

Advice from Selection Committee Members for National and International Fellowships*

What should the recommender do?

Provide **specific information** about the applicant, which selectors can use to determine the applicant's strengths and which might help shape any interview that the applicant might be offered.

Provide **context** for how you know the applicant and for what period of time you have known him.

Demonstrate that you know the applicant personally. Examples unique to this relationship are more valuable than information that could be gathered from a resume.

Point to **specific examples** of what the applicant has done. Has the applicant done outstanding work in some regard? Explain the nature of the work and its particular strengths, especially as they relate to the goals of the fellowship.

Discuss **why** the applicant would be a strong candidate for the specific fellowship. How does the applicant exemplify the personal qualities or selection criteria specified? Specificity in examples is crucial.

Indicate what you believe **qualifies** the applicant for the course of study or project being proposed, providing links between past performance and what is proposed.

Place the student in a **larger context**. For example, you might compare the applicant to others who have applied for similar honors or succeeded in such competitions. Quantitative remarks may be useful, and the strongest comparisons have the widest reach: "among the best in my X years of teaching" is stronger than "the best in this class."

If possible and appropriate, draw on the **remarks of others** for supporting evidence or corroboration of specific strengths.

What should the recommender avoid?

Generic letters or letters for another purpose sent without regard to the specific fellowship, course of study, or project proposed.

Letters that are too short and/or fail to provide specific examples or instances of points mentioned.

Letters merely summarizing information available elsewhere in the application or only presenting the student's grade or rank in a class.

Letters focusing too much on the context of how the writer knows the applicant (descriptions of the course, exhaustive description of assignments) and not sufficiently on the student and his or her accomplishments.

Letters consisting largely of unsupported praise. Kind words that do not give committees a strong, specific sense of how applicants have distinguished themselves are not helpful.

Letters that damn the candidate with faint praise. It is not helpful to say that a student did what might be expected (met all requirements) or to point to qualities (e.g., punctuality) not germane to the fellowship.

Letters that may be read as implying criticism (back-handed compliments) or criticisms that suggest stronger reservations than are stated. Honest criticism, presented generously, can enhance the force of a letter. Committees take critical comments very seriously, however, so be cautious when making critical remarks.

Letters focusing on experiences that happened quite a few years ago. Even letters from writers with long-standing relationships with the applicant should be as current and forward-looking as possible.

*With thanks to Carleton College's Office of Student Fellowships, from which this has been adapted.