Writing the Fulbright Scholarship Recommendation
by Joe Schall

The criteria you should address in a Fulbright Scholarship recommendation letter include:

- strong level of knowledge and potential for future growth in the chosen field;
- ability to carry out research and think and write analytically;
- emotional stability, maturity, motivation, and seriousness of purpose;
- appropriate linguistic preparation and ability to adapt to a different cultural environment;
- a proposed project that is feasible and has merit;
- likelihood of making a favorable impression as a United States citizen abroad.

The best Fulbright recommendation letters detail the student’s background in connection with the proposed project, and are written in a tone that is energetic and genuine. Among the recommendation letters from previous years, one successful letter complimented a student’s ability as a designated discussion leader to keep up with current events in the Middle East and to motivate the students in an 8:00 a.m. class. Another letter offered the relevant aside that the Federal Aviation Administration had shown interest in a student’s research, while another letter took a moment to comment on the kind of vision that a student’s specific study plan had in relation to the agriculture and economy of the host country. Finally, one letter ended with the simple and genuine declaration: “She should become a diplomat.” Such personal, considered, emphatic testimonies reflect familiarity with and abundant confidence in the student.

Weak Fulbright recommendation letters tend to be so generic that they could apply to almost any student’s background, and weak letters from previous years made no attempt to match a student’s abilities and character with the proposed study plan or type of program. Some letter writers were careful to detail the student’s academic excellence, but made no comments beyond what could easily be gleaned from a review of the student’s transcript. It is vital that a letter of support offers some detail that fits only that individual being recommended, and that the recommender comments specifically on the student’s plan of study.

Finally, despite the application’s request that you comment in such areas as a student’s linguistic ability and the resources available abroad, you should not feel compelled to reach beyond your experience in any of your comments. For instance, you may know nothing about the student’s linguistic ability or the availability of resources in the host country. In this case, trust that the student’s application as a whole will serve the committee’s needs, and that a stumbling, unsure effort by you in an area outside your bailiwick might only do harm. If you appear to be reaching for detail, it will likely show.

The above is adapted from Joe Schall’s Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook, with the author's permission. The second edition of this handbook is available on October 1, 2004, from Outernet Publishing (http://www.outernetpublishing.com/writing.htm). Questions and detailed ordering information requests can be directed to Joe Schall (schall@ems.psu.edu).