

Tips for writing reference letters for students applying for scholarships.

With the objective of increasing the success rate for our students applying for major external awards, we are providing some suggestions for writing letters of recommendation that can improve the chances of the applicant winning the award. Some of these suggestions are accompanied by quotes that have been extracted from actual letters written for students who have successfully won awards. Some of the samples illustrate things that are done well, and others are given to show how they can be improved.

Most of these suggestions are straightforward and likely many of you already do these things. However, there may be suggestions that prove valuable to you and ultimately improve the quality of the reference

1. **Match the letter to the terms of reference of the award.** Read the description or mandate of the scholarship carefully and adapt your letter accordingly. Key words from the terms of reference can be echoed in the letter to underscore the suitability of the candidate for this particular award. This is especially critical in the Vanier award, or awards that emphasize community service.
2. **Quantify the strengths and achievements of the candidate with rankings.** It is important to provide accurate descriptions of the comparison group.
 - a. "In fact, his mark of 90% was the 2nd highest mark I have awarded in this class over the last 7 years. "
 - b. "A's thesis was the best written Masters-level document that I have read."
(This statement could be made stronger by providing the size of the comparison group)
 - c. "I am delighted to recommend A for an NSERC Award. I have supervised more than 20 Masters thesis students and served on over 50 additional Masters-thesis committees. A stands out in this group."
3. **Support your assessments with concrete examples.** Example c. above is a strong statement. However its full impact is only realized with tangible supporting evidence.
 - a. "He wrote an exemplary thesis which received an excellent grading and the results of this work are now in press in the prestigious Journal of P."
 - b. "She actively participates in professional scholarly endeavors (3 papers at three major conferences, 2 papers submitted with top journals, 2 minor publications)."
 - c. "In December she presented her data at the International P. Symposium. While there she won the best student poster award for her research to date, and at that time, was a first year MSc student!"
 - d. " He has presented his work at five scientific conferences and has published four papers, including a paper in the well-respected journal P. and three

book chapters (including two as first author). This is a very strong record of productivity for a student who is just beginning his doctoral studies.”

- e. “Without a doubt, K is the most intellectually accomplished, disciplined, and creative graduate student I have supervised in my 25 years of teaching. In my view, her research and writing are brilliant. I would have been proud to author any one of the several papers she produced (and subsequently published) over the course of her Masters. In particular, I consider her 2015 ABC article on the xxx to be one of the best pieces of yyy scholarship written over the past decade. Her work is already being widely read and cited within the academe and I have every confidence her scholarly career will be a stellar one.”

4. Point out that the candidate’s abilities are leveraged by the expertise at Queen’s.

- a. “A is in all ways a stellar student. She is well versed in a variety of theoretical arguments about **a**, **b**, **c** and **d**. At Queen's she is working with the leading scholars on **a** (Dr. X), **b** (Dr. Y), **c** (Dr. Z) alongside my work on **d**.”

5. Explain why you as a reviewer are capable of providing a meaningful assessment of the candidate.

- a. “I know A by virtue of being his instructor for two courses and the Chair for his undergraduate and MSc programs. I have also talked to A at great length about his future plans, and so I feel as well qualified as anyone to comment on A's aptitude for doctoral studies.”

6. Describe academic and extra-curricular activities that highlight the candidates leadership qualities. It is a given that many of our students applying for external awards have the outstanding academic record and are showing tangible signs of research productivity. Thus the extras, the so called leadership qualities¹, may distinguish this candidate from the others. This is particularly important for students applying for the Vanier awards.

- a. “A is a leader pure and simple. She does not demand respect but earns it with action and connections with others. She has made a substantial impact

¹ Leadership (potential and demonstrated ability), as defined by the following qualities:

Personal achievement: professional involvement in dance, arts, music, etc.; significant artistic achievement; recognized athletic achievement, especially in a leadership role; entrepreneurial achievement (startup company); and/or foreign travel and study.

Involvement in academic life: mentoring/teaching; supervisory experience; involvement in student government and in the university community, including committees, teams, senate, boards, ethics committees, etc.; project management; roles in professional societies; and/or organization of conferences and meetings.

Volunteerism/community outreach: community involvement in charity or not-for-profit organizations.

Civic engagement: parliamentary page positions and internships; political activity; and/or elected positions.

Other

on my lab so far. She is emerging as the de facto leader. Finally, I would like to commend A on her continued efforts to reach out to the community and provide assistance to those who need it. She goes above and beyond her graduate peers to have a substantially positive impact on her local community. I have no doubt she will bring that passion and leadership to the rest of Canada as her career progresses.” *(This candidate successfully won the Vanier, however, the superlatives describing these leadership qualities would be enhanced with concrete examples.)*

- b. “A remains steadfast in her activism/advocacy in Canada, all which enhances her academic research. Before she even came to Queen’s University, A held several research positions with XX organizations such as (P), where she assisted in writing grants for the P project. And even though she has only been in Kingston for a little more than three years, her leadership endeavors have already made a significant impact at Queen’s University and in the community.”

7. Talk to the candidate (interview the candidate) to find out about extra-curricular or academic achievements that are not in their cv but may be useful to the grant application.

8. Please carefully proofread your letter.

Sample recommendations (whole letters or sections)

NSERC PGS D applicant

Ms. M. worked for me as a research assistant in the lab and in the field at a remote camp in the XXX from May 2015-August 2016. Through this work experience I was able to observe M. in the lab, but not while she was in the field; as I was conducting research at another site approximately 100 km away. However, while she was in the field we communicated at least weekly by satellite phone. Currently, M. is conducting an undergraduate thesis project under my supervision, which has allowed me to observe her more closely in the lab over the past few months. Hence, I have had the opportunity to observe her skills in the lab and assess her performance and judgment in the field. I have not observed M. as a student in the classroom.

Rarely have I seen such a remarkable record from an undergraduate at Queen's. I can only think of one other student with an equal transcript, and that student was awarded an NSERC PSD award this year to study abroad.

The work M. carried out this summer was both physically and mentally challenging due to the long work days and harsh conditions. She demonstrated sound judgment in carrying out the science and dealing with several equipment failures. Other researchers and graduate students who did observe M. in the field reported that she was a reliable and valued member in camp, and was thoroughly engaged in the science. She demonstrated initiative by taking on additional sample collection to investigate changes in water quality with distance down slope from XX. In the lab over the past few months M. has proven to be organized, thoughtful and careful. She is not intimidated by the complicated analytical equipment (which is very rare for an undergraduate student), but rather tackles each step of her analysis with careful consideration and confidence. She is a reliable and meticulous worker in the lab.

In sum both her field and laboratory work demonstrate that she has excellent communication skills, interpersonal abilities, and sound judgment. I strongly recommend M. for an NSERC graduate scholarship. She is a remarkable individual, who demonstrates excellent research potential and all the qualities of a strong academic.

Vanier award (CIHR) assesment of research potential

D. is a graduate student with rare talent. She possesses the suite of skills necessary for an adept, productive, and advanced researcher. To my mind, these skills are: creativity, organization, flexibility, and responsibility. I will comment on each in turn.

Creativity. D. is patiently creative. This is reflected in her painting as well as her research. She has an uncanny ability to transition easily from theoretical postulate to the specifics of operationalized measurement. She has been instrumental in developing an elaborate coding system for self-conscious behaviour. She has been the generator of the line of research examining concordance across emotion measures. D. also frequently provides spontaneous solutions to problems in the lab, from the personal to the technical.

Organization. Research lives and dies by attention to detail. D. pays exquisite attention to detail but does not get bogged down with it, as can happen with some students. She organizes not only her own actions but has organized two coding teams during her first year here. Furthermore, D. is also organized with time. Her time management skills have made her quite productive so far and she will continue to become more and more efficient as she progresses through her graduate training.

Flexibility. D. dynamically maintains her grounding in the big picture while focusing on the most minute of details. She can fluidly move back and forth between the empirical and applied domains. I have also a great deal of respect for D.'s conscious choice to begin her graduate training with a developmental focus as she moves forward toward developing intervention techniques aimed at mitigating the development of psychopathology in youth.

Responsibility. I have never heard D. complain. This may seem like a small statement, but it is not a common experience for me. Most students are not mature enough to recognize the responsibility they have. D. especially appreciates the responsibility she has to contribute to the betterment of all Canadians and respects the affordances that her publicly funded training allows.

Vanier award (SSHRC) assessment of academic excellence

I believe K. to be one of the most exceptionally gifted students I have had the pleasure to supervise. She received the highest grade I have ever given in a graduate course, which is consistent with her performances in other classes. The ease with which she handles complex issues, her use of language and dialogue, and the reflexivity with which she uses complex concepts is of the highest order. Her written work is of a very high standard; her arguments are well crafted and her structuring advanced. And although she is only beginning her second year of the PhD program, she has already completed the 2nd year PhD requirements for our program. She is a meticulous researcher and her participatory action research on poverty is on par with that of a seasoned academic. She actively participates in professional scholarly endeavors (3 papers at three major conferences, 2 papers submitted with top journals, 2 minor publications). Her research was also recently featured on a radio podcast. The field research for her PhD dissertation is already well developed – she plans to interview low income single mothers receiving welfare benefits in Ontario to assess how they negotiate and resist various new surveillance technologies. Her framework, which is an original synthesis of surveillance theories with those from feminist political economy, makes K.'s work potentially ground breaking, not only in academic terms but also because of the important impact it could have on welfare policies. What really impresses me is K's tireless commitment to bring about academic and public awareness on poverty issues. In this regard, she has taken on the enormous responsibilities of co-organizing a large-scale conference on poverty, to be held at Queen's this October and which involves coordinating hundreds of participants (academic experts and members of community organizations working with the poor). That K. has simultaneously maintained some of the highest grades given in our department, presented at major conferences, submitted papers for publication and has organized a large-scale conference is a testament not only to her potential as an academic but also to the impact that she will have on poverty in this country.

Vanier award (NSERC) Assessment of Demonstrated and Potential Leadership

In addition to his significant academic achievements, A is also an accomplished musician. He has played his music around the world and has participated and led several bands. Currently, he is a member of the Z band and also a local jazz band called X. He recently performed a gala fundraiser for the community that was a huge success and written in the local newspaper. It was great to see a graduate student recognized for his diverse talents. Such activities reflect A's well-rounded sense of community and social responsibility.

A has also been very active in musical theatre. He has been involved in playing and directing various productions. Again, highly novel for a young xxx.

A has taken a very active role in the xxx Outreach Program at Queen's University. This is a voluntary-based program in which graduate students take the lead to build bridges to the community. A was very active in ABC Day, when 200 grade 6 children descend upon our center for a day of hands-on science and talk about xxx. A was one of the best student leaders we had last year. Several teachers commented on his enthusiasm for science and how it was infectious with the children.

My lab is very large and diverse (7 postdoctoral fellows, 5 graduate students, 3 undergraduate students, 4 technicians) and A thrives in this environment. Despite his junior status, he has already taken leadership roles in some journal clubs and research projects. He interacts very well in a large team environment and he has an uncanny knack of getting everyone to the finish line.

In sum, in all my years as a University professor (20 years), I have interacted with many bright students but I have yet to see a student displaying the level of curiosity, enthusiasm, and overall excitement for research that A has. He is extremely hard working, he works well independently and only seeks help once he has exhausted his own abilities. He has already demonstrated tremendous potential to succeed in research. This well-rounded young man has a great future ahead of him and I recommend him for an award without reservation.