

Truman Scholarship---Letters of Recommendation

We asked members of our selection panels to share their perspective on the letters they review. Their responses are collected here in two articles. The first is by Executive Secretary Louis Blair. The second is by Scott Henderson 1982 Truman Scholar, Veteran Member of the Truman Scholarship Finalists Selection Committee, and Assistant Professor at Furman University.

Letters of Recommendation: What selection panel members like to see, and what leaves them cold
By Louis Blair

What helps:

- Point to some specific examples of what the Truman Candidate has done -- gave a terrific presentation, was a dedicated employee who figured out new business practices -- look for results.
- Provide information about the student's strengths in an interview. Letters should assist the committee in interviewing a student.
- Be specific. If the student wrote a brilliant paper on quarks, mention the title and why it stood out.
- [For the nomination letter] Make the case for why this person would be a strong Truman (Rhodes, etc.) candidate. The letter should avoid the redundant information about GPA, class standing, etc. (unless there's something about it not captured in the numbers). Knowing what's unusual about the student (in areas relevant to the scholarship) is really critical.
- Give the reader some context of how the person knows the Truman Candidate --school, civic, work, etc.--and for what period of time that the person has been known.
- Provide specific dates, times and location of the event/activity being reviewed.
- Put the student in perspective. Percentages sometimes help; "top 10% of students in my 50 years of teaching" when true is useful.
- Give serious indication that you know the candidate personally (when possible). For example, incidents or actions that are unique to your relationship are more credible, than writing about things that are obviously on the resume and can be repeated without verification. Comments about character from personal knowledge are also quite credible for me. That means that the referring official is somewhat going out on a limb, and that means a lot.

What hurts:

- Do not write three boilerplate paragraphs about the school or university. The committee does not particularly care where US News ranked the school. The letter should be about the student. Include information about your institution only when it helps the reader interpret the student's activities or academic record, i.e. provides relevant context.
- Avoid letters that only tell what grade was given in what course. They are useless. Letter-writers should provide substantial information about classroom experiences.
- The fact that a student did the reading for the class should not be included in the recommendation. It should simply be expected and implies that other students did not do the reading (reflecting badly on the institution).

- Be honest, but cautious about criticism. Committees take it seriously. Be fair to both the candidate and to the reader.
- Do not include general platitudes that the Truman scholar is a great person and is a candidate for sainthood.
- Avoid citing experiences that happened quite a few years ago -- the more recent the better. What the student did in high school is not relevant in the vast majority of cases.

Note: it is a real downer if the person writing the letter mentions that they only briefly met the Truman Candidate but the staff said nice things.

And a few general observations:

Advisors should encourage the candidate to seek out the people who really know them well. Think outside the box of tenured professors at the university. Not that those are bad, but they may not be the people who are most familiar with the candidate. However, if the letter is coming from someone outside an academic setting, it would be a good idea to acquaint the person with the Truman Scholarship program and to the general style of letters of recommendation.

For advisors, this may also require some earlier identification of scholar candidates, to make sure that they are hooked up with professors and people in their communities who will be able to get to know them well. Some young people don't bond very well with people outside their age group on their own, and they may need a little encouragement.

On the lighter side, we have words of wisdom..

From the Desk of Scott Henderson:

Helpful components in a letter of recommendation:

1. For the faculty rep letter: a brief biographical sketch of the student: this info brings the student alive, indicates familiarity with the student on the part of the letter writer, and can also bring to light salient facts (first member of a family to go off to college, works 100 hours a week, etc.)

All other letter writers:

2. When I read a letter, I want specific, even quantified data. For example: "Steve is among the three best spellers I've taught in 27 years at Bee University." Or, even if qualitative, I look for specific instances cited in support of a general point: "Susy's leadership was also demonstrated last March when she organized a campus-wide demonstration against Dr. Henderson's dress code."

3. Related to number two above: I find quotations from other professors/individuals helpful. "Dr. Drone also notes that 'Steve is among the top five students I've ever taught...clearly headed for academic success in grad school.'"

4. I also look for some sort of assessment of the student's personality and/or disposition. For instance: "Even though he has the highest GPA of any chemistry major at Test Tube University,

Charlie's outgoing, friendly, and a lot of fun to be around. And the practical jokes involving litmus paper are a hoot."

Characteristics that undermine a letter of recommendation:

1. A letter that is nothing but a summary of the application is utterly useless. I feel like the writer is assuming that I can't read (sorta like sitting next to someone who reads movie subtitles out loud to you). Certainly, there can be SOME overlap between a letter and an application, but it should be kept to a minimum. Otherwise, one can get the sense that the writer really doesn't know the applicant (see #2 below).

2. The writer should know the student well. If not, then another writer should be chosen. If this, for some reason, isn't an option, then the writer should at least have a couple of meaningful/informative conversations with the student prior to writing the letter.

3. I'm really turned off by letters in which the writer talks about how well the student did in his/her class. Even in a letter attesting to academic potential, this is weak evidence to adduce; it's like saying, "Bill is one of the smartest people I've seen in the last 20 minutes." And, invariably, the professor throws in a line about how tough HIS/HER classes are; this makes it sound like it's the professor who's applying for the scholarship.

4. Related to number 2 above, a letter shouldn't be written by an "important person" unless the person really knows the student. In other words, I would not be impressed by a letter from Bill Clinton if it were obvious that Clinton didn't know "that woman." At the other extreme, I'm generally not impressed by letters written by family members. I assume that a letter written by an applicant's mother will be positive regardless of the child's mediocrity (or prison record). Since I've actually read a Truman letter of rec from an applicant's mother, there's more truth than poetry (or humor) in my observation.

5. Letters should avoid vague platitudes that, in fact, are really evasions in disguise: "Betty is not a traditional leader, but instead leads by example" (translation: Betty hasn't demonstrated any leadership). Or: "Shelly's GPA should be evaluated in light of the tough standards we set here at Pleasantville Community College (translation: Shelly isn't a particularly good student). Or, finally: "Don completed his assignments on time." (translation: next application, please).

6. Letter writers should not feel compelled to substantiate or agree with every assertion an applicant makes. In 1997, for example, an applicant wrote this for number 7 (leadership example): "One part of leadership is the ability to inspire others. As a fashion model, I presented clothing in a way to inspire others to buy." Regrettably, the professor who wrote the leadership letter tried to justify why this was a good example of leadership. The applicant was not selected for an interview, and our tracking satellites have lost contact with the professor.

Some Responses:

Here is the Truman person responding:

We don't provide guidance on who the letters should come from because we leave that to the student and the Fac Rep to determine. Other than requiring that the Institutional Nomination Letter come from faculty, we are flexible as to the authors of the remaining letters.

Generally, the letter regarding "Intellect and Prospects for Continued Academic Success" comes from a faculty member - but I have seen very convincing letters that came from supervisors, community leaders, etc. The remaining letters can come from anyone - faculty or "civilian" - so long as they can appropriately address the candidate's qualifications. Our main concern - and one that surpasses any concerns over grammar, style, or the occupation of the letter's author - is that the writer can honestly and thoughtfully express first-hand knowledge of the student's commitment to public service or leadership.

I'm sure that someone at the Truman Foundation will respond, but the directions on the recommendation forms are quite clear: one has to be from someone who can testify to the leadership example; one on the commitment to a career in public service; the third, on potential for graduate school. The first one is almost never from a faculty member; the third one always is; the second can be.