

Best Practices for Endorsement Letter Writers
Applicants for Major National & International Fellowships, Scholarships & Grants
University of California, Santa Barbara

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With the support of the UCSB Graduate Division and the Division of the Humanities and Fine Arts, I am facilitating a specialized workshop on major fellowship, scholarship, and grants applications for graduate and advanced undergraduate students. You have been identified as an endorser for a UCSB student who is applying for a major award. The applicant will ensure you are listed as an official reference on the application website, which will generate an email to you with instructions on how to submit your letter. The applicant will forward to you the latest draft of their application as a frame of reference for your endorsement letter. You will also receive periodic reminders from the applicant to ensure that all deadlines are met. Please be aware that the absence of just one endorsement letter will make the applicant ineligible for the award.

As experienced and distinguished scholars, we realize that you write many letters of recommendation. Major fellowship, scholarship, and grant consultants and representatives of major foundations, however, have noted that endorsement letters continue to pose the biggest challenges for applicants, as oftentimes well-intentioned references inadvertently are read as derogatory by some referees. In an effort to avoid such a misreading of your letter, endorsers for these awards are encouraged to share drafts of their letters with an outside reader; as the facilitator of this workshop, I am happy to serve in this capacity. Based on my experience as a referee for the Ford Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, I am available to provide feedback on drafts of your letter to ensure it has the desired impact.

In support of your efforts to facilitate your sponsored scholar's receipt of one of these prestigious awards, I have identified the following key strategies as best practices to consider. I also list practices that usually do not yield productive results and which, indeed, can be harmful.

Best Practices for Endorsement Letters

1. Tailor Letter to the Specific Award Application

Always correlate the contents of a letter of recommendation to the applicant's actual application materials. Be especially sure to address the contents of the student's personal essay (or essays), their principal research project, and overall academic performance. Moreover, be certain to note how the applicant addresses the goals of the particular foundation and scholarship. Reviewers look for this correlation.

2. Use Concrete Details

Always write about specific concrete details of activities and accomplishments that you personally witnessed or know about first hand, using action verbs (e.g., "she convincingly argued"), instead of hyperbolic descriptions and adjectives (e.g., "he is magnificent").

3. Signal Applicant's Excellence in Relation to Other Students

Always provide assessments of the applicant in relation to all students or scholars you have encountered at all institutions where you have taught or worked. Also, if appropriate, signal if the applicant is competitive with others above their rank and experience levels (e.g., you might discuss how an undergraduate student has excelled beyond other undergraduate students and even some graduate students in your institution or elsewhere, or how a graduate student is operating at the level of a junior faculty member). If the student is now attending a graduate program or professional school, you might address how this achievement demonstrates continued progress in their overall career and life plans. If the student has taken initiative in developing new skill sets (e.g., by declaring a minor or double major, learning a new language in a study abroad program, applying their academic knowledge to community service, undertaking extra coursework in a different discipline, and so on), you may wish to emphasize this aspect as indicative of their extraordinary drive, resilience in creating new opportunities, and evidence of their potential to succeed as faculty.

4. Underscore the Applicant's Intellectual Ability & Overall Excellence

Always focus on the applicant's academic successes vis-à-vis their overall intellectual profile to present a full portrait of their assets. Give particular attention to any unique life or other experiences that truly distinguish the applicant. They really must appear to be a once-in-a-lifetime student or future leader in their field if they are to be competitive for these awards.

5. Discuss Student's Values, Character & Life Mission

Major national and international fellowships, scholarships, and grants stress sound moral character and a demonstrated commitment to serving humanity in one's chosen career and life mission. Thus, be sure to identify how the student's academic pursuits are extensions of their values and the life of service they have chosen to pursue. Feel free to add commentary on how their planned graduate institution and chosen program will further their preparation to pursue their life mission.

Practices to Avoid and Issues to Consider for Endorsement Letters

1. Never Recycle a Pre-existing Letter

Never submit a standard template letter previously submitted for a job application, graduate school admission application, or other award application, as these always are read as “lukewarm” endorsements that usually sabotage an application.

2. Never Have Student Write Your Endorsement Letter

Never ask an applicant to write a letter for you as it is easy for experienced referees to identify this type of letter. Furthermore, many opportunities to elaborate on the broader significance of the applicant’s work will be missed, which ultimately will undermine the application.

3. Be Aware of Unintended Consequences Regarding Tone & Word Choice

Be aware that a negative reference to an applicant’s “past difficulties” in a course, research project, or service activity will be read as a subtle indication of a critique. This will take a life of its own because in the general hyperbolic genre of endorsement letters even the smallest indication of a negative assessment oftentimes is read askance. It is your prerogative, of course, to be frank about a student’s past challenges, but be sure to identify how the student exhibited successful problem-solving techniques when confronting problems or challenges. It is safest to feature the student’s assets rather than to raise items or issues that might be read as negative.

4. Be Aware of Faculty Turf Wars & Disciplinary Battles

Given the prevalence of disciplinary and methodological conflicts, avoid using provocative language, without of course sacrificing your integrity, or the integrity of the scholar or their project. For instance, be forceful in your positive detailed description of their major project, but also be diplomatic in noting how the project smartly engages intersecting and diverging opinions rather than claiming that the project obliterates the significance of one or another methodology or scholar’s work on the topic. In short, be aware of faculty egos and turf battles as well as the fact that referees include academics, judges, politicians, journalists, and former award recipients.

5. Devote Enough Time to Write Substantive Letter

Don’t rush! An endorsement letter with typographical or spelling errors is read as evidence of your lack of confidence in the quality of the proposed project or the applicant’s ability. Also, your letter should be substantial; any letter that is less than 1½ pages will be seen as a weak endorsement. For some awards (such as the Rhodes Scholarship) your letter may have a word limit of 1,000 words (tabulated by character counts), or approximately 3 double-spaced pages. The strongest letters use the full word limit. For the Ford, NEH, Mellon and other graduate fellowships and grants, there usually is no word limit.

6. Do Not Endorse a Candidate You Do Not Truly Support

If you are not enthusiastic about a student’s work and their candidacy for a major award, both of you will be better served if you let your student know that you cannot write a strong letter of recommendation for them. Just one unenthusiastic or critical letter will undermine an application, and therefore limit a student’s life options, and it can tarnish the image of letter writers, the applicant, and the institution. Please let the student know immediately if you cannot write a strong letter of support so they can find another endorser.