

Letters of reference

Introduction

Letters of reference are an important part of a "la Caixa" Foundation fellowships application.

Rest assured that the letter will be carefully read and that it will be one of the elements taken into consideration when awarding the fellowships. In fact, these letters are one of the factors that are specifically assessed during the selection process, which is carried out by independent experts.

These experts are asked to assess the quality of the letters of support following two guidelines:

- That they take into account the suitability and aptness of the person who has written the letter with regard to the candidate's project.
- That they assess the personal nature of the letter, specific to the project in question, and whether or not it refers to subjective aspects and personal characteristics of the candidate and also to his or her intellectual skills and to the academic or professional project presented.

The letter, therefore, must be as informative as possible and should refer clearly and objectively to the professional, technical and academic abilities of the candidate, as well as any personal aspects that could influence the future development and success of the project for which the grant is being applied.

General principles

It is essential that the letter is written expressly to support the candidate who has requested it. Standard letters are always detrimental, regardless of how good the contents are.

Provide relevant information about the candidate: The letter of reference will be of one type or another according to the statement of purpose proposed.

- If the candidate is proposing a statement of purpose focused on research, information about and examples of his or her intellectual potential would be relevant, as would details of a theoretical and technical command accredited in the field of research proposed, an ability to produce research; but also information about his or her self-discipline, persistence and motivation, together with a demonstrated maturity.
- If the candidate proposes a statement of purpose that is oriented towards business or professional development, the letter should emphasise, among other aspects, leadership abilities, results orientation and willingness to work with a team, such as how well the candidate gets on with his or her supervisors, peers or subordinates (where relevant).

Be specific: Do not describe the merits or potential of the candidate with reference to general aspects or common places and avoid standard wording and stock phrases. For example, a specific example that demonstrates self-discipline is of more use than including self-discipline among the candidate's virtues. Remember that the more personalised the letter the more value it will have for the evaluators.

Provide information about the candidate from a comparative perspective: Comparative references placing the candidate in relation to other people (students or collaborators) that you know of from their degree course, the last few years or during the last year of study, are very informative. These references can relate to their qualifications, potential, intellectual skills or the factor or factors you consider to be worth pointing out.

Ensure objectivity: Avoid the accumulation of superlative adjectives and try to describe facts rather than listing virtues. Assess with equanimity the achievements obtained and the merits of the candidate, avoiding exaggeration but without discounting them. In this regard, it is important that the letter helps to measure the real value of a specific milestone. Among other things, a letter should serve to account for an apparent deficiency, for example, in the candidate's qualifications, or to describe the real contribution of the candidate to a publication, investigation or business milestone.

Provide information about yourself: Letters of support are important for what they contain but also for the suitability of the person writing them for endorsing the statement of purpose. Therefore, a brief outline of your professional or academic profile is important, as is your experience in assessing the merits or describing the talents of other people. This helps the evaluator to put in perspective the depth of the recommendation. But please remember, the letter is about the candidate!

Be sincere with the candidate: If you feel that you do not know the candidate well enough, or are not in a position to write the letter that could suitably support his or her proposal, better to say so than to prepare a letter that will provide little help. Sometimes candidates approach people of recognised reputation thinking that this could have a positive influence on their application, but this is not the case if the letter is not up to standard.

Avoid gender bias: Some studies¹ have demonstrated that people who write letters of recommendation unintentionally describe candidates differently according to their gender. Letters written about women tend to be shorter and less specific, whilst those written for men are more in line with the requirements that are requested for the grant and even include more enthusiastic adjectives. These studies recommend warning the people who write letters of recommendation about this risk of possible unconscious bias. Therefore, we invite you to critically reread your letter with this in mind before submitting it.

¹ Trix and Psenka (2003) "Exploring the color of glass: letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty" *Discourse and Society*, 14(2). 191 – 220; Schmader, T., Whitehead, J., & Wysocki, V. H. (2007). "A Linguistic Comparison of Letters of Recommendation for Male and Female Chemistry and Biochemistry Job Applicants". *Sex Roles*, 57(7-8), 509–514. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9291-4>