

Writing Persuasive Letters of Recommendation

ADVICE FOR FACULTY

- 1) Write for students that you know well. If you cannot write a positive letter, or if you cannot say much beyond the basics, then politely decline. The basics include GPA, scores, major activities, etc.
- 2) Avoid mega-adjectives (*brilliant, amazing, dynamic...*) that are not supported by specific examples.
- 3) Use a narrative voice when writing about the student. An example can be read below:

"It is a pleasure to recommend Martha Martinez, whom I have had the opportunity to teach and mentor over the past two years in both introductory and advanced coursework. From the beginning, Martha distinguished herself not only through academic ability, but through intellectual curiosity and maturity that are uncommon at this stage of her education. She consistently approaches complex material with thoughtfulness, asks insightful questions that elevate class discussion, and demonstrates a genuine commitment to learning rather than simply earning high marks. Beyond the classroom, Martha has proven herself to be dependable, self-motivated, and receptive to feedback. When faced with academic challenges, she responds with persistence and reflection, actively seeking ways to improve her work. This growth-oriented mindset, combined with her strong communication skills and collaborative nature, makes her an excellent candidate for advanced study. I am confident that Martha will contribute meaningfully to any academic community she joins, and I recommend her without reservation."

- 4) Provide examples. Compare the students to others you have known in past academic years who have applied successfully for that scholarship. Comment on the student's role in class or program dynamics. Include quotations from student papers. Refer to a teacher who is not writing a letter of support, but who may have a positive comment to add: *"I am one of many teachers who admire Robert's work. Dr. Moss, an AP lit teacher, enthusiastically described a research paper of his as thorough, meticulous, and creative. When another teacher heard about the paper topic, she recommended Henry Glassie's important work Material Culture (2001).*



Robert was already plowing through the work by the end of the day." Emphasize virtues that are not obvious from a transcript or resume.

- 5) Provide some sense of your own credentials. Be brief about yourself. Include how long you have been teaching. If this is the best student you have worked with in the last several years, include that too. Avoid giving rankings for students in any given class. Doing so may feel like a compliment, but if they are not in first place, it may hinder that student's chances. If you list the student as the third highest ranking student in the class, the scholarship program may wonder why the other two higher ranking students are not applying for this opportunity instead.
- 6) Engage the reader with active verbs (*achieved, administered, allocated, analyzed, arranged, assessed, assisted, balanced, budgeted, built, calculated, clarified, collected, compared, compiled, composed, computed, conducted, confronted, constructed, converted, conveyed, counseled, created, defined, delegated, demonstrated, designed, determined, developed, devised, diagnosed, directed, discovered, displayed, distributed, earned, edited, effected, encouraged, enforced, engineered, enlarged, enlightened, enlisted, established, estimated, evaluated, examined, facilitated, formed, founded, governed, grouped, guided, handled, headed, honored, implemented, improved, improvised, increased, indexed, informed, initiated, inspired, installed, integrated, investigated, led, linked, maintained, managed, mapped, mastered, mediated, moderated, motivated, navigated, negotiated, nominated, observed, operated, originated, overcame, participated, performed, persuaded, pioneered, planned predicted, prepared, presented, presided, produced, promoted, protected, questioned, reconciled, recorded, recruited, reorganized, researched, reviewed, revised, scheduled, served, shaped, simplified, solved, sorted, sparked, strengthened, supervised, trained, translated, unified, utilized, validated, verified*).
- 7) Proofread carefully. Failing to change the name of the scholarship, the student, or the institution could ruin the student's chances.