

Faculty of Community Services
Academic Support Centre
Writing Reference Letters for Academic Awards

Whether for yourself or for someone you'd like to be acknowledged, strong reference letters make for strong awards applications. The following tip sheet will help guide you regarding the writing and requesting of reference letters.

There are generally two points of reference in recommendation and nomination letters: **character** and **capability**. When writing your reference letter or requesting one for yourself, make sure to be specific about the requirements of the reference. Do you want the emphasis of your reference to be on your character or your capabilities? When writing a reference letter for someone else, what do you want to emphasize? Make sure that your reference letter reflects the criteria of the award.

Customarily, your letter should be approximately 1-2 pages in length. You may wish to follow the following rough outline. This is a suggestion and should be tailored to the award's criteria.

Academic Awards Letter: Rough Outline

1. Introduction
2. Capabilities, contributions, and accomplishments
3. Skills, strengths, and qualifications
4. Summary of the applicant, concluding remarks, signature and contact information

Make sure to address the following in your letter:

1. The appropriate body ("dear selection committee", "dear awards committee" etc.)
2. The relationship between the writer and the applicant. Strive here for specificity. Are you recommending a professor you had for a specific course in a specific year? A project mentor? Indicate the specifics of your relationship, how long you've known them, and in what capacity. Make sure to sign your letter with your name, credentials, and/or position (in a school setting, this may mean your program and year of study) and the date.
3. The person's academic and/or career record. If you are unsure about the academic career of a professor for whom you are writing a letter, try searching for them on the TMU website.
4. Accomplishments. If you are requesting a letter from a professor or employer, make sure to indicate accomplishments that you'd like to highlight. These could include grades, professional acknowledgment outside the classroom, or acknowledgment from other classes/school-affiliated activities.
5. The award criteria: Make sure that your letter reflects the award criteria.

Skills to Highlight

1. Communication: Try to highlight one specific type of communication style. This could mean highlighting the applicant's strong oral, visual, written, or interpersonal communication skills. You should also address the applicant's ability to communicate effectively with colleagues, classmates, peers, and others within their professional discipline.
2. Creativity: Does the applicant use creative teaching/presentation methods? Is there anything creative about this applicant that makes them stand out?
3. Critical thinking: Does the applicant challenge dominant narratives? Does the applicant critically analyze materials used in class?
4. Leadership: Try to highlight the skills and experiences that make your applicant a good leader and mentor. How does the applicant support the success of their peers, students, and colleagues?
5. Self-awareness and reflexivity: You should point to the applicant's critical self-awareness and ability to acknowledge personal strengths, social location, biases, feelings, and values.

Additional Tips

1. Your letter should be roughly 1-2 pages in length, but always refer back to the award criteria in case reference lengths are specified.
2. Try to highlight a variety of strengths related to the award criteria. If you are requesting a reference letter, make sure to include the award criteria. If you are writing a reference letter, make sure to include a few specific strengths of the person for whom you are writing.
3. Avoid vague or broad statements about basic skills. Specificity is key.
4. Include personal experiences as examples of the skills you are highlighting. If you highlight strong interpersonal skills, follow up with a specific personal experience where the applicant demonstrated these skills.
5. Highlight the applicant's future potential based on their abilities and accomplishments. Aim to communicate your confidence in the applicant.
6. Write with a formal, professional tone rather than a casual, conversational tone.
7. Write in an essay format with structured paragraphs and complete sentences. Do not use point form.
8. Concerning critical reflection and reflexivity, make sure to reflect on the context of accomplishments and consider opportunity and privilege.

What to Avoid

1. Vague statements. *Instead, try to be specific and use examples.*
2. Highlighting just one accomplishment, experience, or skill. *Instead, try to highlight that the applicant consistently demonstrates the skills you are discussing.*
3. Descriptive adjectives that have been historically associated with gender and perpetuate gender stereotypes. *These adjectives could include words such as "caring, compassionate, dependable, nurturing, capable, confident, and resourceful."*
4. Do not address any personal information, such as family, illness, personal challenges, etc. unless indicated by the applicant.

Questions to ask when reviewing your letter...

1. Do I sound confident in the abilities and potential of the applicant?
2. Does my letter highlight their skills?
3. Does my letter include specific examples of these skills?
4. Does my recommendation highlight the criteria of the award?
5. Have I customized my letter to reflect the award's specific name and decision makers? (Have you addressed the letter to the appropriate organization or people? Have you named the award in the body of your letter?)

References

Salter, J. (2022). Award reference letters—tips, templates, and recommendations for writers. University of Guelph, office of graduate and postdoctoral studies.

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