingness to work with younger students and help to mentor them... their collaboration or collegiality – all of those things matter.

Overcoming Writer's Block

It's not a one-and-done kind of deal. It's really nice to spend a few hours writing the letter. If you need to, have the student come back to the office and spend some time with a follow-up discussion with the student, telling them where you're at, and what still needs to be done on the letter, but also give your eyes a break from the letter.

It's courteous to write the letter early enough that you give yourself maybe even three, four, five days, or a week away from the letter, and when you come back to it, you're going to remember things – you're going to have had that student and their goals and achievements in your mind during the days since you wrote the letter, and you're going to come back to it with a renewed energy.

Treat the letter writing as an iterative process. Show the letter to some of your colleagues or people whose opinions you value.

... Having the notes helps for that because I can go back to see, OK, what were some of the things that I haven't addressed yet or how I would start addressing. . . . Stepping away from the process for a little bit, taking a break – one other thing is having feedback from colleagues, faculty, folks in the same area that I work with and just having them read the letter and provide feedback on, perhaps something that I didn't express very well, some grammatical issues, or even just expanding on certain areas, taking some things out. That feedback, I believe, is really valuable. That's when I have the student come back. Tell them, I'm like, I really want to write you a long letter, but I need you to help me tease this out, you know.