



Tips for Soliciting Great Scholarship Reference Letters

Reference letters are critical to a scholarship application, yet they are probably the most overlooked part of the application process. All applicants being considered for a competitive scholarship program are already first class, so the letters can help to distinguish you from a pack of outstanding applicants by highlighting your uniqueness. The following tips will help guide you to solicit reference letters that stand out.

1) Choose your referees wisely. You have more control over this part of the process than you think. Think of the reference letter as an integral part of the scholarship application package that will present an accurate and complete picture of your achievements and research potential. Your referees should be familiar not only with your academic abilities, but also with your personal interests and background and how those relate to and enhance your ability to carry out the proposed research.

“The object is to convince the reader that the candidate is superior and to render the candidate unique and memorable.”

*Jody Spooner
Director of Scholarships
Williams College*

2) Provide your referees all the information they need to write a strong letter. The more information a referee has to draw from, the better the case for support he/she can make for you. And as an added bonus, discussion around your research proposal can help you clarify your own goals and objectives for the project. Supply a referee with the following information: your CV; your proposed course of study and area of research; a comprehensive draft of your research proposal; your academic record; and a personal statement that includes career goals, interests, and extracurricular activities. Finally, it is vital that the referee knows the selection criteria and weighting (if applicable) for the scholarship, the required format and length for the reference letter, where to send it, and the deadline for submission. Always follow up to ensure the letters have been submitted and acknowledge the referee’s support.

3) Ask that the adjudication criteria be specifically addressed in the reference letter. (Refer to the Selection Criteria on reverse.) Relating your achievements, skills, and research directly to the adjudication criteria strengthens your case for support. Ideally, a reference letter should specifically address your academic excellence, research potential, publication record, oral and written communication skills, and your interpersonal and leadership abilities. A referee should be able to support his/her claims with specific, concrete evidence and comment on your academic achievements in order to indicate your research potential. A reference letter also provides an opportunity to emphasize extraordinary achievements in light of where you are in your program and your research career. To assist your referee, provide information to highlight these relationships.

“The most effective reference letter is evidenced-based.”

*Dr. Steven Taubeneck
Former Associate Dean,
Scholarships & Graduate
Research, UBC*

4) Ask the referee to highlight the strengths and explain any weaknesses pertaining to your experience and/or your research. It is helpful if a referee can explain any shortcomings openly and honestly and point out any associated improvements you have made. Mention to your referee that your application is to a competitive scholarship and that you will be judged against a high-caliber pool of applicants.

The bottom line: What gives you the edge over others being considered? What makes you memorable? Adjudication committees look for the extra excellence of a student when considering their evaluations. Unique qualities and skills, such as communication and leadership abilities, can be demonstrated through participation in extracurricular and community activities, and volunteer service. Most committees look at what you have already accomplished, but even more so, your potential to accomplish more in the future.