Tips on Writing Scholarship References

1. Use full sentences, not point form. Do not hand write, but type, and sign in black ink.

2. Identify the specific strengths of the student. Talk about what stands out in their accomplishments. Committee members are reading many applications, and will be looking for specific examples to better understand (and remember) the student's strengths and accomplishments.

3. If there are notable accomplishments that stand out, refer to them early in the letter so they are not 'buried', eg, refereed publications, academic awards, etc.

4. Give some indication of your personal knowledge of the student's academic work, rather than speaking generally, or only based on colleagues' impressions.

5. Think about how to organize the letter: start with a clear, direct and specific comment about the student, support that statement with examples, talk about the student's progress over time, end with a summing up of their strengths and weaknesses.

6. Address unusual areas of weakness, such as a year with poorer marks, if there are extenuating circumstances (eg. if a family death impacted student's studies, student illness) or note if grades improve once the student finds their area of interest. Student should provide faculty with relevant information.

7. Stick to the student's academic work and life. Too much personal information detracts and is seen as inappropriate, eg she is divorced, he is devoted father of three, he/she is friendly and generous, etc.

8. Avoid talking about your own research and record unless it is relevant to your discussion of the student. You can introduce yourself and your relationship to the student vis a vis research, but avoid focussing on your own work, accomplishments, etc.

9. Be honest with the student. If you don't feel you can write a good letter, say you would rather not write, and suggest he or she ask someone else.

10. Be fair to the truly excellent students. Write letters that have gradations of difference in them. There are good, very good, excellent, and (rare) extraordinary students. Those reading the applications become frustrated with nothing but brilliant students, always, from Prof. X. They also develop impressions about universities and programs, and if every student is ranked in the top 2%, this can lead to a downgrading of their files over time.

11. Read over the student's statement or proposal before you write, and point out if (and how) they need to revise. Even small grammatical mistakes can cost a student a high ranking. Applications need to look as close to perfect as they possibly can.

12. If you are writing a letter pertaining to academic leadership (eg for a Vanier), go over exactly what they did (projects, activities), how they did it (showed creativity, leadership, teamwork), what the results were (benefits to?), and why it was important (tie this to the award). If in doubt, ask the Graduate Studies Scholarship Officer what elements are important, and what to stress vis a vis skills, publications, presentations, etc.

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