

Faculty of Community Services

Academic Support & Resource Centre

Writing Reference Letters for Academic Awards

Whether the reference is for yourself or for someone you would like to be acknowledged, strong reference letters make for a strong application. This tip sheet provides pointers and resources for writing and requesting 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 do you want the emphasis of the letter to be on your capabilities? When you're writing a reference letter for someone else, what do you need to emphasize? Make sure that your reference letter reflects the criteria of the award.

Your letter should be roughly 1-2 pages in length; you may want to follow this general 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 relationship between the writer and applicant: Make sure to be specific. Are you recommending a professor that you had for a particular 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, position (in a school setting, this may mean your program and year of study), and the date.
2. Academic career record: If you're unsure about the academic career of the professor for whom you're writing the letter, try searching for them on the TMU website.
3. Accomplishments: If you're requesting a letter from a professor or an employer, make sure to indicate accomplishments that you'd like to highlight. These accomplishments could include grades, professional acknowledgement outside the classroom, acknowledgement from other classes/courses, and school affiliated activities, amongst others.
4. The award criteria: Make sure that your letter reflects the award criteria.
5. Address your letter to the appropriate body: "Dear selection committee," "Dear awards committee," or something similar.

Skills to highlight in your letter:

1. Communication: Try to highlight one specific type of communication style. This could mean highlighting your applicant's strong oral, visual, written, or interpersonal communication skills. You should also address your applicant's ability to communicate effectively with colleagues, classmates, peers, and others within their discipline.
2. Creativity: Does your applicant use creative teaching and/or presentation methods? Is there anything innovative about this applicant that makes them stand-out?
3. Critical thinking: Does your applicant challenge dominant narratives or critically analyze materials used in class?

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4. Leadership: Try to highlight the skills and experience that make your applicant a good leader and mentor. How does your applicant support the success of their peers, students, and colleagues?
5. Self-awareness and reflexivity: Critical self-awareness and the ability to acknowledge personal strengths, social location, values, biases, and feelings.

Additional Tips

1. Your letter should be roughly 1-2 pages in length; however, do always refer back to the award criteria in case reference length is specified
2. Try to highlight a variety of strengths related to the award criteria. If you're requesting a reference letter, make sure to include the award criteria. If you're writing a reference letter, make sure to include a few specific strengths of the person you're recommending.
3. Avoid vague, broad, statements about basic skills. Specificity is key.
4. Include personal experiences as examples of the skills you're 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.

Things to avoid

1. Vague statements: try to be specific and use examples.
2. Highlighting just one accomplishment, experience, or skill. Try to highlight the fact that your applicant consistently demonstrates these skills.
3. Do not address any personal information, such as family, illness, or personal challenges unless indicated by the applicant.
4. Be mindful when using descriptive adjectives that have been historically associated with gender and/or perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Questions to ask when reviewing your letter

1. Do I sound confident in the abilities and potential of my 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?

References

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