

## **Marshall, Rhodes (US/Canada), and Churchill Scholarships**

Thank you for taking the time to advise, and possibly write a letter in support of our student's application. Letters of reference are a critical component of the Marshall, Rhodes, and Churchill applications. Indeed, in competitions like these, where many applicants have stellar academic records and impressive achievements outside of the classroom, a strong letter of recommendation is often what sets a candidate apart. This document provides some practical information about letters of recommendation. We have also highlighted aspects of the student's candidacy that are of particular interest to the mission of these fellowships, and that may be areas you choose to touch on in your letter.

### **Crafting an Effective Letter of Recommendation for a Competitive Fellowship**

Faculty who have served on selection committees often note that letters are particularly helpful when they give details or examples to support any claims made. Your letter should therefore speak to what you know about the student from your first-hand encounters with them, with, whenever possible, concrete stories about your academic or professional interactions with the student. Including such references conveys a sense both of how you have worked with the student, as well as your personal relationship with him/her. In addition, and as is explained in detail below, these fellowships are looking for well-rounded individuals, students who are good citizens and good human beings. To the extent possible, it can be helpful to discuss a student's intellectual ability as well as their character and their future potential. At the same time, do remember that unrelenting praise may not persuade your readers. As the Marshall guidelines put it, "Unsubstantiated hyperbole often undermines the credibility of a positive recommendation."

So how long is such a letter? Including such detail means that a strong letter is typically 1.5-2 pages in length (keeping in mind that the Marshall has a 1000 word limit). In asking for a letter, the candidate should provide you with additional materials that may be useful to you as you write: a copy of her/his transcript, resume, application materials, selected UK graduate program(s), and some idea of the role your letter will play in her/his overall application package.

### **When to say 'no'**

Letter writing is a time consuming task, particularly given the length of a letter for the Rhodes/Marshall/Churchill, which typically extends to 1.5-2 pages in length. Generic letters that confirm a student's performance in a class or their suitability for an internship are not suitable for these competitions and will disadvantage your student's candidacy. If you do not have the time to devote to such a letter, or if you do not feel that you know the student well enough to speak in detail about them, please decline to write the letter.

## **Practical Information about the Campus Endorsement and Letter-Writing Process<sup>1</sup>**

The Churchill, Marshall, and Canadian/US Rhodes require institutional endorsement, and thus each summer our office convenes a faculty committee that reviews all applications for these opportunities, interviews students, and prepares a letter of endorsement for each student who is nominated to move forward to the national competition. If you have agreed to write a letter in support of a student's application or applications, you need submit only one letter for the campus endorsement process. Your letter, which is kept strictly confidential, may be addressed to a single fellowship or it may address all the relevant fellowships for which your student is applying. Regardless of how many fellowships your student seeks to apply to, however, for the campus endorsement process only one version of your letter is requested.

Please submit your letter by the internal deadline (in mid-August) for these fellowships to [ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu). While your student's application will be read by the committee without your letter of support, such an application is disadvantaged in the nomination process, as the committee considers seriously the support of faculty who know the student and their work. If your student is nominated to move forward to the national competition, you will be asked to edit your letters so that they are addressed to the appropriate fellowship, and to upload your letter(s) to the appropriate online application system as part of your student's application to the national competition.

A few practical guidelines to keep in mind for letters of support, should your student be nominated:

- The Marshall requires letters to be no longer than 1000 words. Please upload your letter to the Marshall online application portal one week prior to the national deadline. Applications that are missing recommendations cannot be submitted or uploaded, and the applicant will be unable to continue with the application process. If you need URF to enter the text of your letter for you, please e-mail it to our office ([ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu)) one week prior to the national deadline. If you have submitted your letter electronically and then wish to make changes to it, please contact me at [ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu). While I cannot input any changes, I can give you electronic access to do so.
- The Rhodes word count is 1000 words. Please submit your letter electronically by the national deadline. We have no access to the Rhodes' application system, and cannot facilitate this process.
- The Churchill does not have a word count. Your letter will typically be read by academic scientists in a variety of fields.

### **WRITING FOR THE MARSHALL:**

The Marshall Scholarship seeks to support scholars who have the potential to excel as scholars, leaders, and contributors to U.K.-U.S. understanding. Selectors also look for strong motivation and seriousness of purpose, including the presentation of a specific and realistic academic program in

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<sup>1</sup>Thank you to our colleagues at the University of Michigan and Yale University, whose materials have been instrumental to developing this page.

the U.K. Aside from being stellar students, candidates should have made significant contributions to research in their field, and should be considered stellar candidates for top graduate programs in their field. If you are an academic letter writer, your letter should seek to explain how the candidate fits this profile. To this end, if this student has earned a top grade in your course, you may want to say something about what that means in specific terms. If this student has submitted outstanding work in the form of research or term papers, be specific with your praise and link it to the work they have done. Committee members have noted that general praise of a candidate (ex: this student is hardworking and motivated) is made more memorable if instead the writer speaks to qualities that make the applicant stand out, even among other highly motivated/hardworking students.

In addition, your letter should explain why the candidate will excel in his/her selected UK program. If you are familiar with the applicant's proposed field of study, explaining why the UK program selected is a particularly good choice will strengthen the student's candidacy. The Marshall is also interested in understanding the applicant's potential to make future contributions to his/her chosen field—to be, in other words, a leader in whatever field they have chosen. Giving an example or sharing a story in your letter that displays the student's initiative, their ability to play a leadership role on a team, their ability to solve problems or grapple with failure, to be creative and have vision, are all excellent qualities upon which to reflect.

Below is a summary of some of the topics your letter might address:

- How the student's academic achievements and/or other activities speak to their character and intellect;
- Their preparation for the proposed course of study, through research and/or advanced coursework;
- How the candidate's proposed course of study fits into their proposed career plan, and why this student would be best served by spending 2 years in the UK;
- Potential to be a future leader in his/her chosen field;
- Potential to contribute to and gain from his/her UK university/adopted community in informative, instructive, significant ways;

Please note that if you have been asked to write the **Primary Academic Letter**, you should be able to provide specific, expert support on the candidate's proposed course of study, both in terms of its suitability as an integral step in the candidate's broader intellectual development, but also in terms of the student's academic qualifications for the scholarship and for the proposed program of study. This letter is similar to the kind of letter that would be sent to a top graduate program in the field.

**Please note: the Primary Academic Letter is often part of an initial screening and thus carries unusual weight.** Further information can be found at [www.marshallscholarship.org](http://www.marshallscholarship.org).

## WRITING FOR THE RHODES:

The US Rhodes Scholarship is awarded to 32 US citizens each year, allowing them to pursue 2-3 years of funded study at Oxford University. Rhodes selection committees are looking for students who excel academically, who seek to contribute to the well-being of others, and who will be leaders in their fields. The strongest letters will allow selection committee members to understand not only the general achievements of the applicant, but a distinctive quality or aspect of the applicant's candidacy that makes them stand out, even in a pool of highly qualified applicants. Speaking in specific terms about the student's character and their potential for future leadership are also critical components of the letter of recommendation. The below are the four areas that the Rhodes describes as criteria for applicants to its fellowship, and to the extent that you can comment on or have specific, first-hand knowledge of attributes or examples that speak to these criteria, they will strengthen the student's candidacy:

- Proven intellectual and academic achievement of the highest standard;
- Integrity of character, and demonstrated interest in and respect for their fellow beings;
- The ability to lead, and the energy to use their talents to the full;
- Excellence in qualities of mind and in qualities of person which, in combination, offer the promise of effective service to the world in the decades ahead.

Please note that in speaking to these criteria, it is recommended that you include concrete stories or examples about your academic or professional interactions with the student. Selection committee members have commented that such examples are the most effective means of conveying sincerity and a sense of your relationship with the candidate (as well as providing an indicator of how well you know the candidate).

**Academic Excellence:** If you are an academic letter writer, the purpose of your letter is to explain the contributions that the candidate has made, or has the potential to make, in the field. If the student has earned an A+ in your course, you may want to talk about what that distinction means; other potential areas of interest might regard research projects or term papers, with particular reference to the qualities that most impressed you about the student and their work. General praise should be limited; specific reflection on qualities that make the applicant stand out, even among a strong group of peers, is more compelling. If you have specific knowledge of the field or course that the student seeks to pursue in the UK, explain why the UK program is a good choice and/or what the candidate might gain from pursuing this degree program.

**Future Leadership Potential/Commitment to the Good of Others:** To the degree possible given your relationship with the student, your letter should consider the likelihood of this candidate making a significant contribution to their chosen field. Anecdotes or examples that emphasize the student's initiative, problem-solving, their creativity, resilience, self-awareness/sensitivity, can be concrete, specific ways to do this. If you are able, you might consider speaking to the candidate's motivations: what inspires or drives the candidate's commitment with regard to a particular field,

to service to others, and/or to the public good? Are their specific examples you can provide based on first-hand knowledge of the candidate that speak to this commitment?

In addressing these topics, you should plan on a letter that is 1.5-2 pages in length. Your student should provide you with additional materials that may be useful to you as you write: a copy of her/his transcript, resume, application materials, selected Oxford graduate program(s), etc. We at URF ([ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu)) are also happy to answer any questions that you might have!

### **WRITING FOR THE CHURCHILL:**

Established in 1963, the Churchill funds one year of graduate research and study in a STEM field at the University of Cambridge. 14 Scholars are selected each year, and they usually apply to complete a one year Master's degree in the UK before applying to a doctoral program. The Churchill seeks to identify applicants in the sciences and engineering who have proven talent in research (i.e. who demonstrate extensive experience, internships, or other relevant work). While the Churchill does not have a minimum GPA, they are looking for students who demonstrate outstanding academic achievement, in STEM courses in particular, and in the major especially. The selection committee is also interested in the personal qualities of the applicant—not so much if the applicant is “well-rounded,” but rather the committee is curious to hear of interests/achievements outside of research.

The selection committee is comprised of eight former Churchill Scholars from a variety of STEM disciplines. Typically a mathematician, physicist, chemist, engineer and two different kinds of biologists are on the committee. Because each institution is only allowed to nominate up to two students to move on to the national competition, the applicants are top notch, and the letter of recommendation is a critical tool in allowing the selection committee to evaluate stellar candidates in a very strong pool.

As the Churchill Foundation states on their website, “brief and generic letters, or letters intended for graduate admissions may weaken an otherwise strong application.” The Churchill will ask you to discuss how long you’ve known the student, in what capacity, and how you would rank the student; they’ll ask you to provide a detailed commentary on the applicant’s academic work and research in STEM fields, and to discuss the student’s creativity and originality. Finally, they’ll ask you to consider how they will fare in the independent research environment of a Cambridge Master’s program, and what strengths that might bring outside of the scientific arena. You can find this information and other details about the Churchill here (<https://churchillscholarship.org/publications/RecommendationForm-revMay17.pdf>)

In addressing these topics, you should plan on a letter that is 1.5-2 pages in length. Your student should provide you with additional materials that may be useful to you as you write: a copy of her/his transcript, resume, application materials, selected Cambridge graduate program(s), etc. We at URF ([ugrad-urf@columbia.edu](mailto:ugrad-urf@columbia.edu)) are also happy to answer any questions that you might have!