



**University
of Victoria**
Graduate Studies

WRITING EFFECTIVE REFERENCE LETTERS

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Territory Acknowledgement:

We acknowledge and respect the Ləkʷəŋən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Welcome

- Introductions
- Territory acknowledgement
- Purpose of the workshop
- Overview of FGS scholarships and awards

Crafting effective letters

- General guidelines
- Specific award criteria:
Tri-Agency & donor awards

Wrap-up

- Questions
- Helpful resources

PURPOSE OF THIS PRESENTATION

- ✓ Increase graduate student success with scholarship competitions
- ✓ Understand the value of strongly written reference letters
- ✓ Share general principles/best practices for effective letter writing
- ✓ Improve ability to craft strong letters aligned with award criteria
- ✓ Reduce the number of poorly written reference letters
- ✓ Provide additional resources

SCHOLARSHIPS & AWARDS ADMINISTERED BY FGS

- UVic Graduate Fellowships and Graduate Entrance Awards
- Tri-Agency (NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR) Scholarships: CGSD, CGSM, Vanier & MSFSS
- Donor Awards
- Rhodes Scholarships
- UVic Gold and Silver Medal Awards
- CAGS Excellence Awards
- MacKenzie King
- Sarah Spencer
- Google Fellowship
- Other awards as they come up

WHAT WE DO

- Liaise with Tri-Agencies: feedback on processes, advocate in unusual applicant/recipient circumstances
- Clarify eligibility guidelines for applicants and help with applications
- Organize UVic internal competitions, timelines, coaches, workshops
- Issue scholarship payments, manage award changes due to leaves, etc.
- Funding reconciliations, Tri-Agency payments

WHAT WE DON'T DO

- Not solely responsible to increase Tri-Agency success rates
- Help students choose a topic for their research proposals
- Determine Tri-Agency quotas, rules, expectations

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- ✓ Give yourself enough time to write a strong letter
- ✓ Review evaluation criteria and tailor your letter to align accordingly
- ✓ Read the student's draft application
- ✓ Proofread for mistakes, gender bias, and poorly expressed ideas

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- ✓ Contextualize your assessment according to your field's disciplinary norms
 - Situate yourself as a highly qualified assessor of this student's work
 - Highlight the significance of the student's proposed research
 - Use specific examples to support your assessment
 - Describe the generally accepted expectations in your field for a master's or doctoral student; timelines for publications, patents, program completions

PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Not spell-checked/full of mistakes
- Vague/thin/generic, lacking in clarity/substance
- Not tailored to the specific student or award criteria
- Lacking suitable context for the discipline
- Over-use of superlatives with no supporting examples
- Too specialized for a general audience of reviewers

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Writing letters for multiple students competing for the same award
- Recognizing when you may not be the best reviewer for the student
- Recruiting colleagues or graduate advisors to proof-read letters
- Unconscious bias and EDI considerations

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

- Use **first and last name**, and omit courtesy titles (*Ms., Mr.*). Use “**the applicant**” instead of “he/she”.
- Avoid distinctions based on **physical attributes** including age (*mature student, young researcher*) and **personal information** (*disability, life/knowledge journey*) unless in consultation with applicant to provide insight into performance.
- Focus on **research excellence** (*thought-provoking, innovative, novel, impactful*) and use **action verbs** that accurately describe the applicant’s role (avoid *assisted* or *aided*). Avoid focus on **interpersonal skills using gendered terms** (*kind, compassionate, helpful, warm, caring, tactful*).

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

- Use **'stand-out' adjectives** – as appropriate – for all genders (*superb, outstanding, confident, ambitious*). Avoid **grindstone adjectives** that suggest the applicant's success is due to effort (*hardworking, dependable, conscientious, diligent, dedicated*) rather than exceptional ability.
- Avoid **doubt raisers** (hedges, faint praise) that unintentionally raise questions about an applicant's ability to be successful (e.g., comments on English language proficiency).

TRI-AGENCY AWARD CRITERIA

Canada Graduate Scholarship – Master's (CGSM)

- 50% academic excellence, 30% research potential, 20% personal characteristics & interpersonal skills

Canada Graduate Scholarship – Doctoral (CGSD)

- 50% research ability & potential, 50% relevant experience within and beyond academia

Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship

- Academic excellence, research potential, leadership potential, demonstrated ability (all weighted equally)

TRI-AGENCY INDICATORS

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE	RESEARCH POTENTIAL
GPA, academic record (first class average)	Quality & originality of contributions to research & development
Scholarships & awards held	Relevance of work experience & academic training
Duration of previous studies	Significance, feasibility & merit of proposed research
Type of program & courses pursued	Judgement & ability to think critically
Course load, relative standing (if available)	Ability to apply skills & knowledge; initiative & autonomy
	Research experience & achievement relative to expectations for candidate's academic experience

TRI-AGENCY INDICATORS (CONT'D)

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS & SKILLS	RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS INCLUDE
Work experience	Publications, presentations, posters
Leadership experience	Contributions to policy and practice
Project management including organizing conferences, meetings	Communication of research results to specialist & non-specialist audiences
Ability or potential to communicate theoretical/scientific concepts clearly in written & oral formats	Creation/curation of data sets, appropriate data stewardship
Involvement in academic life	Strengthening of research networks
Volunteerism & community outreach	Advances to EDI in research ecosystem

★ *Don't undervalue 'non-academic' accomplishments which may be the tie-breaker between two students with equal academic & research scores*

DONOR AWARDS

Category A: Limited to a specific department (e.g., must go to a student in Economics who...) and only requires a completed nomination form to FGS.

Category B: Open to students in 2 or more departments and requires additional supporting documents including 1-page reference letter. Winners selected through FGS adjudication.

Terms of eligibility

- available at [FGS](#) & on nomination forms
- may include gender, citizenship, research area, & awards that may/may not be held concurrently

Indicate how student fulfills eligibility terms

- e.g., if award is for research in rheumatic disease, clearly indicate how the student's research is related to rheumatic disease

TRI-AGENCY RESOURCES

- CGSD [selection criteria](#) & information for [NSERC referees](#), [SSHRC referees](#), & [CIHR referees](#)
- Vanier [selection criteria](#) & information for [referees](#)
- CGSM [selection criteria](#) & information for [referees](#)
- [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) (DORA)
- [Equity, diversity and inclusion](#) resources
- [Bias in Peer Review](#) (video)

OTHER RESOURCES

- UVic Style Guide: [Inclusive language](#)
- APA Style Guide: [Bias-free language](#)
- Canadian Commission for UNESCO: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA): [Good practices for researchers](#) and [Toolkit](#)
- [Bias in selection: evidence and remedies](#) (video) (UBC)
- [Award reference letters: tips, templates & recommendations for writers](#) (Guelph)
- [Unconscious bias in graduate admissions & scholarship adjudication](#) (McMaster)
- [Better letters: equitable practices for writing, reading, & soliciting letters of recommendation](#) (USC)

WRAP-UP AND QUESTIONS

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PRESENTATION SLIDES:

Available at FGS [Scholarship application help](#)