

Writing an Reference Letter for an External Scholarship

A good reference letter:

- supports the information in the application
- focuses on the applicant’s skills and achievements, and
- emphasizes the applicant's strengths and personal achievements.

1. Cover each of the selection criteria in a separate paragraph

Academic excellence: the transcript is attached - no need to repeat it. Cite highlights, awards and honours. Explain anomalies/gaps in the transcript.

Research ability or potential: describe the student’s role in each paper/presentation including, if you are the supervisor, your system of including and ordering names. Don’t describe the research (this is a clue that you don’t know the student or can’t think of anything good to say) unless it help explain the role. Committee members may not have knowledge of the sub-field in which the applicant proposes to study. Were there any awards or comments by external experts about their work? Explain delays in publishing. Did the student have any insights that were novel and useful? Give examples of critical thinking, initiative, autonomy.

Communication, interpersonal and leadership abilities: Were they active in the community? What was their role in community groups? Comment on their written and oral communication skills (clarity of communication, professionalism). If soft skills were not excellent, how did they attempt to improve them?

2. Selection criteria weighting

Scholarship	Academic Excellence	Research Ability or Potential	Communication, Interpersonal or Leadership Abilities
CIHR/NSERC/SSHRC CGS M	50%	30%	20%
NSERC PGS D	30%	50%	20%
OGS/QEII-GSST	30-60%	20-50%	10-20%
SSHRC Doctoral	No specific weighting given – excellence across all expected		

	Achievements & Activities	Characteristics & Abilities	Research Training Environment
CIHR Doctoral	35%	40%	25%

3. Speak with the student

Go over the student's resume, transcript, and research proposal. Find out why they want to do research. Their enthusiasm will help you write.

4. Use facts and examples to support your claims

Why do you think that the applicant is good? What has s/he done that demonstrates virtues? Bring in items not present in the application materials. Be realistic about your rankings and consider the whole of their work. You cannot rank two students in a group of 20 as being in the top 5% !

5. Write to read

Check spelling and grammar by preparing in a Word document, then cut and paste. Avoid long, complex sentences. Use headings and spaces to avoid one solid paragraph. Check gender!