

# Reference Letters – Dr. Renee Polziehn



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# Who Should Write Your Letter?

Someone who:

- has familiarity with skills required
- has good writing skills
- has a high opinion of you\*
- has position of value\*
- knows you

**You?**



# Scholarship Relative Weightings

## Masters

Personal Characteristics and Interpersonal Skills	20%
Academic Excellence	50%
Research Potential	30%

## PhD

Relevant Experience and Achievement	50%
Research Ability and Potential	50%

## Postdoc

Relevant Experience	30%
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## **Criteria - Relevant experience and achievements** (obtained within and beyond academia)

- Transcripts, Scholarships
- Duration of Previous Studies
- Comments from University to describe an International transcript
- Impact of a publication
- 3MT Finalist/Knowledge Translation
- Teaching in your discipline
- Committee work

<http://nisf.unm.edu/scholarships/uk-scholarships/rd-sample-letter-1.pdf>



# Criteria - Research Ability/ Potential

- Academic training and relevant work experience
- Research artifacts (publications, patents, posters)
- Research proposal (feasibility, merit, significance)
- Critical thinking, originality, enthusiasm for research, autonomy, initiative, application of knowledge
- Ability to complete projects
- Involvement with agencies as it relates to your discipline
- Quality of your proposal – put into greater context



# What can you do?

- Provide scholarship criteria
- Relevant details – 5 W's/meet each criteria
- Provide CV/relevant materials (application)
- Why are you qualified? Why do you want this?  
What does leadership mean to you?
- Highlight your non-academic activities – on and off campus
- Allow time
- Follow-up - Provide details of where and when to send



# Great Reference Letters



- Specifics or details

“He is a dedicated student, and his grades have been consistently exemplary. He always shows great initiative and diligence; he is able to develop intelligent plans and implement them successfully.”

The applicant was given a challenging project. He quickly came up to speed on the relevant literature and, before the end of the summer, had mastered the different analysis techniques core to the research. He showed tremendous enthusiasm, often working extra hours so that the project could be completed before her summer was up. We will be submitting a paper to a top journal shortly with him as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, he ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.

- Longer letter\*

# Great Reference Letter Continued

- Development of person into peer
- Provides insights into **all** criteria
  - Competencies - Problem solving abilities, analytical skills, creativity, research skills, etc.
  - Communication, responsibilities, attributes
- Show candidate as “role model”
- Show enthusiasm for candidate
- Gender neutral/Cultural –emphasize accomplishments

<https://career.berkeley.edu/Info/LetterGuidelines>

[https://wff.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/avoiding\\_gender\\_bias\\_in\\_letter\\_of\\_reference\\_writing%20copy.pdf](https://wff.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing%20copy.pdf)

# **The Magic Behind Reference Letters is You!**



# CGS-Master's Applications:

## How to Write to Be Persuasive

November 2, 2022

**Bonnie Stelmach, Professor**  
**Faculty of Education**



**Inspire**

**Teach**

**Persuade**



# Poor Decisions that May Jeopardize Your Success

- Not reading and following application instructions carefully
- Starting the application close to the deadline
- Trying to 'sound smart' – using dense academic prose (highly technical, esoteric...manage the *curse of knowledge*)
- Taking too long to state the question/purpose
- Not creating white space (LESS is MORE from reviewers' perspective!)
- Sprinkling the proposal with jargon and/or acronyms (excludes reader)
- Writing a vague methodology/methods section - research plan/methodology has a “trust me I know what I’m doing” feel
- Skipping the proofreading step—typos, grammatical errors, etc.

How many times  
will a reviewer  
read your  
application?





A mediocre idea articulated eloquently will be more competitive than a fantastic idea communicated poorly.

**Creative Writing = Competitiveness**



# Tempt with your Title

“An Exploration into the Use of Profanity in  
Modernist Writing”

“#\$%^&\*!”: Modernism and Dirty Words”

(Sword, 2012, p. 68)

# From *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harari, 2014)

- (Chapter 1) An Animal of No Significance
  - Skeletons in the Closet
  - The Cost of Thinking
  - A Race of Cooks
  - Our Brothers' Keepers
- (Final Chapter) And They Lived Happily Ever After



## Hooks & Sinkers: The First Paragraph

“plunge the reader into a story that has already begun” ...create “the desire to know more”

(Greenblatt as cited in Sword, 2012, pp. 82 – 84)



# **The Power of the Post: The Impact of Parents' Social Media Use on Principals**

– Erika Nelson, PhD Student, Studies in Educational Leadership

As you begin your workday, do you worry about your professional integrity becoming the next casualty in the Facebook comments section? Principals do. According to one recent report from New South Wales, over 90% of principals reported it is the worsening behaviour of parents on social media that is creating stress and heavier workloads for principals (Rose, 2022). In my six years as a vice principal, I noticed a shift in my day-to-day work: I spent evenings perusing parents' Facebook posts about the school to prepare for fallout. I was less an educational leader, and more a school manager. Social media dictated my day, and with it, my professional identity. It is of crucial importance to studies in educational leadership to better understand the impact social media can have on school leaders.



## **Keep** The Reader Hooked

### Chapter 8 *The Story Net*:

“A carefully woven opening paragraph will catch no readers if, on the very next page, you slacken the net and let all the fish go” (Sword, 2012, p. 87).

## Examples from Harari (2014)

“The fact is that a jumbo brain is a jumbo drain on the body.”

(p. 9)

“That tale is a fantasy.” (p. 89)

“Who was responsible?” (p. 90)

“That was the plan.” (p. 97)

“When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.” (p. 133)



# Structure of the Proposal

What reviewers expect in each section



# Focus Your Proposal Early

- As a reviewer I want to know right away:
  - What this research is about
  - What question drives this research proposal
  - The context from which this study emerges
  - That this research addresses an important challenge, problem, persistent issue
  - Who will benefit from this research
  - Why this study is intellectually exciting

# What the Reviewer is Looking for in the Literature Review Section

- Appropriateness of the literature review
- Is the literature review up to date?
- Is the literature cited relevant to the study?
- Does the literature review ARGUE for your proposed study?
- Does the literature review identify gaps in scholarship in a diplomatic, respectful way?

# The Methodology: Can This Study Be Completed?

- Most important section
- How are you going to address your research question?
- Hypotheses?
- Theoretical and/or conceptual framework
  - Explain the framework
  - Justify the framework—why is it appropriate for addressing your research question?
  - HOW will the framework be used as a lens through which to understand your data (if you're collecting data)
- What steps will you take to conduct your study (e.g. methods of data collection or path of argumentation?)
- Are your plans FEASIBLE?

# Contribution to Advancing Knowledge (Significance)

- What happens if this problem isn't studied?
- Who benefits (besides you!) from this study?
- Why does this matter to the immediate context and beyond?
- How does your research *change the conversation*?
- What is the practical, theoretical, methodological potential of your work (don't have to hit all three!)
- Don't embellish ☹️

# Characteristics of a Good Proposal

- Document – neat, well organized, easy to read
- Fresh insight into an important problem
- Writing that shows excitement, commitment (use “I”)
- Evidence that the applicant knows the field (strong lit review)
- Feasible work plan (methodology)
- “The best proposals teach” (Porter, 2005, p. 343)

Porter, R. (2005). What do grant reviewers really want anyway? *Journal of Research Administration*, 36(2), 5 – 13.



Submitting an application is success in itself.

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# Suggested Reading for Improving Your Writing

Harari, Y. N. (2014). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. McLelland & Stewart.

Sword, H. (2012). *Stylish academic writing*. Harvard University Press.

Sword, H. (2016). *The writer's diet: A guide to fit prose*. The University of Chicago Press.

# ENGAGE Your Reader

- Is your title memorable?
- 1<sup>st</sup> and last sentence
  - Ask a question: Have you ever known what was the right thing to do, but were unable to do it because of factors outside your control?
  - State a fact/statistic: Work intensification was among the top three trends school principals face in their job (ABC Psychology Study (2018)).
  - Introduce a counterintuitive finding: Sleeping with your dog may enhance chronic pain sufferers' quality and quantity of sleep.
  - A literary or historical quotation
  - Personal or historical story/anecdote
  - Anecdote from your research
  - Dialogue or conversation
  - Start/end opening paragraph with a purpose statement: The purpose of my proposed research is to ....