

### **Guidelines**

#### **Letters of Recommendation for International Scholarship Applicants**

Most faculty members are familiar and comfortable with writing letters of recommendation for graduate school applicants. A letter of recommendation for a student applying for an international scholarship, such as the Fulbright, Marshall, or Rhodes is similar, but there can be a notable difference in focus.

#### **Similarities in Letters of Recommendation for Graduate School and International Scholarships**

Both letters will:

- Establish who you are
- Establish how you know the applicant, for how long, and in what capacity
- Heavily use anecdotes to support contentions
- Appraise the quality of the student's participation in various activities, rather than simply list them
- Include a "ranking" statement, such as "In my N years of teaching, I've seen the following type of students at X, Y, and Z universities, and I put her in the P percentile of these students"

#### **Recommendations for Graduate School Applicants**

These recommendations will:

- Describe and give context for the academic background of the applicant
- Focus on the potential of the student to do successful graduate level work
- Identify things the applicant has done to suggest a skill set compatible with research and successful graduate study
- Usually be 1-3 pages in length

The recommender will usually spend less time on the applicant's character or leadership capabilities in these letters.

#### **Recommendations for International Scholarship Applicants**

These recommendations will/may:

- Discuss both the student's character and his or her intellectual talents, in similar measure if possible
- Discuss the appropriateness and rigor of the applicant's proposed course of study – is this the next logical step for the applicant? Why?
- Comment on the applicant's flexibility, ability to negotiate a new environment, and tolerance for change
- Describe other cultural experiences the student has had and indicate a degree of cultural sensitivity
- Indicate a level of self-motivation, self-directedness, and independence

- Comment on the applicant's ability to represent the U.S. well and promote a deeper understanding of the country
- Comment on the applicant's potential to "make a difference in the world"
- Be somewhat longer than a typical graduate school letter (2-4 pages)

In addition, each program will ask recommenders to comment on specific characteristics of the applicant. Be sure to read these instructions, usually found on the recommendation form, carefully and respond specifically to the requested information. See Addendum for summary of specifications by program.

### Tips

- Since scholarship reviewers may be reading hundreds of applications at a time, it is an advantage to the candidate if you use some of the following in structuring your recommendation:
  - Paragraph headings or headlines
  - Bolding
  - Bullets
  - A strong summary last paragraph
- Use Olin's small size as an advantage and make the letter as personal as possible.
- If you are new to writing letters of recommendation for international scholarships (or if you'd simply like the feedback), feel free to request that a member of the Scholarship Committee review your letter if it would be a help to you.

### Student Information

In order to write a strong letter of recommendation you will need to know quite a bit about the applicant, their interests, and the program they are applying for. It is appropriate to ask for this information if the student does not volunteer it. Allen Downey has crafted specific instructions for students and have agreed to share them with colleagues. These directions are included here. Feel free to develop your own instructions, or not.

**FROM: Allen Downey, Associate Professor of Computer Science**  
**TO: Students Who Want a Letter of Recommendation**

**So you want a letter of recommendation...**

If you are reading this, it means that I have agreed to write a letter of recommendation for you. The purpose of this note is to suggest some things you can do to help me write a strong, supportive letter, and turn it in on time!

Regarding the content of the letter, I usually start by describing any classes you have taken with me, and your performance in each class. If there were extenuating circumstances that hurt your performance in one of my classes, please tell me whether and how you would like me to discuss those circumstances.

If I have had significant contact with you outside of class, I will describe that, too, and discuss any personal characteristics I think

you have that are relevant to the people who will read your letter.

**In order to do that, I need some information from you:**

- 1) If you are applying to grad school, tell me where you are applying and what kind of program you are applying for. By far the most useful thing you can give me is your statement of purpose, even if at this point it is just a draft.
- 2) For any other kind of application, tell me anything you can about the people who will read this letter and what they are looking for. This information is important: if you are applying to teach kindergarten, I will probably not discuss your capacity for independent research. Conversely, if you are applying for a research position, I will spend less space on your facility with children.
- 3) If you have any special concerns---something that you would particularly like me to mention, or something you would prefer that I omit---let me know. Within limits, I will try to accomodate you, although you should keep in mind that I cannot in good conscience omit information I think is reliable and pertinent. On the other hand, if I had anything to say that I thought might damage your application, I would have indicated to you that you should not use me as a reference. That pretty much covers the content of the letter. Most of the time, I don't have much trouble composing the letter itself, but in many cases the details of collecting information and getting the letter to its destination turn out to be the bigger headache. Anything you do to minimize this overhead will be greatly appreciated.

**Here are some suggestions:**

- 1) **Give me as much lead time as possible, where the minimum is two weeks.** If you give me less than two weeks, I will almost certainly have to decline to write a letter, and that would make us both feel very bad. So don't do that.
  - 2) Give me everything related to your application at the same time, so the material doesn't end up scattered around my office (and liable to be misplaced).
  - 3) Often applications come with cover sheets or other forms that have to be filled in with your name, my name, the address the letter will go to, etc. Please fill in these forms before you give them to me. In addition to saving me time, you can also ensure that the information is correct (for example, I might know you by a nickname that is not the same as the name that appears on the rest of your application)
  - 4) Please provide me with an addressed, stamped envelope to put the letter in.
  - 5) Please put all the material in a single big envelope or folder, and write your name and the DUE DATE on the outside.
- Again, thanks for your help. As you might imagine, I write many letters of recommendation, and it is often the case that many of them are due at the same time. Anything you can do to make the process easier for me is greatly appreciated, and will give me a chance to mention, in your letter, how organized and conscientious you are

## **ADDENDUM**

### **Comments specific to the Fulbright Grant:**

The Fulbright Reference asks for the following:

In completing this form, please keep in mind that the applicant will be serving as a citizen representing the United States and that personal suitability, as well as academic excellence, is an important criterion to be considered. Please comment specifically on the feasibility of the applicant's project in terms of resources available abroad, ability of the applicant to carry out the project in the allotted time, linguistic preparation for the proposed plan, the candidate's ability to adapt to a different cultural environment; in the arts, the candidate's talent and potential for growth, and any other factors which you believed may have a bearing on the candidate's successful experience overseas. Also indicate your opinions as to the merit or validity of the project itself.

### **Comments specific to the Rhodes Scholarships:**

The Rhodes application notes that

In considering applications, Committees of Selection will have regard to those qualities which Cecil Rhodes expressly listed in order to define the type of Scholar he desired. Proven intellectual and academic achievement of a high standard is the first quality required of applicants, but they will also be required to show integrity of character, interest in and respect for their fellow beings, the ability to lead, and the energy to use their talents to the full.

Mr. Rhodes believed that the last of these qualities was best tested through participation and success in sports. Participation in organized sports is not essential if applicants are able to demonstrate in other ways the physical vigor which will enable Rhodes Scholars to make an effective contribution to the world around them. Mr. Rhodes clearly expected such a contribution when he expressed the hope that Rhodes Scholars would come to "esteem the performance of public duties as [their] highest aim." From this statement one may infer that he expected his Scholars to play an influential part in the betterment of society, wherever their careers might take them. It does not necessarily presuppose a career in the public sector. Mr. Rhodes desired that his Scholars be intellectually, morally, and physically capable of leadership in any field.

Much of the distinctiveness of the Rhodes Scholarship arises from this comprehensive set of criteria. Intellectual excellence is obviously required, but not in isolation from other qualities. Mr. Rhodes sought Scholars who were more than "mere bookworms;" he wanted their intellectual talents to be combined with concern for others. Thus the Committees of Selection assign the highest importance to this blend of character with intellect.

In short, Rhodes committees are looking for candidates who have both the intellectual firepower and the strength of character to "fight the good fight." An effective letter makes the case that the applicant is not only *qualified* for the scholarship (from both a character perspective and an intellectual perspective), but also makes a compelling case that the applicant is someone who has the potential to *go on* to make a significant difference in the world, and that the Rhodes Scholarship will somehow enable this to happen. Committees will often try to imagine (1) where the applicant might be in 10-15 years, and (2) how the Rhodes scholarship might or might not change that outcome. If possible, an appraisal letter should help answer these questions.

Finally, it is worth noting that the “participation and success in sports” criteria is VERY loosely interpreted; it is not necessary to inform the committee of how vigorous the candidate appears in class.

### **Comments specific to the Marshall Scholarship:**

Marshall has similar criteria to Rhodes:

Candidates are evaluated on academic achievement, leadership potential, social commitment, and communication skills. In appointing scholars, the selectors will look for distinction of intellect and character as evidenced both by their scholastic attainments and by their other activities and achievements. Preference will be given to candidates who display a potential to make a significant contribution to their own society. Selectors will also look for strong motivation and seriousness of purpose, including the presentation of a specific and realistic academic program.

Accordingly, a good Rhodes letter is often a good Marshall letter. The one significant difference between the two programs is in the last sentence of the above paragraph: Marshall is typically more demanding with respect to the definition of the academic program, and correspondingly puts a somewhat lower emphasis on the “fight the good fight” aspect of the candidate. If one were to make a fine distinction then, a Marshall letter could perhaps be slightly closer to a typical graduate school letter.