

LETTER WRITING GUIDANCE - RECOMMENDERS

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The mission of the Goldwater Foundation is to identify and support the Nation's next generation of scientific, mathematics, and engineering research leaders. Letters of Recommendation play a critical role in helping the Goldwater Foundation identify this country's most promising talent.

Mentors should spend most of their time discussing the student's involvement in and, most importantly, contributions to the research. Research mentors should keep remarks about their research program brief but provide enough detail for the reader to develop a general understanding of the work.

Please note that Information disclosed in the student's research essay and other parts of the application is held in confidence. All Foundation reviewers sign a Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Agreement.

GUIDANCE FOR ALL RECOMMENDERS:

1. If you do not know the student well enough to write a strong letter, the student has not given you enough time to write a letter, or you have other reasons that make you uncomfortable writing the applicant the kind of letter that is described below, please explain this to the student and decline to write the student a letter. A two-paragraph generic letter could doom a nominee.
2. Prior to agreeing to write a letter, engage in an in-depth discussion with the student about the student's career and research aspirations.
3. The more detail your letter provides about the student, the stronger your letter becomes. Be as specific as possible and provide as many examples as possible. The Foundation suggests that students provide letter writers with an information packet that is tailored to the context in which you know the student. Materials in the information packet should help you develop insightful examples.
4. Comments on student demeanor (e.g., gentle, kind, sweet, etc.) are not helpful in evaluating a student's likelihood of success in a research career. Attributes usually needed to become a successful research scientist, engineer, or mathematician are helpful, e.g., analytical, brilliant, careful, deliberate, persistent, etc., particularly when these attributes are backed up with examples that demonstrate these qualities.

LETTERS – FROM RESEARCH MENTORS

Your letter should help the Foundation and its reviewers:

1. Understand the context in which you know the student (e.g., for how long, in what capacity, whether you were the student's direct supervisor),
2. Understand how the student contributed to the work and how important the student's contribution was,
3. Obtain an insight into how independently the student worked or how much guidance was required,
4. If a team project, understand what fraction of the work was done by the applicant and how significant the student's contribution was to the success and completion of the project,

5. Gain an insight into what the student already knows and can do,
6. Assess the student's originality, intellectual daring, insight, creativity, perseverance, and integrity by describing specific examples of where these characteristics were observed,
7. Through a comparison with other students who have gone on to pursue successful research careers, gain an insight into the likelihood that the student will become a successful researcher, and
8. Acquire an insight into what drives or motivates the student's interest in research.

LETTERS – FROM NON-MENTORS

Faculty and post-docs who have observed a Goldwater applicant but who are not the student's mentor should:

1. Explain the context in which you know the student,
2. Focus remarks on general characteristics that you have observed that will make the student a successful research scientist, mathematician, or engineer (e.g., persistence, ability to collaborate, ability to present complex ideas and concepts), and
3. Compare the student to other students you have known who have gone on to successfully pursue a PhD and a professional research career.

LETTERS – FROM COURSE INSTRUCTORS

1. Discuss aspects of the course that are pertinent to the student's research and career aspirations,
2. Describe ways in which the student stands out from peers,
3. Compare the applicant with students you have taught who have gone on to successful research careers,
4. Discuss the student's ability to grasp difficult topics and present ideas in a coherent fashion,
5. If you are familiar with the student's commitment to their field through extracurricular activities, particularly where they demonstrate initiative, teamwork, and leadership, describe these relative to their development and contributions in the scientific community.

LETTERS THAT ARE NOT HELPFUL

1. Letters that are written for another purpose.
2. Letters that do not provide insights into both the likelihood the student will pursue a research career or do not suggest that the student has the potential to become a leader in these research endeavors.
3. Letters that say a "student studied hard and received an A," "student is in the top X % of the course," or "student gets along well with others and has a sense of humor." Avoid meaningless superlatives that are not backed up with examples.