

Faculty of Social Science, Western University
Writing Strong Reference Letters For Superlative Grad Students
A guide for faculty¹

Background

Reference letters are pivotal to scholarship applicant success. These letters are often the first thing adjudicators read - the source of first impressions. The Grad Chairs in the Faculty of Social Science, through the adjudication of various graduate-level, external awards (e.g., OGS, NSERC, CIHR, SSHRC, Vanier, Trudeau), have identified that in many cases, we could do better writing reference letters for those we strongly feel are deserving of an award.

The strongest reference letters...

The strongest reference letter is not required for every candidate, but when you feel a student is deserving of the scholarship/position, consider the following strategies:

- 1) **Lead with high-impact, superlative statement:** This point is about placement/order –the first sentence or two should be attention grabbing - and goes hand-in-hand with suggestion 2). For example,
 - a. “I am extremely pleased to write this letter in support for Aashi’s application for a SSHRC doctoral award – she is a once-in-a-decade top student with exceptional research design and analytical skills”.
 - b. “In the 20 years I have been a faculty member... I have never been more pleased to write a letter of support...”

- 2) **Relative to other students at this level:** When speaking about academic strength, and where the numbers are supportive, rank a candidate relative to other students at the same level. Choose the most flattering comparison group possible. For example,
 - a. “Clara received a grade of X, which placed her at the top of a very strong class of 20 graduate students in YYYY, our most challenging core course; Clara is the most innovative, independent thinking PhD student I have worked with in my 20 years as an academic. “

¹ Lisa Hodgetts in Anthropology created the original draft of this letter. This version includes input from various members of the Faculty of Social Science Graduate Council.

- b. "...I would put Xiaoming in the top X% of over 200 graduate students I have taught and supervised over my 15 years as a faculty member, he is outstanding in every category I can imagine..."
- c. "...I have served on faculty-level, university-level, and national-level scholarship and grant committees and in terms of leadership both inside and outside academia, Sophia is in the top 1%..."

The following statement is more likely to signal that though the student is strong, they may not be at the top of the list for receiving an award:

- d. "My colleagues and I on the Graduate Committee all agree that Elvis is among the top students in his cohort."

Those who are writing letters for multiple students *may* want to be *cautious* about wording that references relative ranking of their own students. That is, if you are writing letters for multiple students in any given competition, avoid ranking them if you feel all are deserving of an award.

3) **Relative to other [journals, awards, etc] in the field:** Many items are discipline or institution-specific. Write to the award adjudication audience; if the structure of the decision-making bodies is unknown, assume it is multidisciplinary. That is, clarify for the generalist reader. For students with peer-reviewed and other explain how their record compares to that of other students in their field/subfield at their level. The best letters tend to highlight the strength of a journal or book in the field – a journal's impact factors is one of many ways to accomplish this. For example,

- a. "Mohammed won the X-award in 2018, for his work on Y; this international award is extremely competitive and he is the first at Western to receive this award since 1999"
- b. "Abby's forthcoming article in an edited volume on nationalist movements is quite exceptional among first year PhD students in sociocultural anthropology. Of the few who do publish their work, they tend to do so after completing their PhDs. The journal is top three in the field."
- c. "Bharat has an exceptional record of national and international conference presentations that is unparalleled among our current clinical psychology PhD students."

- d. “Li has published two first author manuscripts in top journals, the *Journal of Stuffyoushouldknow* has a 5-year impact factor of 4.3 and is consistently ranked in the top 5 of [SCImago journal rankings](#) for Social Science”
- e. “Like most of our first year PhD students, Nilima is working towards her first publication [perhaps with details of what she’s working on and when she’s likely to submit it]. She has a strong and consistent record of presenting her work to national audiences at conferences.”

4) **Importance and originality of the proposed research:** As most scholarship committees are interdisciplinary, the referee is in a unique position to set the context of the proposed research project within the field. Highlight the scale of contribution and impact. For example,

- a. “Brigitte’s experiments have been changing the field of X by clearly demonstrating that process of Y... causing us to rethink...Z...”
- b. “This work has direct policy implications such that polling companies will need to rethink how they approach X in the future”

Uses adjectives carefully. Avoid lukewarm adjectives like “solid” unless you want to send a message that this student may not merit funding yet. Do not shy away from words like “outstanding” and “exceptional” when they are warranted. Indeed, be sure to use them when you feel strongly that the student is deserving of the award. It is critical that you provide supporting evidence.

- c. **Mitigate bias:** Be mindful and avoid adjectives likely to systematically disadvantage candidates (e.g., women). See the following document, which includes a list of gendered adjectives:
https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf.

There are bias “calculators” which identify adjectives that tend to appear in the letters of successful candidates and the adjectives that may not:

- <https://www.tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/>
- <http://slowe.github.io/genderbias/>

5) **Links:**

While the themes above related to superlative letters, the following document is a more general guide to reference letter writing.

https://grad.uwo.ca/doc/viceprovost/supervision/effective_reference_letters.pdf