

Characteristics of Effective Recommendation Letters for Rhodes and Marshall Candidates

The most effective letters –

1. Are *not* standard or boilerplate letters. To help a student in this competition, a letter must be a very special one, written especially for that student and for this competition. Straightforward letters about the student doing all of the work, writing good papers, and getting good grades are not very helpful. In fact, boilerplate letters probably hurt a student more than they help in this rarefied competition. The most effective letters usually run to over a page and take an hour or more to write.
2. Are vivid. Vividness and specificity mean everything here.
3. State how long and in what capacity the professor has known the student.
4. State where the student ranks in relation to other students the professor has taught. If possible, the letter should compare the student with other students who have gone on to top graduate/professional programs or received Rhodes, Marshall or Mitchell scholarships.
5. Include vivid personal memories of the student and suggestive anecdotes, something that indicates the professor knows the student very well and thinks very highly of him or her.
6. Describe in some detail and evaluate the student's scholarly work, especially a major piece of research. The letter should help the committee understand the significance of this research, the contribution it has made.
7. Describe the student's personality, work habits and interpersonal skills. Has s/he built productive relationships with people, engaging with them in his/her field or beyond? Does s/he appreciate the needs, motives and concerns of others? Is the student self-confident and able to seize opportunities? Give examples.
8. Comment on how well prepared the student is to study at Oxford (or another British or Irish university).
9. Explain how study at Oxford (or another British or Irish university) will make a difference in the student's intellectual growth.
10. Comment on the prospects for the student to play an influential part in the betterment of society.