



Office of Fellowships

<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/fellowships>

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WRITING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR NATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS: Suggestions for Faculty, Staff, and Supervisors

How important are recommendation letters?

Recommendation letters are *critical* to fellowship applications. Most applicants have outstanding grades and many accomplishments. Their transcripts and resumes are almost always highly impressive. In order to distinguish these applicants from one another, foundation selection committees rely on the detailed testimony of those who *know* the candidates. Through these letters, they seek to find out whether a candidate is capable of thriving in a rigorous academic program; has the maturity and flexibility to adapt to a new culture; possesses the interpersonal skills and experience to lead or inspire others; or is truly committed to a particular goal. Faculty and research advisors have particular insight into how a candidate *thinks*. Staff and other supervisors observe how a candidate *interacts* with others or *works*. Everyone who works regularly with students can judge how they stand out in relation to their peers.

Can I recycle a letter I've already written?

The best letters speak directly to the concerns of the fellowship foundation and describe how the student is a good fit for it. A letter originally drafted for a summer internship, research assignment, job, or even graduate school application may have some useful source material, but to be effective, a fellowship recommendation must be tailored to the aims of the foundation. Every fellowship provides guidelines for recommenders telling specifically what they want to know. Applicants should include this information with other materials they provide you when they request a letter. You can also find it on the Office of Fellowship pages of the Amherst website. For most fellowships, our website has two pages, the first of which is an **Overview** page (where we explain the history and purpose of the fellowship, the award details, how to apply, and a section called **For Recommenders**). The Recommenders section describes desired content, format requirements, how to submit the letter, and the deadline. On the next – **Application** page – you can find the prompts for essays the student has to write and other details about application components. The Director of Fellowships is also very happy to answer questions about what the fellowship is looking for over the phone or email.

Should I include negative as well as positive attributes?

Some foundations specifically ask recommenders to note where a student has room to grow. In fact, acknowledging that a candidate isn't perfect can lend credibility to the praise you offer. But it is usually advisable to agree to write the letter only if, in your mind, the student's positive qualities and suitability for the fellowship overshadow any growth areas she may have. A student who cannot find enthusiastic recommenders may be pursuing a fellowship that is not a good fit. Coming to this realization before he engages in a demanding application process will be to his benefit. This may mean a hard conversation in which you say, "I don't think you're quite ready for this," or "I don't see how you meet these qualifications. Is there more I don't know about you?" It is better, in the end, to tell a student you can't write her an enthusiastic letter for a particular fellowship than to agree to write, but in the end, be able to offer only tepid comments.

What should I say, specifically?

Here are some ways you can substantiate your enthusiastic words about the applicant:

- Put the student’s performance in context. If you have been teaching for decades and this student stands out as in the top 5% or 1% of students you have taught, say so.
- Discuss his insight into a particular academic or practical problem as shown by a question he has addressed in a paper or by his perceptive questioning and contribution to class discussion.
- Give an example of how she responded well to criticism about her work and improved as a result.
- Talk about how you have observed them interacting with peers in a classroom or organizational setting.
- Write about conversations you have had with him during office hours or other settings in which he has impressed you with his clear articulation of goals.
- Describe her ability to hold the attention of the room when giving a classroom presentation.
- Tell how you watched them garner enthusiasm for a particular project or initiative, and organize the work of others toward achieving a common goal.
- Show how she has exceeded your expectations. If she has merely *met* the expectations of a course, this is not worth noting. No one will be impressed by a student who simply manages to show up for class.

What shouldn’t I say?

You needn’t recite the candidate’s activities from his resume or transcript, if you only know about these pursuits *from* those sources. It is most helpful if your letter *supplements*, rather than *summarizes*, those documents. Think of your letter as offering a detailed perspective from one important vantage point.

What’s the required format these days?

Some fellowships ask you to complete a form with specific questions to address, but most ask for a traditional letter. Letters can usually be addressed as follows: Dear [Name of Foundation] Selection Committee. Currently, most fellowship foundations still prefer that letters be typed on institutional letterhead (physical or virtual) and signed by hand. The letters can often be scanned and sent as pdfs, but are sometimes required in printed form. In this electronic age when recommenders are often working remotely, this can be frustrating. Academic Department Coordinators can be very helpful with such challenges, and the Fellowships Office is happy to support your efforts to produce a letter in the desired format.

What about length?

Major fellowships are *highly* competitive and ask for evidence of *many* outstanding qualities. For this reason, some foundations expect that the recommendation writer will need *at least* one full and often two full (single or 1.5 spaced) pages to convey all that he or she has to say about the candidate (up to 800 or 1,000 words). Some have word or page limits. Take the time to say all that you want to say on the page. It is highly unusual for selection committees to try to track down a letter writer to find out more, so offering your contact information for further conversation, while generous, is not as effective as saying it all in the letter they will read.

Are deadlines “real”?

There are usually two deadlines for national fellowship applications – an internal deadline, and a foundation deadline. The internal deadline allows the Committee on Student Fellowships, which evaluates and selects candidates, to decide about a candidate with all the information the foundation will see. The Committee needs time to receive and review the materials before meeting with the candidate. Please note that all foundation deadlines for fellowships are “real.” Unlike many graduate school applications, there is no grace period for submission. And submitting the letter at least a few days before the foundation deadline is highly advised to avoid computer and other glitches. Our website has a timeline for all fellowship deadlines.

Thank you for taking the time to write in support of your students’ fellowship applications! We know how much time and effort it takes. While we never divulge the content of letters to candidates, we often remind them of how fortunate they are to have you in their corner. Your letters really do matter.