

# **How to Write Effective Grad School and Scholarship Reference Letters**

## **Mechanics**

1. Use letterhead (not necessary for SURF).
2. Address the letter to the Department, the Program, or the Scholarship, not “to whom it may concern”.
3. Write an entire page, it’s even OK to go on to a second page. Never, ever limit it to “this student was in my X course and got an A and sat in the front row...”

## **Getting Ready**

4. Ask for the student’s resume and something about what they are applying for—ask for the student’s draft main essay for the scholarship or grad school.
5. Meet with the student and discuss the materials.

## **Content—overall advice**

6. In both grad schools/scholarships settings they want to know how the student “thinks” and how the student will contribute to and be benefited by their institution or program.
7. Include a concrete example of what you mean in #6.
8. Consider including information like leadership, communications, and ethics. Compare (generally) with other students at a similar stage, success of your past students, etc.

## **Scholarship Advice**

9. Never say the student needs the money (unless expressly asked for this) or is motivated to get good grades. These are about their potential and excellence. Everyone in the pool has good grades, but no one wants to think the applicant is a grade grubber. It is permissible to note the average GPA for your department or the nature of Tech if that illustrates something important about the student.
10. Assume that people from different fields are going to read the applications. What is so fascinating or interesting about what the student proposes to do or has done? Why is it difficult to do? What habits of mind matter? If the student is an experimentalist, talk about the particularities of that endeavor; if a theorist, talk about that. How would the scholarship/fellowship help the student further develop and hone their capacities?

*In sum*, just as the student is trying to let his or her best and most interesting self shine through in the application, you need to reflect the best and most interesting aspects of your interaction with the student.