



# Writing Effective Reference Letters

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# Workshop Outline

- ▶ Welcome/Introduction/Territorial Acknowledgement
  - ▶ Overview of FGS Scholarships and Awards
  - ▶ Purpose of the Workshop
- ▶ Crafting Effective Letters
  - ▶ General Guidelines
  - ▶ Focusing on Specific Award Criteria (Tri-Council vs Donor Awards)
- ▶ Questions/Wrap-up
- ▶ List of Helpful Resources



# Overview of FGS Scholarships & Awards

- ▶ Some scholarship competitions and payments FGS administers:
  - ▶ UVic Graduate Fellowships and Graduate Awards
  - ▶ Tri-Council Scholarships (NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR)
    - ▶ CGSD, CGSM, Vanier & MSFSS
  - ▶ Donor Awards
  - ▶ Rhodes Scholarships
  - ▶ UVic Gold and Silver Medal Awards
  - ▶ CAGS Excellence Awards
  - ▶ MacKenzie King
  - ▶ Sarah Spencer
  - ▶ Travel Grant Program
  - ▶ Others as they come up



# Overview of FGS Scholarships & Awards

What we do:

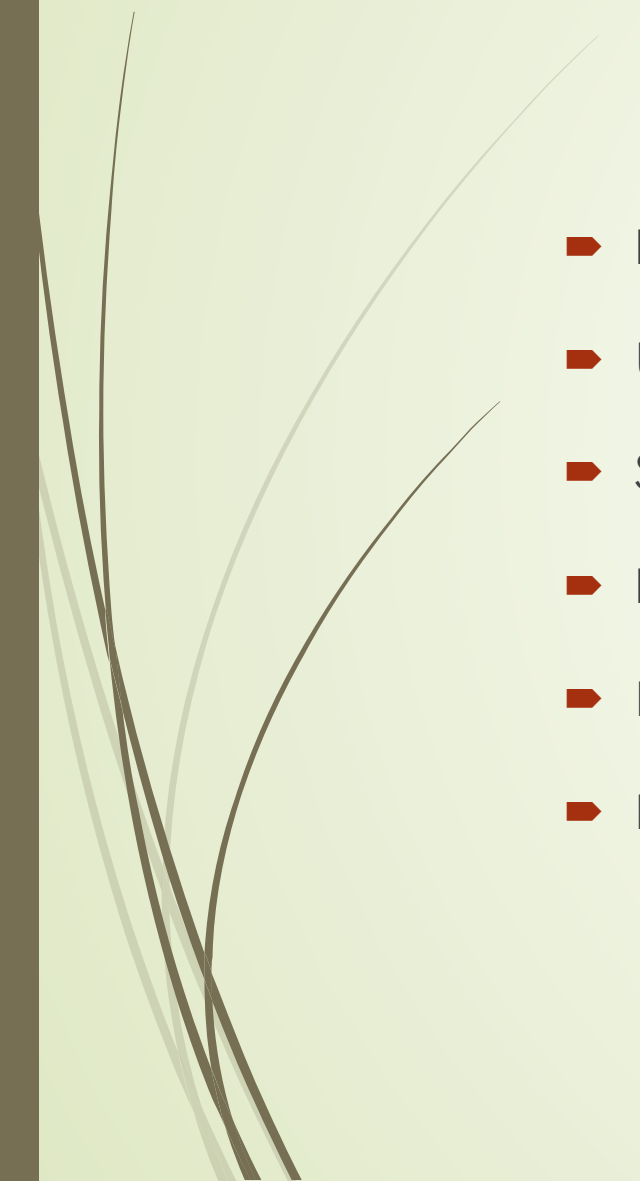
- ▶ Liaise with Tri-Council (TC)
  - ▶ Feedback on TC processes, advocate in unusual applicant/recipient circumstances
- ▶ Clarify eligibility guidelines for applicants and help with applications
- ▶ Organize UVic internal competitions, timelines, coaches, workshops
- ▶ Issue scholarship payments, manage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

What we don't do:

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



# 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 reference letters that align with award criteria
  - ▶ Reduce the number of poorly written reference letters
  - ▶ Provide additional resources
- 



# 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
- ▶ 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
- ▶ Proof read for mistakes, gender bias, and poorly expressed ideas



# 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
- ▶ Gender bias and EDI considerations





# Examples of gender-biased wording

## Adjectives to avoid (grindstone adjectives)

- Caring
- Compassionate
- Hard-working
- Conscientious
- Dependable
- Diligent
- Dedicated
- Helpful
- Tactful
- Interpersonal
- Warm
- productive



# Award Criteria for Tri-council Awards (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR)

- ▶ **Canada Graduate Scholarship – Doctoral (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR)**
  - ▶ 50% Research ability & potential 50% Relevant experience & achievements obtained within and beyond academia
- ▶ **Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR)**
  - ▶ Academic Excellence, Research Potential, Leadership Potential & Demonstrated Ability (no specific % assigned to each criteria)
- ▶ **Canada Graduate Scholarship – Master's (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR)**
  - ▶ Academic Excellence 50%, Research Potential 30% & Personal characteristics and interpersonal skills 20%

# Specific Indicators of Tri-Council Award Criteria

## Academic Excellence

- ▶ GPA/Academic record (first-class average)
- ▶ Scholarships and awards held
- ▶ Duration of previous studies
- ▶ Type of program and courses pursued
- ▶ Course load Relative standing (if available)

## Research Potential

- ▶ Quality and originality of contributions to research and development
- ▶ Relevance of work experience and academic training
- ▶ Significance, feasibility and merit of proposed research
- ▶ Judgment and ability to think critically
- ▶ Ability to apply skills and knowledge; Initiative and autonomy
- ▶ Research experience and achievements relative to expectations of someone with the candidate's academic experience



# Indicators of Personal Characteristics/Interpersonal Skills

- ▶ Work experience
- ▶ Leadership experience
- ▶ Project management including organizing conferences and meetings
- ▶ Ability or potential to communicate theoretical, technical and/or scientific concepts clearly and logically in written and oral formats
- ▶ Involvement in academic life
- ▶ Volunteerism/community outreach

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



# Donor Awards

- ▶ Divide them into two categories
  - ▶ **Category A** – limited to a specific department (must go to a student in Economic who...) only requires a completed nomination form to FGS
  - ▶ **Category B** – open to students in 2 or more departments, requires additional supporting documents including a 1-page reference letter, winners are selected through FGS adjudication
- ▶ Terms of eligibility are available on FGS website, also written on the nomination forms, and may include things like gender, citizenship, research area, other award held/not held
- ▶ Be sure to indicate how the student fulfills the eligibility terms, e.g. if the award is for a student doing research in rheumatic disease be sure to clearly indicate their research is related to rheumatic disease



# Helpful Links and Additional Resources

- ▶ Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Victoria, Scholarship Application Help <https://www.uvic.ca/graduatestudies/finances/external-scholarships/scholarship-help/index.php>
- ▶ Government of Canada Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/nfrf-fnfr/edi-eng.aspx>



# Wrap-Up/Questions

► Contact us at:

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