



Reference Letters



Dr. Renee Polziehn

*"A desk is a dangerous place from which
to view the world." John Le Caré*



What is the Purpose of a Reference Letter?

Let someone know:

- you have skills and ability
- can deliver the goods
- right candidate



Who Should Write Your Letter?



- Someone who:
 - has familiarity with skills required
 - has good writing skills
 - has a high opinion of you*
 - has position of value*
 - knows you

You?



SAMPLE UDALL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION



MYTHIC
UNIVERSITY

123 Ivy Road, Mythic, CA 99999 555-111-4567

November xx, 20xx

Letter of Support for Janet Lerner's Application for the Morris K. Udall Scholarship

I first encountered Janet Lerner three years ago as a student in my freshman-level class in rhetoric and composition. In this class, Janet distinguished herself as a skillful writer, a hard worker, and a sensitive, caring individual. Among other reasons, she stood out for me in this group of students because she was one of only two students to receive an A.

Lastly, let me assure you of Janet's integrity and character. She is a person of discernment, intelligence, sensitivity, optimism, energy, and humility. She possesses a wealth of virtues that, in my opinion, make her highly deserving of a Udall Scholarship. Please do give her every consideration. If needed, I would be happy to provide further detail.

Sincerely,

John Student

John Student

Graduate Assistant in English, PhD candidate



What Makes a Good Reference Letter?

Exercise

- ❑ Write down 3-5 points as to why you are a good researcher/what makes someone a good researcher. (1 Min)



Excercise Part 2

Using the piece of paper you have, tell the person next to you why they should hire this person as a “Barista.” 1.5 Min each



<http://www.seattlemet.com/assets/0003/9774/barista.jpg%3F1276812396>

<http://www.seattlemet.com/assets/0003/9774/barista.jpg%3F1276812396>





Points to Ponder

- How useful was the material provided?
 - Did you want to know more?
- “Spin” the qualities into ones of value?

Good Reference Letters

- Avoid meaningless words – “outstanding academics and very productive in his research”.
- Jargon restricted
- Structure flows
- Longer letter*



Translation: "You have a bruised rib."

Good Reference Letter Continued



- Development of person into peer
- Problem solving abilities, analytical skills, creativity, research skills, etc.
- Communication
- Show student as “role model”
- Show enthusiasm for student

<https://career.berkeley.edu/letter/letterguidelines.stm>

Good Reference Letter Continued



- Indicate how referee knows student
- Specifics or details****

“He is a dedicated student, and his grades have been consistently exemplary. He always shows great initiative and diligence; he is able to develop intelligent plans and implement them successfully.”

- Accomplishments and Rankings
- Provides insights into all criteria





2012 Relative Weightings

Scholarship	Academic Excellence	Research Ability or Potential	Communication, Interpersonal or Leadership Abilities
NSERC PGS M	50%	30%	20%
NSERC PGS D	30%	50%	20%
NSERC Postdoc	0%	70%	30%
SSHRC CGS M	60%	30%	10%
SSHRC CGS D	30%	50%	20%
	Achievements and Activities	Characteristics & Abilities	Training Environment
CIHR M	40%	40%	20%
CIHR D	35%	40%	25%

Criteria - Academic Excellence



- Transcripts
- Scholarships
- Duration of Previous Studies
- Comments from University to describe an International transcript

<http://nisf.unm.edu/scholarships/uk-scholarships/rd-sample-letter-1.pdf>

Criteria - Research Ability/ Potential



- Scholarships/awards (amount/prestige)
- Academic training and relevant work experience
- Research contributions (publications, patents, reports, posters)
- Research proposal (feasibility, merit, and significance)
- Critical thinking, originality, enthusiasm for research, autonomy, initiative, application of knowledge
- Ability to complete projects

Criteria - Communication, Interpersonal & Leadership Abilities

- Awards for posters, oral presentations, reports
- Professional and extra-curricular interactions
 - Teaching, supervision, project management, departmental/university committee involvement, work experience, elected positions, community involvement



What can you do?



- Provide relevant details – 5 W's
- Provide CV – current
- Highlight your non-academic activities – on and off campus
- Allow time
- Follow-up



Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to strongly recommend Mr. Smith for your program. I know Mr. Smith because he worked in my lab for one summer. Mr. Smith came to me a year ago to discuss the possibility of spending a summer working in my lab. I met with him and outlined a project. I gave him some background reading at our first meeting. By the time of our second meeting he had read what I had given him and prepared a two-page project description. This level of effort is typical of a good medical student who joins my lab, so I agreed to take him on for a summer.

During his time in my lab, Mr. Smith demonstrated a good work ethic and interpersonal skills. We outlined a scope of work to be completed, and he successfully completed that work in the time required. He put in extra hours as necessary in order to meet specific deadlines that I set. I teamed him up with another student to work on the project. He seemed to work well with the other student, and I found him very personable. Mr. Smith put in sufficient work to be a co-author on a manuscript.

Overall, I would strongly recommend Mr. Smith for a position in your program.

Sincerely,

Richard Hughes, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor



SAMPLE

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to give my highest possible recommendation for Mr. Smith. I know Mr. Smith through his work in my laboratory. Mr. Smith first approached me two years ago about the possibility of work in my laboratory for a summer. At our first meeting I described the general outline of the project the he might work on. He asked good questions and appeared intelligent. He then went to the library and found many papers on the subject and read them carefully. He did this independently - I did not ask him to do this. I learned that he had done this at our second meeting, and I was quite impressed at his motivation and independence. Mr. Smith obtained funding from a program at our University to work in the lab for a summer. During that summer, Mr. Smith demonstrated the ability to work independently with great creativity and enthusiasm. He also put in many long hours. He worked as hard as my best graduate student. I teamed Mr. Smith with another student to work on a project involving testing of patients having shoulder pathology. The project included recruiting patients, testing patients using biomechanical instrumentation, and data analysis. Mr. Smith excelled in each one of these areas. His interpersonal skills were excellent. He "schmoozed" the clinical staff to facilitate recruitment of patients. He tested the patients professionally. Sometimes this testing required long days due to the extensive setup and calibration of equipment each morning before the clinic began operation.

He stayed after the testing sessions to back up data, clean up the area, and start data processing programs to run overnight. He was usually the first one in the lab in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. The other student working with Mr. Smith commented favorably about working with Mr. Smith. He said the Mr. Smith got along well with everyone, pulled his own weight on the project, and had the ability to compromise with other team members. One incident illustrates this point. There is a staff member in an adjoining lab that is a rather prickly person who has had many problems with students in the past. Mr. Smith had to interact with this staff person in order to get his project done. Mr. Smith was able to find a common interest with this staff person, which was folk dancing, and build a rapport based on this mutual interest. At the end of the summer the staff person noted what a pleasure it was to work with Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith also volunteered to help others in the lab. One of the other students was doing a project on knee biomechanics, and it required harvesting knees from the University's morgue. Mr. Smith volunteered to help harvest the knees on several occasions. I asked the graduate student in charge of that project about Mr. Smith, and he commented that Mr. Smith has excellent dissection skills.

I was especially taken by Mr. Smith's creative mind and independent work ethic. He continued to read the literature independently and generate interesting hypotheses. We met about every other week, and at several meetings he presented papers and information that was new to me. By the end of the summer he was introducing me to scientific papers that were directly relevant to his study that I hadn't seen before. Mr. Smith also showed remarkable problem solving ability. Our instrumentation system began having problems midway through his experiment. Mr. Smith spent a full weekend troubleshooting the system. He discovered there was a loose wire in the A/D connection box. Mr. Smith is going to be first author on a manuscript that he is preparing for publication. He followed through on his promise to write the manuscript during his M2 year. Moreover, he handled the manuscript revisions and saw the manuscript through to publication. This illustrates his high level of motivation.

In summary, Mr. Smith is clearly the best student I have worked with in the last 10 years. I would very much like him match to our residency program. Even though I hope he stays here, I think he would be an outstanding asset to your program. I give him my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,
Richard Hughes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

http://www-verimag.imag.fr/~plafourc/DIVERS/sample_letter.pdf

