Yale notes for writers of letters of reference

Letters of reference are an essential piece of an application for the Marshall, Mitchell, and Rhodes, as of so many other applications. Thank you for taking the time to advise this applicant, and perhaps to write a letter!

When to say no:

Scholarships such as the Marshall, Mitchell, and Rhodes are extremely competitive, and letters of recommendation play an important role in a student’s application. If you feel that for any reason you cannot write a strongly supportive recommendation for the student, please decline to write a letter at all. If you do not know the student well enough to write a detailed letter, or if you simply do not have the time to write a strong 1½-2-page letter, please decline.

Applicants asking you for a letter should have done so in timely and helpful fashion. They should give you information about the scholarship(s) for which they are applying. They should also have outlined, and preferably discussed with you, why they are applying for the scholarship, what they’re hoping to do with it, and how they might be thinking of your letter in the context of the rest of the application. Should you wish, they may share with you copies of their personal statements [although see the note below], proposals of study, and/or information about extracurricular activities. If you have not been given adequate time or information to write a strong letter, you may wish to decline to write and would be well within your rights to do so.

Writing for the Yale committee:

As the Marshall, Mitchell, and Canadian & US Rhodes Scholarships require institutional endorsement, a faculty committee reads applications, interviews students, and prepares a letter of support for each endorsed applicant during the month of September. If you have agreed to write a letter of reference to assist in the campus endorsement process, we ask that you please forward a copy of your letter directly to the Yale committee by August 16, 2021, ideally via the Yale Student Grants Database (your student should trigger the system to send you a link to allow the upload of your letter to our secure system; if in doubt please simply email your letter to fellowships@yale.edu). Thank you!

For an overview of the process, deadlines, and what makes for strong letters of recommendation, please see the following pages, provided for your reference.

(There are notes especially for the “Primary Academic Recommender” in the Marshall section of this document.) In addition, our website provides further information under the heading “Writing Letters of Recommendation” at: http://funding.yale.edu/faculty-staff-recommenders/writing-letters.

CHANGE in requirements for personal statements as of 2014 for US Rhodes, and as of 2015 for the Canadian & other Rhodes competitions:

Please note that the US Rhodes has changed its rules and that Rhodes competitions in most other countries have added very similar requirements: this means that applicants may not receive any comments or feedback on drafts from anyone, and that conversations about “personal goals and Oxford ambitions” should take place before drafts are begun. You may request that a draft essay be sent to you to assist in the writing of your letter, but you may not offer any feedback on the essay at all. (Marshall rules have not changed.)

Should you have any query or difficulty concerning letters, the Yale Student Grants Database, or the official online application systems, Fellowships staff will be very glad to help: simply email Rebekah.westphal@yale.edu or fellowships@yale.edu or telephone 203-432-8685.
Marshall/Mitchell/Rhodes Scholarships 2021-2022
Notes for Writers of Letters of Reference

Campus endorsement process

- **Only one letter is requested** by the Yale committee, even if the applicant has asked you to write in support of applications for more than one of these fellowships. The letter you send may be a draft for any one of the fellowships or address all the relevant ones, as you wish.

- **Please submit your letter by August 16, 2021**, ideally via the online Yale Student Grants Database (your student should trigger the system to send you a link to allow you to upload your letter into the secure database: if it doesn’t arrive, please check your junk mail folders). If you prefer you are welcome to email your letter to fellowships@yale.edu.

- **Your letter will remain completely confidential** and will be used only by the Yale committee unless the student’s application is endorsed, in which case you will be asked to upload your letter(s) into the appropriate online application system as part of the student’s official application. Students will submit a copy of the waiver of access to letters, so we will have a record of it.

- The Yale Committee for the Marshall, Mitchell, and US/Canadian Rhodes Scholarships will read applications shortly after the campus application deadline, and will conduct campus interviews in the first part of September. **On or about September 10, candidates will be notified whether or not they have received Yale’s endorsement to proceed to further competition.**

What happens if my student’s application(s) should receive Yale’s endorsement?

Your student will register you as a recommender and trigger the online system(s) to send you log-in information so that you may submit your letter(s).

- **For the Marshall**: In accordance with Marshall rules, the online system will only accept a total of 1000 words for the text of your letter. Please upload it by **September 20**, as all applications must be forwarded to the Marshall Commission by the **September 28** national deadline, and applications lacking sufficient letters cannot be forwarded. If you need me to enter the text of your letter for you, please email it to fellowships@yale.edu. If you have submitted your letter electronically and then wish to make changes before it is submitted to the Marshall Commission, simply contact the Fellowships office at the email address above. (Please note that once you have uploaded your letter I cannot make any changes, but can return electronic access to you to allow you to make any desired changes before once again clicking “submit”. Once the student’s application has been forwarded to the Marshall Commission, however, no further changes may be made to letters and late letters may not be added.)

- **For the Mitchell**: In accordance with Mitchell rules, the online system will only accept a total of **750 words** for the text of your letter. Please enter your text into the online application system and click to submit it electronically before **5pm** on the **September 24 national deadline**. (You or an assistant will need to do this: I do not have access.)

- **For the Rhodes**: Please upload your letter of no more than 1000 words into the online application system and click to submit it electronically by the **national deadline (October 6 for US Rhodes)**. You or an assistant will need to do this: I do not have access.

- Most finalist **interviews** will take place in mid-November, though Mitchell and some US Rhodes district semi-finals start things off in late October. We will hear **final results** of all these competitions by the end of November or beginning of December.

Thank you for supporting this student’s candidacy! Please don’t hesitate to contact me if I might help in any way.

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(203) 432-8685 - [http://funding.yale.edu/fellowships](http://funding.yale.edu/fellowships) - rebekah.westphal@yale.edu (or fellowships@yale.edu)
What makes for strong letters of recommendation for nationally competitive scholarships:

Speak to what you know best, and to what you know at first-hand about the applicant.

**Academic references** should be the sort of letters which will help students gain admission to top graduate programs. We have found that, unless a student is first in a class, it is often not helpful to give a class ranking. However, if a student could be said to be best, or among the best, in some particular way (the most insightful or imaginative in 15 years, for example), please do say this and follow up with a brief explanation.

In general, faculty who have served on past endorsement committees have found that it is most helpful if, wherever possible in your letter, you can give details or examples to support any claims made. It is helpful if you can discuss a student’s personal characteristics as well as their intellectual ability to the extent that you feel able to address this from personal knowledge. (For more particular notes on what each of these scholarships is looking for, please see below).

**Notes on references for the UK:**

- The adjective “quite” does not connote “very” in British usage; instead it means “somewhat.”
- British readers often question the credibility of unrelentingly glowing (and unsubstantiated) praise; a thoughtful qualification can make for a more credible letter of support.

**Writing for the Marshall:**

The Marshall Scholarships are intended for scholars who will contribute to the advancement of knowledge, and, further, for people who will be leaders in their fields, to motivate them to act as ambassadors from the US to the UK and vice versa throughout their lives, fostering good relations between the two countries. To the extent that you can comment on specific attributes of the candidate that are relevant to these considerations, please do so. The most helpful letters address not only the applicant’s intellectual promise but also their potential to perform well in a program in the UK, where students are not likely to find as much structured support, encouragement, or ongoing academic feedback as they have at Yale.

Things your letter might address, if you have first-hand knowledge of them, include:

- Distinction of intellect and character as evidenced by both a student’s scholastic attainments and by their other activities or achievements;
- Adequate preparation for the proposed course of study, particularly upper-level course work/research, demonstrated strength in a major field, and ability to work independently;
- Why the candidate’s studies and proposed career would be best served by spending 1-2 years at a British university;
- Potential to make a significant contribution as a leader in their field; and
- “Ambassadorial” potential.
- See the clearly laid-out official selection criteria: [www.marshallscholarship.org/applications/criteria](http://www.marshallscholarship.org/applications/criteria).

The **Primary Academic Letter** needs to offer particular, expert support for the candidate’s choice of and suitability for the proposed course of study, as well as providing a substantive assessment of the candidate’s academic qualifications for the scholarship. It should be, essentially, the kind of letter you would write to help your student win admission to a top graduate program. This letter is often part of an initial screening and hence carries unusual weight.

*Note that the official online application will only accept letters of **1,000 words or fewer**.*

Writing for the Mitchell:

The Mitchell scholarship, “named to honor the former US Senator’s pivotal contribution to the Northern Ireland peace process, is designed to introduce and connect generations of future American leaders to the island of Ireland, while recognizing and fostering intellectual achievement, leadership, and a commitment to public service and community”. By future leaders, the US-Ireland Alliance means not only political leaders, but also anyone who is likely to be a leader in their field. Mitchell Scholars are expected to be outstanding cultural ambassadors to Ireland, and it should also be clear that the applicant has the potential to perform well in their chosen program of study, knowing that students are unlikely to find as much structured support, encouragement, or on-going academic feedback in an Irish university as they have at Yale. To the extent that you can comment on specific attributes of the candidate relevant to these considerations, please do so.

Criteria your letter might address, if you have first-hand knowledge of them, include:

- Demonstrated record of intellectual distinction, and strong preparation for the proposed course of study;
- Character, integrity, generosity of spirit, leadership; and
- Sustained commitment to service and community, indicating potential for future leadership and contribution to society.

*Note that the official online application will only accept letters of 750 words or fewer (text must be pasted into an online form).

You can find further information about the Mitchell, including profiles of current and past winners, at: www.us-irelandalliance.org

Writing for the Rhodes:

As one Rhodes Selection Committee chair puts it, “We are looking for students who exhibit well-rounded excellence with a ‘bulge’—some distinctive quality that really stands out from the many other excellent applicants.” Thus, the most helpful letters provide detail not only about the applicant’s general intellectual achievements but also what makes them a genuinely remarkable individual. The Rhodes is intended for people who will be leaders in their fields and contribute to the well-being of others. It should also be clear that the applicant has the potential to perform well in their chosen program at Oxford, where students are unlikely to find as much structured support, encouragement, or on-going academic feedback as they have at Yale. Rhodes Scholars are, moreover, expected to be good student ambassadors to the UK and to represent the UK well once they return home. To the extent that you can comment on specific attributes of the candidate that are relevant to these considerations, please do so.

Criteria your letter might address, if you have first-hand knowledge of them, include:

- 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.
- *In short, “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”.*

Rhodes Scholarship Committees are especially respectful of letters that are both glowing and genuine. Since committees may be skeptical of letters that are too effusive or unqualified in their praise, recommenders are encouraged to take a forthright tone.

Letters should be no more than 2 pages.

You can find further information about the Rhodes, including profiles of current and past winners, at: www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk and (for the US Rhodes) www.rhodesscholar.org.

Thank you very much for your support of this applicant!