Advice for Graf-Meiland Scholarship Letters of Recommendation

Thank you for taking the time to write a letter of recommendation for the Graf-Meiland Scholarship. These scholarships are among the Honors Program’s most prestigious awards. They honor the memory of two former directors: Prof. Otto Graf, who served as director of the Honors Program for eighteen years, and Prof. Jack Meiland, who championed interdisciplinarity in the Honors curriculum. The scholarship competition also serves as a preliminary review of potential candidates for top post-graduate scholarships such as the Rhodes, Marshall, and Gates Cambridge. As with any scholarship competition, the quality of a candidate’s letters is among the most important factors in the selection process. Below are some features of strong letters that the Graf-Meiland Committee has seen over the years.

Establish Context, Personal Knowledge, and Sincerity
Graf-Meiland letters typically come from course instructors, research supervisors, or mentors for major co-curricular accomplishments. State the context in which you know the student and establish that you have specific, personal knowledge of the student’s performance and career aspirations. Whenever possible, include concrete stories about your professional interactions with the student. These are the most effective means of conveying a sense of personal knowledge and sincerity in your recommendation and can be very powerful with readers. When asking for a letter of recommendation the candidate should provide a copy of her/his application essay and resume; and should set up an appointment to discuss her/his educational interests and future plans.

Make the Case for Excellence and Well-Roundedness
Graf-Meiland candidates should have a serious commitment to intellectual pursuits and promise for continued academic success; have demonstrated exceptional depth or breadth in their studies; have research or other co-curricular accomplishments that supplement or complement their academic programs, demonstrating sustained commitment, leadership, and effectiveness. Most have a 3.7 or better GPA and are considered the very best in their departments or cohorts. The purpose of the letter is to explain why you think this candidate fits that profile. Be specific about the qualities that impress you (intelligence, understanding, insightfulness, speed, commitment, ability to work independently, technical skills, communication skills, teamwork and personality, etc.) Again, back up your comments with specific examples or anecdotes about your professional interactions with the student whenever possible. Many of our candidates will be excellent in multiple areas; and for the Meiland Scholarship in particular, we look for interdisciplinary interests and excellence.

Explicit Comparisons
At some point in the letter, typically in the first or final paragraphs, you should be explicit about the scale against which you are comparing the applicant. Obviously you will want to select the best scale against which you can favorably compare the applicant with integrity. Examples might include: “The best undergraduate in our department,” “One of the best students I’ve encountered in 20 years of teaching at U-M [and other peer institutions],” “Compared favorably with other major scholarship winners for whom I’ve written letters,” etc. If you’ve assigned the student an A+ in your course, you may want to say something about what that distinction means (e.g. if only one A+ assigned in the course).

Submission Instructions
Please save your letter as, “STUDENTFIRSTNAME_STUDENTLAST_RECOMMENDERLAST,” and send it directly to honors.scholarships@umich.edu with “Graf-Meiland Recommendation” in the subject line. We will post it to the committee’s review site.

If you have any questions or concerns about your letter or feel that you may not be the best letter writer for this candidate and would like to discuss the matter confidentially, please feel free to contact Henry Dyson (hdyson@umich.edu), the scholarship advisor in the LSA Honors Program.