Writing a recommendation for the Harry S. Truman Scholarship

The mission of the Truman Scholarship Foundation is to find and recognize college juniors with exceptional leadership potential who are committed to careers in government, the nonprofit or advocacy sectors, education or elsewhere in the public service; and to provide them with financial support for graduate study, leadership training and fellowship with other students who are committed to making a difference through public service (Harry S. Truman Foundation).

Truman applicants are required to provide three letters of recommendation in addition to the institutional nomination letter. Each of the letters should address one of our selection criteria, but it is acceptable for a letter to discuss more than one criteria.

**Leadership Abilities and Potential:** This letter should confirm the experience described in question seven (specific example of your leadership). The letter writer need not have witnessed the example first hand, but he or she should be able to discuss the example and how it fits within the context of the student's leadership.

**Commitment to a Career in Public Service:** This letter should confirm the experience described in question eight (recent, satisfying public service activity). The letter writer need not have witnessed the activity first hand, but he or she should be able to discuss the example and how it fits within the context the student's commitment to a career in public service.

**Intellect and Prospects for Continuing Academic Success:** This letter should discuss the student's overall academic background in context of the student's future plans for career and graduate school (questions 11 to 13). It is recommended, though not required, that the writer have taught the student at some point.

Please be certain that your comments are in relation to the letter's specified category. It is encouraged to use concrete examples in your letters that are linked with evidence in support of a student's character and abilities.

**Criteria for the Scholarship**

We asked members of our selection panels to share their perspective on the letters they review. Their responses are collected here in two articles. The first is by Executive Secretary Emeritus Louis Blair. The second is by Scott Henderson, 1982 Truman Scholar, Veteran Member of the Truman Scholarship Finalists Selection Committee and Assistant Professor at Furman University.

**Advice from Louis Blair**

Your letter should:

- Point to some specific examples of what the Truman candidate has done (i.e., gave a terrific presentation, was a dedicated employee who figured out new business practices).
- Provide information about the student's strengths in an interview. Letters should assist the committee in interviewing a student.
- Be specific. If the student wrote a brilliant paper on quarks, mention the title and why it stood out.
- (For the nomination letter) Make the case for why this person would be a strong Truman (Rhodes, etc.) candidate. The letter should avoid the redundant information about GPA, class standing, etc. (unless there's something about it not captured in the numbers). Knowing what's unusual about the student (in areas relevant to the scholarship) is really critical.
- Give the reader some context of how the person knows the Truman candidate (i.e., school, civic, work, etc.) and for what period of time that the person has been known.
• Provide specific dates, times and location of the event/activity being reviewed.
• Put the student in perspective. Percentages, when true, sometimes help (i.e., “top ten percent of students in my 50 years of teaching”).
• Give serious indication that you know the candidate personally (when possible). For example, incidents or actions that are unique to your relationship are more credible, than writing about things that are obviously on the resume and can be repeated without verification. Comments about character from personal knowledge are also quite credible for me. That means that the referring official is somewhat going out on a limb and that means a lot.

Advice from the Truman Foundation
• We are unmoved by generic letters from people with recognizable names. A well-written letter with specifics from an associate professor is always better than a letter from a big-name tenured professor who only saw the student in a large introductory class setting.
• Letters do not need to all come from faculty members or be written in an academic style. It is quite welcome, and often preferred, to have non-university personnel write letters to discuss a candidate’s leadership or service.
• Recommenders should have had recent contact with the student. Letters from high school are rarely persuasive.
• Letters should not be more than two pages long. Letters that are much longer run the risk of not being read thoroughly.
• Provide recommenders with draft copies of the relevant essays. If that is not possible, please provide recommenders a resume. Students should also make sure the letter writer understands the main points the student wishes them to convey. It is always disappointing when a letter fails to mention things that are clearly significant to the student.
• Letters should ideally be addressed to the Truman Selection Committee. If a letter is addressed to a faculty rep or to the executive secretary of the foundation, that is also acceptable.
• We are selecting students, not their recommenders. While letters of recommendation are helpful, a good letter will not elevate an otherwise mediocre candidate. Likewise, a bad letter will not sink a terrific candidate.

Other Considerations
Please include a header identifying the type of letter you are submitting (i.e., service, leadership or academics). Please return the completed letter of recommendation directly to Elizabeth Colucci, Director of Fellowships and Scholarships, at the University at Buffalo.

Letters of recommendation are due to the selection committee by November 11, 2017.

http://www.truman.gov