

Award Reference Letters – Tips, Templates, and Recommendations for Writers

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SUMMARY

Reference letters often vary widely between both departments and professors, making it difficult for adjudication committees to evaluate students comparatively. To create a more equitable evaluation process, Dr. Jodie Salter (Writing Services) in collaboration with Sarah Erbarescu (OGPS) and faculty advisor Dr. Andrew Hamilton-Wright (Computer Science) have developed a new resource that supports reference writers in creating strong and accurate letters.

This resource includes tips and recommendations for writers with guidance on language, specific areas of focus, unintentional biases, and the key components to address in a reference letter. Letter writers will also find templates, examples of specific statements, and a list of skills and qualities to consider when crafting their letters.

PROBLEM

- Letters often vary widely between departments and professors.
- OGPS and adjudication committees find it hard to evaluate students comparatively because there are no similarities between faculty letters of recommendation.
- Some faculty refer to character versus capabilities, and with no uniform equitable language, this can pose inequities in the evaluation process.

GOAL

- To support writers in creating strong and accurate reference letters
- To provide guidance on language and the key components of a reference letter
- To support a more equitable evaluation process by decreasing unintentional [biases](#)

NOTE: If you are not willing or able to write a strong letter of support, you should encourage the student to seek another reference letter writer.

KEY COMPONENTS OF A REFERENCE LETTER

The following four components should be addressed in reference letters:

1. the applicant's commitment (including the relationship of the writer to the applicant)
2. the applicant's academic and career record
3. the applicant's accomplishments
4. personal characteristics that specifically relate to the award criteria

TIPS FOR WRITERS

1. Discuss at least three different strengths

- A quality letter should be able to address at least three different areas of strength for the student, such as leadership/mentorship, communication, initiative, research/scholarly outputs, and/or organization.
- A briefer, more focused letter will have more impact than a list of underdeveloped statements.

2. Address the award criteria

- Review the specific requirements of the position or award and write specifically to what is being evaluated.
 - Use the language of the award, including key terms, when possible.
 - Link applicant's research or work with the award qualifications. List achievements, awards, and certifications.

3. Provide specific examples

- **Be specific** when explaining someone's work experience, responsibilities, and results in your letter of recommendation.
 - Focus language on **accomplishment statements** and ability.
 - Avoid vague or broad descriptions or commenting on basic expectations.
- **Quantify and qualify** your statements (focus on **results and impact**).
 - Mention publications and professional successes.
 - Provide a contextual and quantitative comparison of the student's performance to others you have worked with.
- Be anecdotal and **mention specific personalized examples** of the student's work that highlight results.
 - Teaching experience is a good source for anecdotes about communication, organization, mentorship, problem solving, and initiative. Teaching experiences could include academic opportunities, coaching, peer mentorships, volunteering, land-based practices, etc.

4. Focus on results and impact

- Use anecdotes or specific examples to exemplify and support your statements. You could address any of the following:
 - A problem or challenge that the student solved
 - A need or gap they identified and met
 - A process or methodology they developed or improved
 - Any relevant recognition or awards they received
 - A service they provided or initiated
 - A product they created
 - Time or money they saved

5. Focus on accomplishment statements

The following bullets are examples that provide quantifiable accomplishments:

- X significantly reduced wait times for data analysis in our lab by developing and implementing a new software system called ...
- X researched and created a gender equity training program, now in effect in six local municipalities, which promotes awareness and education for police services.
- X was promoted to curatorial manager after four months because they demonstrated exceptional initiative, strong leadership skills, and a high level of team and program engagement.

6. Recognize Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) principles in your writing

- Keep **equity** in mind
 - Address diverse experiential learning opportunities (both within and outside of academia) to showcase what the student has done with the opportunities they've had.
- Use gender-inclusive writing to avoid selection biases against the student during review.
 - Avoid references to gender whenever possible. Use the student's name instead.
 - Use "they" as a singular third-person pronoun instead of "he" or "she."
 - Omit courtesy titles (Ms., Mr., Mrs.) except neutral titles (Dr., Coach, President), and use surnames
 - Replace any possessive pronouns with an article (a, an, the). Instead of "Shruti secured *her* first patent for...", you could write Shruti secured *a* patent for..."
- Discuss the student's **professional or academic intentions** and how the award or opportunity will contribute to their growth.
 - Highlight suitability and strengths before allocating space to areas of growth and development, unless specifically requested.

7. Avoid the biggest pitfalls

- Too vague – A quality letter should include examples and anecdotes to support statements.
- Focuses on only one area – A quality letter needs to show a student's well roundedness.
- Doesn't address the award criteria
 - A quality letter should address *all* areas of criteria. If you don't have this information, request criteria from the student, the granting body, your department's Graduate Program Assistant, or the OGPS Awards Officers.
 - If there is no information available, address leadership (including teaching and mentorship), communication, education, as well as relevant skills and abilities.

8. Additional cautionary reminders

- Avoid addressing personal information, such as children, family, illnesses, unless prompted by the student.

- Avoid unintentionally biasing a reader or raising doubt.
 - Instead of “While Sam has little publishing experience...,” try “Sam’s initial publication is strong...”
 - Instead of “Robin requires minimal supervision...,” try “Robin is self-directed and asks for support when needed.”
- Use action verbs that accurately describe their role (avoid “assisted” or “aided”). Use adverbs sparingly.
- Avoid descriptive adjectives that are often associated as gendered stereotypes, such as helpful and compassionate.
 - Adjectives such as hardworking and dependable are often used more for women and can be interpreted as women succeed more through effort than ability.

Adjectives to avoid:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • caring • compassionate • conscientious • dedicated • dependable • diligent • hard-working • helpful • interpersonal • meticulous • nurturing • tactful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accomplished • brilliant • capable • confident • excellent • insightful • knowledgeable • outstanding • resourceful • skilled • successful • independent

EXAMPLES - LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC SECTIONS

Referee’s relationship with student

I actively recruited _____ to work with me because of their unique experience in _____ and their innovative approach to _____.

I have known _____ for the past _____ as they have taken the following courses which I teach: _____. I would rate the student's overall performance in these subjects as _____, and this is evidenced by their grades of _____.

Academics

During _____’s undergraduate degree, they earned ___#___ distinct scholarships awarded for excellence in academic or research performance. The applicant has been recognized as outstanding with “Great Distinction” for _____ and with the awarding of the ___\$___ during their undergraduate education.

_____ has received the award of _____ (20XX-XX), valued at ___\$___, in recognition of their exceptional dedication to _____ studies (overall ___%___ average in graduate level courses). They also received the _____ award (20XX-XX) for their talent in the laboratory, as well as an invitation to the competitive _____ program for Fall 20XX.

Contributions

_____’s work is focused on the effect of _____ is employing a _____ model to investigate this _____. _____ has demonstrated a great deal of originality and scientific skill in developing this project, which builds from their MSc thesis, which quantified the effects of _____.

To date, _____ has ___#___ first author and ___#___ co-author publications (Accepted- In revision, In press, etc.) and ___#___ co-author publications from _____’s undergraduate work. In addition, _____ has presented research at the _____ conference along with ___#___ seminar series presentations.

Evidence of their research excellence can be found in the recent publication of a peer-reviewed article on _____.

_____’s enthusiasm for research stands out in our lab. _____ has made impressive progress on their _____ thesis and is on track to successfully defend and publish ___#___ papers.

Skills and Qualities

(Leadership): _____ have expanded their network beyond my department by engaging our _____ community in meaningful discussions about _____.

_____ previously spent time in _____ different research labs during _____ studies at _____ and has been involved in a wide range of research experiences. These experiences serve _____ very well as _____ has developed into a leader in the _____ lab, often mentoring more junior students in their projects.

(Commitment): _____ has impressive commitment to community and volunteerism. _____’s professional experience in the _____ fields will undoubtedly bring important practice perspective to _____ research.

Outside of the research lab, _____ has been highly involved with science promotion through the University of Guelph’s _____ program. Specifically, _____ has acted as a volunteer coordinator, where _____ has contributed their time and effort by recruiting and training volunteers, as well as developing materials for outreach events.

(Initiative): _____ also demonstrates excellent self initiative as evidenced by publishing a position piece in _____, detailing _____, and co-authoring a _____ opinion paper in _____.

(Creativity): _____ helped establish the _____ policy that safeguards the students’ academic interests and personal welfare. During their leadership role as _____, they successfully secured ___\$___ of funding for _____ and implemented two new programs: _____.

Summary

I am confident that _____ has the dedication, creativity, and intellect required for success in _____. I cannot more highly recommend _____ for this funding and believe that it will contribute to supporting a future star in our field.

Overall, _____ is an exceptionally talented scientist, excelling in their _____ graduate program, and is an outstanding candidate for the _____ award.

SKILLS AND QUALITIES

You should explicitly address at least one type of communication style in your letter. For brevity and impact, focus on the most relevant communication skills. (These criteria should be outlined in the award description.)

COMMUNICATION (ORAL, VISUAL, WRITTEN, OTHER)

1. Consider the student's strengths:

- **Oral:** Exchange information and ideas with other people through speech, active listening, and non-verbal cues
- **Visual:** Find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media
- **Written:** Communicate information and ideas through written or typed text
- **Other:** Prioritize and share key information in a variety of communicative modalities

2. Address their ability to communicate clearly, effectively, and professionally in one or more of the following situations:

- with colleagues, team members, supervisors, industry partners, public audiences
- within the discipline (i.e., proposals, presentations, papers, posters, and other publications)
- within meetings, labs, classes, conferences, social media, etc.
- when teaching and in TA-ships

3. And provide anecdotes and examples:

- X demonstrates a strong ability to prioritize information and offer a focused point-of-view when creating materials for ...
- When guest lecturing in my _____ class, ___X___ proved themselves a skilled active listener during live interactions with my students by ...
- During grading, ___X___ provides tactful feedback to students, which I witnessed when ...

CREATIVITY, ORGANIZATION, INTERPERSONAL, AND LEADERSHIP

Here are some other categories to consider. You should try to specifically address at least three strengths in your letter and provide explicit evidence to support your statements. You may end up addressing more than three, and you might find it easier to combine some of the following areas into one example.

If applicable, reflect on how a student's professional or extracurricular activities mirror or enhance their academic abilities.

Creativity and Innovation

- Make and see new connections
- Imagine and devise new ways of addressing problems
- Apply, synthesize, or repurpose knowledge to create new strategies
- Integrate and apply relevant information from a variety of sources into new or broader contexts

Critical and Analytical Thinking

- Identify, analyze, and evaluate strategies and situations, ideas, and information
- Evaluate potential solutions, tools, and approaches
- Locate, select, organize, and document information from a variety of sources using appropriate technology and information systems

Decision-Making

- Determine when a task is completed or a problem has been solved
- Make timely decisions based on thorough assessment of short- and long-term effects
- Recognize potential political and ethical implications

Organization and Problem-Solving

- Assess, prioritize, and evaluate potential solutions to problems by asking relevant questions, identifying root causes, and gathering facts
- Establish tasks and allocate resources to meet objectives, monitor progress, and revise plans to reflect new information

Leadership and Mentorship

- Direct, guide, and motivate others to accomplish a common goal or purpose
- Provide clear direction and support for others through logical organization, planning, and communication
- Guide, motivate, and support others (colleagues, junior students, collaborators) based on the mentees' identified areas for growth and development
- Demonstrates formal or informal leadership in discipline or field, institution, professional field, and/or in extracurricular activities

Teamwork and Collaboration

- Contribute to the shared purpose of a group, network, or partnership through a commitment to sharing power, resources, expertise, and perspectives
- Considers the needs of others
- Is accountable for actions

Time Management

- Manage several tasks at once, setting priorities and allocating time to meet deadlines
- Show flexibility and openness to changing plans, methods, opinions, or goals in light of new information and changing circumstances
- Ability to work both independently and part of a team

CHARACTER TRAITS, PERSONALITY, ATTITUDE

Self-Awareness

- Set personal and professional goals
- Acknowledge and reflect on personal strengths, areas for development, values, limits, feelings, motivations, and biases

Social and Cultural Agility

- Communicate, interrelate, and function well in diverse social and cultural settings

Curiosity:

- Ask questions and demonstrate open-mindedness and inquisitiveness

Initiative and Follow-through

- Comes up with new ideas without being directed
- Willingness to proactively take on responsibilities and challenges
- Is a “self-starter” and can keep up with tasks
- Able to set goals and systematically move projects to completion in a timely manner
- Sustain interest, effort, and motivation to persevere in accomplishing a task or goal

TEMPLATE - REFERENCE LETTER

Introduction

- State your relationship with the student
- Compare their work ethic and skills with other students

Academics

- Outline the applicant’s academic capabilities
- Give examples of their academic record, successes, awards, and recognitions
- Note previous degrees, certifications, thesis projects, etc. if relevant

Contributions

- Discuss significance of research contributions
- State quantity and quality of publications and presentations
- Highlight strengths and areas of expertise

Skills and Qualities

- Discuss skills and qualities with specific examples
- Highlight leadership and/or mentorship (from teaching, lab supervision, group work, external activities)
- List positive character traits and ambition (personality)

Summary

- Provide an overall summary of student
- End with the recommendation
- Provide your contact information

RESOURCES

- [Gender Bias Calculator](#) – flags commonly female-associated vs. male-associated words
- [The Influence of Unconscious Bias](#) – summarizes findings from various articles on how implicit biases and assumptions, based on the gender and ethnicity of the person being evaluated, significantly influences how letters are worded and how candidates are evaluated
- [Better Letters: Equitable Practices for Writing, Reading, and Soliciting Letters of Recommendation](#) – an short resource on the content and mechanics of reference letters
- [Best Practices for Reading and Writing Letters of Recommendation \(1-page\)](#) – provides examples of language and phrases that are gendered and/or racially biased
- [Avoiding Gender Bias in Reference Writing \(1-page\)](#) – University of Arizona
- [Building Community: Introduction to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\) eBook](#) – provides an introduction to key foundational anti-oppression concepts and EDI tools
- [When Your Resume is \(Not\) Turning You Down: Modelling Ethnic Bias in Resume Screening](#) – discusses contingencies of ethnic discrimination in resume screening
- [Quality of Evidence Revealing Subtle Gender Biases in Science is in the Eye of the Beholder](#) – documents ever-growing empirical evidence of gender bias against women and their research
- [Science Faculty’s Subtle Gender Biases Favor Male Students](#) – presents results from a double-blind study that demonstrates faculty gender bias against women in science
- [Combating Gender Bias in Modern Workplaces](#) – discusses how bias-mitigation efforts and broad-scale diversity initiatives can sometimes exacerbate inequality, and thus concludes more research is needed to understand how organizations can decrease the effects of gender bias
- [Writing Reference Letters for People with Disabilities](#) – provides practical advice on having a conversation with the student about whether and how they discuss and present their disability