Rhodes Letters of Recommendation

Thank you for agreeing to write a Rhodes Scholarship letter of recommendation. This is a time-consuming task and we greatly appreciate your efforts. This document provides some tips for writing an effective letter based on the U-M nominating committee's collective experience reviewing potential nominees. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of National Scholarships and Fellowships at onsf.info@umich.edu; we are happy to help.

Overview of the Rhodes Nomination Process

Each year approximately 20-30 students apply for U-M nomination to the Rhodes Scholarships, which support graduate study at Oxford. Students may not apply for these scholarships directly without U-M endorsement. The U-M nominating committee will review these applications, select approximately ten of the most promising candidates for campus interviews, and nominate approximately five candidates for the national competition. Top candidates are also frequently nominated for the Marshall Scholarship as well, which supports graduate study at any UK university. *The deadline for U-M applications and letters of recommendation is the fourth Monday of August.* Applications and letters *for selected nominees only* must then also be uploaded to the Rhodes online application by the final week of September.

The Importance of Recommendations

Applications for the Rhodes comprise a 1,000-word personal statement; a 750-word academic proposal; official transcript(s) and 2-page resume of activities; a nominating letter from the U-M Provost; and 4-8 letters of recommendation. Highly compelling recommendations are essential to successful applications. Roughly 1,000 Americans are nominated by their institutions each year for 32 Rhodes scholarships. Most nominees will have exemplary academic records and strong extracurricular activities. *What sets finalists and winners apart from the rest, in our experience, is the depth and quality of their characters and their potential for future leadership as reported by the letter writers.* It is of vital importance, therefore, that your letter be clear, detailed, well-written, and no longer than two pages.

A Rhodes packet must contain at least four academic recommendations from faculty who have taught or supervised the student in research, plus 3-4 letters attesting to the applicant's demonstrated leadership potential and commitment to serving others. When asking for a letter, the applicant should specify your role in their overall packet of letters.

Establish Context, Personal Knowledge, and Sincerity

"Unsubstantiated hyperbole often undermines the credibility of an otherwise positive recommendation." State the context in which you know the student and establish that you have specific, personal knowledge of the student's performance and career aspirations. Whenever possible, you should include concrete stories about your academic or professional interactions with the student. These are the most effective means of conveying sincerity in your recommendation and can be very powerful with readers. *Use these past/current examples as evidence for predictions about their future flourishing and leadership, both at Oxford and in their future careers.*

When asking for a letter, the candidate should provide you with a copy of their transcript, resume, selected UK graduate program(s), and specific ideas about how your letter will contribute to their overall application strategy. Please do not take offense if the candidate is unusually frank about this; we have helped them select specific letter writers that will collectively represent each of the high points of their applications. If you are unable to give specific examples of a candidate's personal or academic qualifications for the scholarship, we recommend that you make this clear to the candidate and, if necessary, decline to write a letter of recommendation. If you have questions about your qualifications as a recommender, please reach out to ONSF's director, Dr. Henry Dyson, at hdyson@umich.edu.

Make the Case for Excellence and Avoid Implicit Bias

Rhodes Scholarship candidates typically have a 3.8 or better GPA, have made significant contributions to research, are considered the very best in their departments or cohorts, and will be successful candidates for top graduate schools in their field. If you are an academic letter writer, your letter should attest to the applicant's high level of achievement at U-M, their admissions qualifications and the likelihood of flourishing as a Rhodes Scholar, and their potential to be a thought-leader in their future field. Academic letters for the Rhodes will also be for graduate admissions to the programs listed in the candidate's academic proposal. Explain why the candidate will excel in their selected Oxford graduate program. If you have specific knowledge of this field, explain why Oxford is a particularly good choice for this candidate.

If you've assigned the student an A+ in your course, you may want to say something about what that distinction means (e.g. top score in the class). Regarding research projects or term papers, be specific about the qualities that impressed you (intelligence, understanding, insightfulness, speed, commitment, ability to work independently, technical skills, communication skills, teamwork, and personality, etc.). Minimize general praise of the candidate's generic qualities (e.g. "the candidate is highly motivated and hardworking") in favor of qualities that make the applicant truly exceptional even among other highly motivated and hard-working peers. If you're writing on behalf of an applicant from an underrepresented group (including women) pay close attention to the language that you use and avoid terms associated with implicit bias, even in statements intended as praise.

Future Leadership Potential and Commitment to the Good of Others

Leadership and character letters should state the likelihood that this candidate will make significant contributions to their chosen field and help the committee understand the candidate's driving motivations. Tell stories that emphasize the candidate's initiative, creativity and insight, problem-solving, ability to create a shared vision, management of workflow and deadlines, management of team members, self-awareness and promotion of diversity, resilience, emotional intelligence, and ability to deliver results. As you do so, again be careful to avoid implicit bias in your statements. Talk about the candidate's motivations, especially as these relate to service to others or the public good. Is the candidate driven by a particular cause, problem, or commitment to work with those who are disadvantaged or disenfranchised? What specific examples have you observed in your interactions of these motivations or of the candidate's altruistic character more generally? Once you've established that the candidate possesses these traits based on past experience, project them into the future: where does the candidate's trajectory lead in 5, 10, and 20 years?

Explicit Comparisons

One effective way of supporting these claims is by comparing the student favorably to other students, interns, employees, or peers who have also gone on to make significant contributions in the same field. ***Because letters of recommendation are inherently evaluative, at some point - typically in the first or final paragraphs - you should be explicit about the scale against which you are comparing the applicant.*** You will want to select the best scale against which you can favorably compare the applicant with integrity. Examples might include: "The best undergraduate in our department," "One of the best students I've encountered in 20 years of teaching at U-M [and other peer institutions]," "Compares favorably with previous Rhodes/Marshall [or comparable scholarships] winners for whom I've written."

FERPA and Submission Instructions

For the U-M nomination process, the candidate is responsible for providing you with instructions for electronic letter submission. U-M applicants must complete an online FERPA waiver before their recommenders can submit a letter to ONSF. The candidate should provide a copy of this FERPA waiver with you indicating whether or not they have waived their access to the letter (i.e. whether or not it will be confidential). Letters of recommendation will be treated as confidential and will not be released to the student without your permission unless the student's FERPA waiver indicates otherwise. If you have questions about ONSF's FERPA policy, please see this page or contact us directly.

The FERPA waive also includes the instructions for submitting your letter of recommendation to ONSF via Qualtrics. If you have not seen a FERPA release from the student you are recommending, please ask the student for a copy. Once submitted, your letter will be added to the student's electronic application file to be reviewed by the U-M Rhodes and Marshall Nomination Committee. If you are not comfortable with electronic submission, you may choose to email your letter directly to ONSF at onsf.applications@umich.edu. ONSF may reach out to you if there are questions or concerns regarding your letter of recommendation or if a deadline has passed and your letter has not been received.

If an applicant is selected as a U-M nominee, we will contact you early in September to upload your letter to the Rhodes Scholarship application web portal. If you know that you will be unavailable to upload the final draft of the letter in September, please let ONSF know at onsf.info@umich.edu so that we can make plans in advance.

Note: If you have been asked to provide a letter of recommendation for both the Marshall Scholarship and the Rhodes Scholarship, please review both advice documents.

Again, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact ONSF directly at onsf.info@umich.edu.