

## From the Sigma Xi Grants-In-Aid website...

### Guidelines for Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation for the Grants-in-Aid of Research Program

Solid letters of recommendation contain a number of common traits. The Sigma Xi Committee on Grants-in-Aid of Research has developed the guidelines below for developing a well-structured recommendation letter for this program.

#### **Comments from the Review Committee:**

*I'm impressed when I feel like the writer really knows the student. I look for one or two anecdotes about the person's strengths.*

*I like specifics, not just "this student is a nice person." The letter should describe a particular experience or relationship with the writer; it means the writer really cares about and knows the candidate well. Remember, the committee is trying to project how this student performs. A good letter should address that.*

- Begin the letter by briefly stating your position, where you work, your relationship to the applicant, and how long you have known and/or worked with the applicant.
- Describe the candidate's personality and work ethic, using concrete examples that demonstrate a strong relationship.
- Be vivid and specific, including memories of the candidate, anecdotes, something to indicate that you know this candidate very well and think highly of him or her. Letters that matter to the review committee bring the candidate to life on the page.
- If the applicant will use any complex techniques or need any specific instrumentation or facilities, the letter should indicate the availability of the equipment and training in its use.
- If the applicant's work falls within the constraints of an ongoing project, clearly state how the applicant's work meshes with the larger project and is a unique contribution.
- Describe and evaluate in detail the student's scholarly work, especially work related to the proposed research project, if possible. The letter should help the review committee understand the significance of this research, and the potential for contribution that it has.
- Address the scholarship criteria specifically in ways that demonstrate your abundant confidence in the student and your knowledge of the candidate beyond grades and classroom performance.
- Provide evidence of the candidate's leadership and teamwork skills. The most effective letters use narrative technique to highlight the student in action, as a teaching assistant, researcher, volunteer, employee, innovator, etc.
- Reflect, refer to, and elaborate on themes in the candidate's proposal. The student should provide a copy of this proposal for you. Request one from him or her if the student hasn't already provided it for you.

- Rank the candidate in relation to other students you have taught/worked with, if possible.
- The length of letters of recommendation varies greatly, but one page is generally enough. The most effective letters consist of wisely chosen content. Remember that a concise letter is usually more useful than an overly verbose one.