

Western Research Excellence Awards 2024

Letters of Reference

The Letters of Reference are a crucial component and play a significant role in the evaluation of the nomination dossiers for the **Western Research Excellence Awards (WREA)**. Special attention should be given to the selection of the referees as they provide an expert perspective on the material presented in the nomination. The WREA Selection Committee has emphasized the importance of including high-quality letters of reference.

Letters of reference for all WREA categories should be from experts outside of Western who can speak to the significance and impact of the nominee's research, scholarship, and/or creative activity, and reach beyond the university (as appropriate for the career stage).

Best Practices

Potential referees:

- Will provide a strong and persuasive letter of reference
- Are aware of the nominee's work and/or have followed their career
- Have an excellent national or international reputation and a strong understanding of conventions in the field (and can place the nominee in this context)
- Have provided compelling and well-written letters of reference in the past

Different perspectives among the letters of reference are valuable. Contact a diverse set of referees to include unique voices and avoid overlap in the content of the letters. For example:

- Scholars from different career stages – while highly established scholars might be notable experts in the research environment, emerging researchers can discuss topics such as how the nominee's work is inspiring their own research program or scholarly career
- Partners – from industry, community, government, etc.
- International scholars
- Representatives from relevant organizations, societies, committees, etc.

Request more letters than the two that are required for WREA submission:

- In case a referee is not able to meet the final deadline
- If an anticipated letter is not high quality (not every top scholar is great at writing letters!)
- To allow flexibility in selecting the most appropriate final letters for the nomination dossier you are curating

Provide referees with resources that will help them draft strong letters:

- Send them the nominee's current CV and draft of the nomination rationale – for reference only, they should not cut and paste the same content into their letter

- Provide their previous reference letter, if they have written one for your candidate, and ask them to update it to suit the WREA program
- Request the referee provide specific information depending on their perspective or role, for example, you might ask them to:
 - Comment on the value or significance of a publication, project, report, or other contribution
 - Mention industry, community, or other partnerships or interdisciplinary work
 - Describe the nominee's contributions to advancing EDIDA in their research
 - Discuss evidence of leadership or their training success
 - Provide an overview of the nominee's reputation (national or international) and ongoing impact of the research in Canada and beyond

High-Quality Letters

Strong reference letters for WREA Nominations will:

- Describe the nature of the professional relationship between the referee and the nominee
- Be “fact-heavy” and explain the specific originality, significance, and impact of the candidate's achievements to date, relative to their career stage
- Use a clear, persuasive, and engaging narrative, rather than technical language or jargon
- Include the referee's unique perspective on the work of the candidate, rather than a summary of their CV
- Where possible, address the Evaluation Criteria:
 1. Quality and scope of research, scholarly, and/or creative activity achievements, taking into account the norms of the field of study and career stage
 2. Contribution of ideas and research results to their discipline and/or impacts on broader society
 3. Contribution to advancing EDIDA in the work and/or people associated with their research, scholarship, and/or creative activity
 4. National and international stature, as appropriate for the career stage
 5. Future promise and potential for ongoing excellence and impact, where appropriate

Limiting Unconscious Bias

In order to limit the influence of unconscious bias within letters of reference, the referee should consider the following:

- Focus on assessing the nominee with respect to the specific evaluation criteria
- Avoid using stereotypical adjectives when describing character and skills, especially when providing a letter for a woman (e.g., avoid words like nice, kind, agreeable, sympathetic, compassionate, selfless, giving, caring, warm, nurturing, maternal, etc.)
- Use “stand-out” adjectives for both men and women (e.g., superb, excellent, outstanding, confident, successful, ambitious, knowledgeable, intellectual, etc.)
- Use the nominee's formal title and surname instead of their first name.

- Consider whether the letter unintentionally includes gaps, or doubt-raising, negative or unexplained statements (e.g., 'might make an excellent leader' versus 'is an established leader')