10 Tips for Writing Winning Letters of Recommendation
by Rebecca Stark-Gendrano, Fulbright Fellowship Coordinator, Office for Prestigious Fellowships

Writing a good recommendation letter for a student can be daunting and time consuming. Sometimes, we might barely remember the student who comes to us, years after a class, asking for help applying to graduate school. At other times, we might spend an hour trying to think of novel ways to say “exceptional” when describing a student who is pursuing a prestigious fellowship. Whatever the specific purpose of the letter might be, you should keep in mind these strategies of successful recommendation letters.

1. **Tell the selection committee who you are.** Most committees will want to know why you are qualified to comment on this person. How well and in what context do you know the applicant?

2. **Get the student’s details.** Ask the student to provide you with a resume, project statement, personal statement, or other relevant details related to the project he or she is pursuing. It is always helpful to know how the work a student did for you fits in with the larger picture. You may know that a student wrote excellent papers for your Shakespeare seminar, but you may not know that she did this while simultaneously working a part-time job, volunteering as an after-school tutor, and caring for her sick mother. You can write a more compelling letter if you know some of those other details.

3. **Add something new.** Each letter of recommendation should add something that the selection committee would not get from reading other application materials. Be careful not to simply repeat information provided by the resumé, transcript, or project statement. Feel free to comment on other aspects of the student’s history, but make sure you have a point of your own when you mention some other activity that shows up on the student’s resumé. To continue the example given above, you might comment that your Shakespeare seminar student has tremendous strength of character, as demonstrated by her ability to produce outstanding papers when she was also dealing with a challenging personal situation.

4. **Speak about what you know.** You should describe your own personal experiences with the student. You cannot comment productively on a student’s performance in other classes, only on what you have seen. You could (and often should) infer how a student might perform in situations that differ from what you have seen, but make it clear that this is an inference.

5. **Answer the questions asked by the application.** Each program will have its own specific set of concerns. If the recommendation form asks about communication skills or community engagement, then you should make an effort to discuss that particular trait directly. The selection committee is asking for that information because this quality is important to their decision-making process. The U.S. Naval Academy, for example, will have different standards than a graduate program at Columbia, and the qualities that would serve an applicant well in one context might not work for another program.

6. **Tell a story.** It is not enough to say that a student is outstanding. Provide a short anecdote that illustrates what makes the student so outstanding. Remember that the selection committee will be reading many applications, and you want to make this candidate memorable. A richly detailed narrative about a student who takes it upon himself to conduct an outside research project says much more than “he takes initiative.” Be specific. Include personal details. Some of the best words you can include in a letter of recommendation are “for example.”

7. **Research the organization to which you are writing.** Or better yet, ask the student to provide you with information about the program he or she is pursuing. The primary concerns of the organization ought to be taken into consideration when you write your letter. For example, Fulbright promotes world peace, while the Rhodes scholarship fosters leaders, which means that a student pursuing both fellowships would need two different letters addressing different qualities. The same letter will not work in all contexts.

8. **Use negative comments with extreme caution.** There are different schools of thought on this point. Some letter writers feel that high praise is more believable when it is balanced by a small critique. For some highly competitive fellowship and graduate programs, however, a negative critique in a letter of recommendation can be the kiss of death for an applicant. You should be honest, of course, but I suggest omitting any unflattering details. Talk about the positives instead. Alternately, you can portray potentially unflattering qualities as unsuspecting.

9. **You can always say no.** If all you can offer is tepid praise then you are wasting your time and your student’s time, particularly if the application is for a highly competitive program. There are nice ways to excuse yourself if you ultimately feel that you are unable to write an evaluation that is both honest and positive. You will be doing the student a favor by giving him the opportunity to ask someone else who can write a firmer endorsement.

10. **Proofread.** Formatting and spelling matter as much for the recommendation letter as they do for the other aspects of a student’s application. Proofread carefully. Compose multiple drafts. Ask colleagues for feedback. This writing could change the trajectory of your students’ lives, and you owe it to them to provide quality work.