

Guidelines for Letters of Support

Suggested letter format:

- Opening paragraph: overview/summary (Please address letter to “Dear [Name of Award] Committee”)
- Background: BRIEF review of nominee’s education and career history and key items from CV (support, honors, awards, etc.)
- Breakout sections: Address key leadership/achievements as appropriate for the specific nominee and award/grant application, in categories, such as
 - Research (e.g., basic, clinical, translational)
 - Education (e.g., teaching, curriculum development, new modalities)
 - Administration/Leadership
 - Mentoring
 - Health Care Delivery
 - Patient Care
 - Public Policy
 - Other(s)
- Personal factors: This can include challenges overcome, interpersonal skills, reputation/recognition/impact (local/national/international), originality, creativity, etc.
- Conclusion/Summary

Points that a letter of support should convey include (not necessarily in this order):

- The stellar record, training history of the nominee, and evidence that others think they are great too.
- Include just a sentence or so in the letter’s first paragraph (after it being an honor or delight to nominate this wonderful person) explaining what’s unique about this person’s research to excite readers at the outset.
- Include past accomplishments and why they matter presented in a way that is accessible even to a smart, non-expert in the area.
- Prior awards and recognition.
- Prior training in terrific labs, including names and accomplishments (she was trained in the HHMI labs of So-and-So a member of National Academy of Sciences, where she discovered x, y and z...).
- Major accomplishments at WCM if nominating after some time at WCM. It is very important to provide evidence for the applicant’s ability to pursue independent research that is separate from his or her prior doctoral and/or postdoctoral work.
- The creativity, brilliance, novelty and rigor of the persons work – past, present and future plans.
- If possible, include quotes from illustrious folks from reference letters to emphasize the level of regard for the individual by others. This comes across particularly well, because it is showing more than one person’s (the letter’s author) opinion about the candidate.

- We suggest a meeting with the candidate to get input about the project or applicant that they think might be important to convey. This can help to make the letter be more personal and directed toward the competition rather than a dry recounting of the applicant's CV.
- Put publication record in context. Some fields have lots of publications, others only few. But focus mainly on the impact of their work, which is what matters for major competitions. The competitions are usually decided by folks who know that it is breakthroughs, discoveries, ideas, and insights that transform thinking and catalyze progress in a field that matter much more than the number of papers published.
- For grant applications: The essentials of the current proposal presented in an exciting, accessible way - minimally some portion should make the importance clear to any intelligent person. The level of detail about the project may vary depending on the narrowness of the competition and the narrowness of the review committee, but most often the committees that will review it are broad. Basically, excite people about the science/project.
- For awards and prizes: When describing the nominee's scientific achievements, it is not necessary to go into specific detail. Gear the description to a scientifically/medically knowledgeable audience from a broad range of disciplines. Focus on the significance and impact of the work rather than on providing in depth data.
- Convey why the candidate/project is especially well matched to the competition.
- If nominating more than one PI from the same department, the chair's letters should try to highlight differences and help distinguish the two candidates. This is most often requested in the submission instructions as a separate paragraph following the Chair's signature in the letter.
- Start and end the letter with statements of strong support for the candidate – first and last impressions matter most.
- Try to refer to the candidate as "Dr. Lastname..." rather than by their first name, this is particularly important for female candidates.
- **Things that generally do not help... the Don'ts:**
 - Nothing boring like a simple recounting their history without emphasizing substance. This comes across as if the letter writer doesn't know the candidate they are nominating.
 - Unless outreach or teaching are key, keep the focus on research. Obviously if outreach or teaching are part of the basis of the award then focus on it and highlight its excellence.
 - For institutional letters: Better not to include details of startup, lab space etc. unless they have requested it. People will assume that a place like WCM has given the person enough... and the package might turn them off if they think it is too little or too much – this varies widely across fields.