When a student you have some familiarity with has asked you for a reference form for a scholarship, think about the following before you start to write:

— Know the nature of the competition
  - What are the criteria the agency is weighting?
    e.g., Vanier awards are 1/3 weighted to leadership.

— Take the time to have a conversation with the student
  - Gives you more specifics on which to comment
  - Makes your form more personal
  - Allows you to see where the application is already very strong relative to the adjudication criteria

— Give yourself enough time to write a meaningful reference
Each competition has their own set of criteria but, regardless of agency and regardless of discipline, the criteria do not stray far from:

- Academic excellence
- Research ability or potential
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal and leadership skills

Perhaps also:

- Research environment
- Research fit with strategic themes
Advice for a Meaningful Support Form

- Think about the competition and the other applicants. Is this reference for admission to graduate school or for the top scholarship in the country?

- Think about the selection process. Will the application be reviewed by experts and non-experts in the field?
  - If non-experts, you need to more clearly explain impact of research and contributions.

- Think about the perspective of a member of the selection committee. You have dozens of applications to read/rank and 2-3x that number of references to read.
  - Address the criteria of the award
  - Be concise
  - Be specific
  - Give context

- Tailor the letter to the student in question. Do not use a generic template.
The Selection Procedure (TriCouncil – NSERC/SSHRC/CIHR)

- **Step One: Departmental Evaluation**
  - Screening and ranking of applicants by a Departmental Committee
  - People in your discipline who would know the jargon

- **Step Two: University Evaluation**
  - Ranking of applicants by Faculty of Graduate Studies Committee
  - For sure, a few people who are peripheral to or even outside your discipline

The university has a quota so you need to satisfy this second committee!

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
The Selection Procedure (TriCouncil – NSERC/CIHR/SSHRC)

- **Step Three: TriCouncil Evaluation in Ottawa**
  - Awards based upon votes from a committee of researchers (academic, industry, government) in the discipline from across the country.
  - **Most will have only seen the application for 5 minutes**
  - Each TriCouncil has a specific adjudication process:
Advice for Meaningful Support

- Clearly state the context in which you know the applicant and how well you know them.

- Group your comments in relation to the criteria of the award. You can even use headings to delineate this for the reviewer. This will likely include comments on their interpersonal skills and character.

- Use your comments to complement the rest of the application. E.g., If the student has a straight A+ transcript and gave a great presentation in your class, use your space to comment on their communication skills, not the fact they have good grades. In a fair manner, note the applicant’s weaker points.

- Give anecdotal support to affirm your statements. Give more than adjectives. *Specifics trump superlatives.*

- Point out key features of the application that may be missed by a reader (presentation prize, departmental award). You may be able to provide specifics about these awards that emphasize their importance.

- Draw comparisons to their peers or, for the very best, their counterparts over the years.
EXAMPLES OF WAYS TO IMPROVE
Specific Comments on Communication Skills

- The applicant writes and speaks very well.

- The applicant’s writing skills shown in her undergraduate thesis compare with mid-program Ph.D. students. Her speaking skills are highly polished as evidenced by her award for her talk at an undergraduate conference.

- The applicant’s writing skills are exceptional. He can provide drafts of manuscripts that are nearly publication ready with the most recent citations. They are concise with regards to content and still stylistically fluid. His speaking skills parallel this. He gave a 20 minute talk at a national meeting where the audience included several international leaders in the field. Two of these scientists commented afterwards that his talk was superb.
Specific Comments on Research Ability

- The applicant made very good progress on a research project while working with a senior graduate student.

- The applicant developed a firm grasp of the project from the outset and advanced the work with minimal supervision. Problems were encountered and he would seek advice appropriately. He always came with a proposed solution rather than simply wanting answers. He is a natural researcher.

- The applicant was given a challenging project. She 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. She 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 her as the first author. In my 20 years as a professor, she ranks as the top undergraduate student I have had in my group.
The reference should meaningfully place the applicant in the context of the competition. It does not need to assure them receipt of the award.

Specifics easily trump superlatives. Superlatives without support are meaningless.

Committees have memories and professors can develop reputations for hyperbole. Conversely, other letters will carry a lot of weight.

Committees are typically sensitive to cultural differences in writing letters but if you are not sure, you may want a colleague to read your reference for tone.

Be mindful to use gender neutral language.

If the student’s applications demonstrates any weaknesses, you may be able to alleviate concerns of the committee if you can explain how the student has improved in this area.

Make sure the reference corroborates the application (Papers submitted or accepted?).

Adhere to the competition guidelines.