Supporting Graduate Students for External Fellowships, Awards, and the Academic Job Market

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TExAS STATE UNIVERSITY
The rising STAR of Texas
Why do this

• Help others succeed
• Help your own career trajectory
• Help Texas State
Which role letters play

• Confirm applicant’s credentials
• Explain to committee how applicant meets (or ideally exceeds) award/scholarship/job criteria
• Help contextualize the information provided by the applicant
• Committees often rely on letters to decide among top-ranked applicants
  • Example: Celebrity Classic Scholarship has 5% acceptance rate. We regularly have more than 300 highly qualified applicants from across campus, many with a 4.0GPA. Letters explain / “translate” achievements in the discipline.
How to make the process manageable

- Communicate Expectations
  - In advising meetings
  - On your syllabus
  - On your homepage

- Reasonable Expectations
  - Request appropriate amount of time (3-4 weeks)
  - Ask for supporting documents
    - CV / Resume
    - Description of job / award / fellowship criteria
    - Applicant’s statement
    - Deadline
    - Where to send information
What about truthfulness / integrity

• When and how to say no

• Enthusiasm for student’s accomplishments / application needs to come across … but no need to embellish

• Letter can be nuanced
So, yeah, Dr. G., I was hoping to get a recommendation from you for my grad school apps. And you are...?

Uh, I'm Dee... I was in your intro class last semester. I had a hundred students in that class...

You said you really liked my final project...? You gave me an A+?

Uh, sorry, I still don't remember you...

Um, does it matter?

Not really. Here's a letter. Just put your name down on the blank spaces.

www.phdcomics.com
## Dos and don’ts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t</th>
<th>Do</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use the same form letter for all students</td>
<td>Include student-specific information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use the same letter for given student for all occasions</td>
<td>Tailor the content to the occasion</td>
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<td>Have students write the their own letter</td>
<td>ask for talking points, or items to highlight</td>
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<td>Be generic</td>
<td>Use language the funder / job ad uses</td>
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<td>Argue by assertion</td>
<td>Provide examples / evidence / statistics / anecdotes to support your assertions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understate</td>
<td>Use positive adjectives / adverbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embellish</td>
<td>Use nuanced language</td>
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<td>Use gendered language</td>
<td>Use descriptors that are relevant to the occasion</td>
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Formatting Considerations

• Use the correct letterhead! It can be downloaded here http://www.umarketing.txstate.edu/resources/downloads/letterhead.html

• Include your signature
  • Either print, sign, & scan
  • Or scan your signature, save it as an image and insert it

• Don’t forget addressee's contact info, the date, your contact info

• Be appropriate in length
  • Undergraduate student applications to graduate school: 1-2 pages
  • Graduate College scholarships: 1-2 pages
  • Applications for external scholarships: 2 pages (unless the requirements state differently)
  • Awards: 2 page minimum
  • Job applications: 2-3 pages

• Headings and/or topic sentences are absolutely fine

• Run a spell-check and a grammar-check

• For external fellowships: Take us up on our offer to review drafts
Building blocks of a letter

• First paragraph (for all letters)
  • how you know the student
  • for how long you have known the student
  • what the comparison group is (“student is among top 2% of the 800 graduate students I have taught in the last 5 years”)

• Subsequent paragraphs for letters supporting
  • job applications: One paragraph each for teaching, research, service. Be sure to address all job qualifications listed in the advertisement and anything else that sets the candidate apart.
  • awards/fellowships: evaluation criteria determine body paragraphs (one paragraph for each)

• Last paragraph (for all letters)
  • Summative evaluation
  • Beware of gendered language
  • Refrain from “please contact me if you need additional info” (All info ought to be in the letter!)
Questions?