

# EFFECTIVE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION: WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T

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## WHAT WORKS

- Help the selection committee understand in what capacity and context you know the applicant: as research supervisor, through volunteer activities, professional experience, and for what length of time. Whenever possible, indicate that you know the applicant personally. Summarizing activities listed on the resume or reviewing the transcript is not particularly helpful to our readers.
- Provide concrete evidence of the applicant's leadership and service activities. The more specific the examples, the better. The most effective letters use narrative technique to highlight the applicant in action, as an innovator, activist, leader, volunteer, researcher, or teaching assistant, and convey the applicant's passion, enthusiasm, and dedication.
- Convey to readers the scope of responsibility the applicant assumed; readers look for evidence of results. What impact did the applicant's actions have?
- Address the scholarship criteria specifically. Udall Scholars are selected for their potential to shape the future of environmental or tribal policy and for their demonstrated commitment to tribal or environmental issues. Readers look for sustained participation in environmental or tribal activities; assumption of leadership roles; evidence of initiative, and coursework or research that complements activities and career goals.

## WHAT DOESN'T

- A letter that is so generic that almost anyone's name (or any scholarship, internship, or job opportunity) could be inserted.
- Letters that focus more on the institution (U.S. News ranking, quality of student body) or on the merits of the recommender (high grading standards, academic fame).
- Letters that focus exclusively on classroom performance: the applicant did the reading for class, showed up on time, and earned a "A."
- Letters that focus exclusively on the candidate's potential for success in graduate school. Although many Udall Scholars do go to graduate school, service and leadership are more important qualities for the scholarship.

## FIVE COMMON MISTAKES THAT RECOMMENDERS MAKE

*The examples below are from actual letters of recommendation for Udall Scholarship nominees.*

### **Common mistake #1: Not knowing what the student is applying for.**

"X will be an excellent candidate for your scholarship program."

"I am writing to recommend X for this scholarship to which she is applying."

### **Common mistake #2: focusing exclusively on the student's classroom performance.**

"X is enrolled in my Introduction to Environmental Studies; her performance in homework assignments, exams and lab reports is consistent and well above the class average."

**Common mistake #3: focusing exclusively on the student's ability to show up on time and perform tasks as required.** Enough said. Unfortunately, this mistake frequently occurs in letters from job supervisors, internship coordinators, and athletic coaches.

**Common mistake #4: using a great many words to say nothing at all.**

"Our internship program provides participants with a wide variety of experiences. X demonstrated a wonderful enthusiasm for learning the requirements of the intern position. Her friendly and professional manner enabled her to quickly become a part of the team. The entire staff found X to be fun to work with and a wonderful asset to the program."

**Common mistake #5: creating a mountain of praise out of a molehill of insignificance.**

"The environment has been a primary interest to X since her early years. A few months ago, watching a documentary on penguins with X, I could see that she was concentrating on every word. It is thus that I can say that X truly wants to make the world a better place. As an example of her effect on those around her, we are very careful not to run the water when brushing our teeth."

*To whom it may concern:*

*This is a quick letter of reference regarding X. X has worked for Home Town Spirits for two years when he is on various breaks from his schooling.*

*I cannot go on enough about X. He is an incredible individual. His work ethic is exemplary. He is a refreshing testimony to today's youth.*

*X is truly a concerned individual regarding environmental issues.*

*Sincerely,*