

# Tri-Council Scholarship Competitions

Writing a compelling support letter



# Importance of writing a good support letter

Referees are responsible for putting the student's accomplishments into context for ranking committee members who come from a broad range of disciplines

# Understand your audience

Banting, Vanier, CGS-D are ranked at the university as a first pass and then ranked at a central group in Ottawa, by committees usually composed of representatives of each agency (NSERC, CIHR, SSHRC) voting

CGS-M is ranked within the university and only by representative of the agency to which the applicant was submitted (ex. NSERC CGS-M applicants are reviewed by Science and Engineering faculty)



## Know your subject

It is very obvious to reviewers, and not in a good way, when the referee is not very closely connected with the applicant and either working from a script given by the student or summarizing a CV

# Constructing a support letter

Ensure the letter is easy to navigate with separate paragraphs talking about the candidate's excellence in academics, research, and leadership, as well as activities that display a thoughtfulness towards EDI





# Typical length

To avoid giving too few details of the candidate's qualities as a researcher and leader, support letters should be two pages in length (for the Banting and Vanier, fill to the word count limit for the CGS-D and CGS-M)



**Be  
detailed  
but not  
personal**

Letters must show the referee is familiar with the candidate and their capabilities, but this needs to be balanced with a preference for inclusive language and avoiding details about their personal life

# Preparing to Write

Make sure that you have read the student's research proposal to be included in the application and have seen their CV before writing

# Uniqueness of the candidate

Use the majority of the letter to amplify strengths of the candidate in the areas of research and leadership since all applicants are academically strong and rankers that are considering academics in their scoring don't need help in understanding a transcript

# Avoid Discipline Specific Lingo

Students are generally too new to their fields of study to convert discipline specific terminology into clear, concise explanations of their research, and so the onus falls to the referee to put the excellence of the student into understandable context for rankers not part of the discipline

# The student is more important than the research proposal

The research work is largely a platform for the student to display their ingenuity and technical skills. Don't talk only about the research, but be sure to also talk about the merits of the student and their past and potential contributions to research.

And remember – research is only 50% of what the student is being evaluated upon for the scholarship, so balance the letter with equally long sections for research and leadership.

# Evidence supported skills

Claims of personality traits (ex. innovative) are easily dismissed by reviewers if not associated with several examples where the applicant displayed this trait to the referee

Additionally, focus on cognitive and non-cognitive attributes in a way that they are on balance with the award criteria

# Evidence supported skills

Focus on their professional accomplishments  
not the effort to achieve them

Avoid doubt-raising phrases and hedges such as  
“likely to succeed” vs ‘will undoubtedly succeed

Do not include personal information related to  
ethnicity, age, hobbies, marital or family status,  
religion, disability.

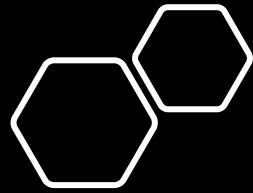
# Leadership

Leadership is beneficial for the CGS but it is crucial for the Banting and Vanier

Reviewers are not looking for roles that any students in the Faculty does regularly (ex. being a TA) but rather unique roles (ex. President of a society, started a new company/NGO, launched a mentorship program) where the student is exceptional. Make sure to really highlight these unique roles in the letter.

# Volunteership or Leadership

Support letters where the referee is confusing volunteering activities (helper roles) versus leadership activities (organizer and planning roles) don't usually resonate well



# Additional resources suggested by ranking committee members

- [https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding gender bias in letter of reference writing.pdf](https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding%20gender%20bias%20in%20letter%20of%20reference%20writing.pdf)