



PACE UNIVERSITY CAREER SERVICES

Writing Letters of Recommendation

PURPOSE/OVERVIEW

In simplest terms, a letter of recommendation is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate. Preferably, the person writing the letter of recommendation has been in an academic or working relationship with the applicant. A letter of recommendation should also present a well-documented evaluation and provide sufficient evidence and information to help a selection committee in making its decision. It should address the specific purpose for which it is written: to discuss both scholarly capabilities and personal character, although the balance between the two will vary, depending upon the nature of the application. For example, at one end of the scale, a letter for an applicant for graduate study should focus primarily on the scholarly, while at the other end, a letter for an applicant for a non-academic position should discuss a broader range of qualities and experiences, including extracurricular or work experience as well. It should give an overall picture of the candidate's: personal characteristics, performance, experience, strengths, capabilities and professional promise. Letters of recommendation can also be used to explain some weakness or ambiguity in a student's record. If appropriate and after consulting the student, you might wish to mention a family illness, financial hardship, or other factor.

The letter should be about one page in length and generally consist of three parts: opening, body, and closing. The presentation and professional appearance of your letter often impacts the individual's candidacy. Please be sure that the letter is typewritten rather than handwritten. Proofread it carefully for typographical and grammatical errors. Be sure that your affiliation to the individual is clear. Indicate how you can be contacted for additional information and list time frames that the contact information is accurate. You should include address, phone number and email address if applicable. It is not uncommon for students to provide you with both a form and stamped, addressed envelope for you to use to mail the letter directly to the school, program or job for which the student is applying.

If, after doing a careful review of a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, you cannot write a supportive letter, it is important to have a candid discussion with the student letting them know of your decision. In addition, it is suggested that you provide information to the individual as to why you have declined to serve as a reference.

WHAT TO ASK FOR FROM THE RECOMMENDEE

As you arrange a meeting with a student, you should also ask the student to bring the following items:

- Resume or curriculum vitae
- Copy of transcript and/or list of courses completed
- Copy of a graded paper or an exam written for a course
- Explanation of the student's career goals or type of job or graduate school he/she hopes to enter
- A list of the student's accomplishments
- Any suggested topics the student has on what s/he would like to be addressed in the letter
- Deadline for when the letter is needed
- Copy of the application essay or fellowship statement of purpose
- Any literature that describes the fellowship, program, job for which the student is applying
- Specific recommendation forms or questionnaires (if they are provided for the letter writer) to complete in advance of the date the recommendation is due
- Address and preferably an addressed envelope where the letter is to be sent
- Phone number and address of where the student can be reached

Graduate schools often ask students to waive their rights to view a recommendation. If the student has any questions about this decision, you might point out that there are important benefits in maintaining the confidentiality of letters. Selection committees, for example, tend to view confidential letters as having greater credibility and assign them greater weight; also, some letter

writers actually feel less inhibited in their praise of students in confidential letters. While making these points, be sure to make it clear that it is up to the student to decide.

One other factor that greatly facilitates letter writing is if you can write a letter as soon as possible after you have taught/worked with a student, while your impressions are still vivid and fresh. You might consider encouraging students to make their requests early, rather than waiting until senior year or beyond. These early letters can be maintained in your own files for future reference.

FORMAT/WHAT TO INCLUDE

Start by describing how long you've known the person and in what capacity. Include dates of courses the student has taken with you or dates of employment with your company and details on how you have interacted with the person. Continue by describing the person's skills and performance and what makes them an ideal candidate for a potential new employer or for graduate school. End by summarizing why you are recommending this person.

For the content of a well-documented letter, the following are tips to keep the following in mind:

- Begin the letter by describing how you know the individual you are recommending and the specific contexts upon which you are basing your evaluation. In what situations have you known the individual? For how long? How closely?
- Promptly identify yourself and the basis of your knowledge of the student: Was s/he a student in your class, seminar, a teaching assistant? Did you supervise this person in a working environment or were you a peer colleague? Has your acquaintance been sustained over a number of years? Writing the letter on department/company letterhead is a further form of identification.
- In evaluating a student's intellectual capabilities, try to describe the student in terms that reflect that student's distinctive or individual strengths. How well does the applicant organize his/her thoughts and communicate them? What evidence is there of his/her judgment, reliability, organizational ability and analytical skills? Whatever strengths strike you as particularly salient, be prepared to back up your judgment with concrete examples - papers, exams, class presentations, or performance on a project.
- Present the individual's general qualities relevant to the position along with one or two detailed **examples**. Be objective and realistic in describing such things as strengths, "on-the-job" or "in-the-classroom" performance, planning and follow-through abilities, flexibility, professional qualities, teaching/professional skills, interpersonal skills or other skill areas.
- In discussing a student's character, proceed in a similar fashion to the intellectual evaluation, highlighting individual traits and providing concrete illustrations. Including vivid detail will make the recommendation much more effective.
- Ranking the student may be requested or desired by graduate admissions/grant program selection committees. Having concentrated on the student's individual or unique strengths, you might find it difficult to do so. Ranking is of course less of a problem if a student is unambiguously among the top five or ten percent that you have taught, or so outstanding that he or she would safely rank high in any group. Many of the students who come to you for a letter, however, will not fall within that small unambiguous group. If you wish to offer some comparative perspective, you might be more readily able to do so in more specific areas: Is the student one of the most articulate? original? clear-thinking? motivated? intellectually curious? Some schools or fellowships have forms which ask for rankings broken down into specific areas.
- Avoid the misconception that the more superlatives that you use, the stronger the letter. Heavy use of stock phrases or clichés in general is unhelpful. Your letter can only be effective if it contains substantive information about the student's qualifications.
- If you lack sufficient information to answer some questions posed or suggested in an application, it is best to maintain the integrity and credibility of your letter, and say only what you are in a position to say.
- Present the person truthfully but positively. A recommendation that paints an unrealistic picture of a candidate may be discounted. A recommendation that focuses on negative qualities may do more harm than intended.
- Tailor the recommendation to the position. A letter recommending an individual for a job as a camp counselor should contain different information from that in a letter recommending the same individual for a job as a computer programmer.
- Give your professional opinion of the potential for success of the candidate. Be sure to explain the incident or circumstances upon which you base this opinion.
- Your letter should conclude with a brief summation, giving the main thrust of your recommendation for the candidate.

Common problems that can detract from the overall usability of a letter of recommendation

- It contains school-specific references or is otherwise inappropriate for multiple audiences
- There is an incorrect spelling of the student's name or multiple spellings of the name within the same letter
- Multiple names are listed in the body of the letter, indicating a cut and paste effort from a previously written letter

- It uses a nickname without first introducing the student's legal name
- The letter is typed on plain, white paper instead of letterhead
- The letter is missing the writer's signature and/or contact information
- It lacks the appropriate evaluation form indicating the student's intention regarding the confidentiality status of the letter
- The letter contains unsupported, over-enthusiastic or generic endorsements, instead of offering useful, balanced and concrete insights

Although less frequent, the following occurrences are also problematic, as they can also negatively impact a student's candidacy. This is the case when letters:

- Concentrate on the writer and/or the class taught, with only a brief reference to the student
- Consist of only one sentence or one paragraph simply confirming the completion of a class and the grade earned by the student
- Disclose the student's personal circumstances, especially in relation to illnesses or disability, **without authorization**
- Lack clarity regarding the nature of the relationship between the writer and the student (e.g. personal, academic, or professional employment)
- Are typed but signed in pencil
- Are illegible — due to poor handwriting or the medium used (pencil, gel pen, etc.)
- Are stained due to food, beverage, cigarette
- Contain profanity
- Evaluate both the student and his/her spouse or partner in one letter
- Focus on personal information about the letter writer such as personal lifestyle, aspirations, or political views

SAMPLE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

The following is a general "template" to follow in organizing the content of your letter.

Opening

The writer should explain the relationship between herself/himself and the candidate as well as why the letter is being written. For example: Bill Jones completed his student teaching under my supervision. I am pleased to be able to provide a letter recommending him for a position as a teacher.

The writer may want to describe the type of experience, length, and time period during which he/she worked with the candidate. The writer may also wish to describe any special assignments or responsibilities that the candidate completed.

Body

The body of the recommendation should provide specific information about the candidate. Information may include:

- Personal characteristics such as poise, confidence, dependability, patience, creativity, etc.
- Specific areas of strength or special experiences. The candidate may have some exceptional strengths such as a very high energy level or excellent communication skills. A candidate may also have a specific area of knowledge or experience such as a strong background in science, an undergraduate degree in another area or related work experience in education, a research project, coaching, extracurricular activities, etc.

Closing

The closing of the letter should briefly summarize previous points and clearly state that you recommend the candidate for the position, graduate program or opportunity they are seeking. The recommendation letter should be written in language that is straightforward and to the point. Avoid using jargon or language that is too general or effusive.

Sample One—Academic

I was Tom Smith's cooperating teacher during his student teaching assignment the Spring 2002 semester. Tom completed sixteen weeks of student teaching in seventh grade social studies under my supervision. I am pleased to be able to write a letter of recommendation for Tom. During Tom's student teaching experience, he was highly motivated to learn as much as he could and perform to his best capacities. He frequently put in long hours to develop lesson plans and monitor student progress. He asked for feedback on a daily basis and accepted constructive criticism with maturity. He understood his limitations as an inexperienced teacher and observed experienced teachers closely in order to improve his own teaching abilities. Tom has several strengths but his main strength, from my observations, is his ability to motivate students. He always seemed sincerely interested in their progress and presented new material in a way that captured their attention. For example, he had a group of students map out a "road-trip" across the United States. The students had to plan the trip to include a given number of state and national parks, major cities, and historic battle sites. The students really dived into the project. Tom consistently displayed this type of creativity in planning lessons and motivating students. He soon learned that the best way to manage a classroom is to keep students on-task with projects that were both interesting and challenging. He also did a good job of recognizing when a student needed special assistance or attention. In summary, Tom displayed the qualities that make a teacher successful. He is dependable, motivated, and is in tune with the needs of his students. He works well with colleagues and administration and is able to learn from those around him. I highly recommend him for a teaching position.

First Name Last Name
Title
College/University
Contact Information

Sample Two--Academic

"I am writing in support of X to . . . I have known X since September, 2006. He was a member of a small . . . tutorial that I taught in 2006-2007. . . . X was an active and conscientious member of the class. He challenged the rest of the class to consider issues from new perspectives and often asked very penetrating and important questions. He chose to take on difficult topics and handled them well. His assignments were well-written, well-supported, organized, neat, and timely. It was evident that X really desired to learn more and challenge himself. . . .

X also has interest outside of academics. He has been an active member of . . . , a university singing group, and a member of the campus . . . club. He is also a member of the . . . House film society. X's personality is wonderful. He is outgoing and friendly, but not dominating. He has an obvious and sincere concern for others. . . .

X would be a wonderful student to have at He has skills that he is eager to share, but he is just as eager to learn. . . . I feel very confident that he will be extremely successful in all his future endeavors. He is a focused and determined young man. I highly recommend him for"

Sincerely,

First Name Last Name
Title
College/University
Contact Information

Sample Three—Employment

To whom it may concern:

I would like to recommend Muriel McKenna as a candidate for a position with your organization. In her position as Administrative Assistant, Muriel was employed in our office from 2004 - 2008.

Muriel did an excellent job in this position and was an asset to our organization during her tenure with the office. She has excellent written and verbal communication skills, is extremely organized, can work independently, and is able to effectively multi-task to ensure that all projects are completed in a timely manner.

Muriel was always willing to offer her assistance and had an excellent rapport with the many constituents served by our office including clients, employers, and other professional organizations. She would be an asset to any employer and I recommend her for any endeavor she chooses to pursue.

Yours truly,

John Doe, Job Title
Company Name
Contact Information

Sample Four—Employment for a Current or Past Summer Employee

Recommendation for Ms. Jane Sorlow:

Jane worked in the Career Office at ABCD College under my supervision during the summer of 2009. During that time I developed a very high regard for Jane based on the outstanding contributions that she made to the office throughout the summer. In fact, Jane has been the most productive summer staff member that the office has employed during my 20 year tenure as Director!

Ms. Sorlow has exhibited a rare combination of speed and accuracy that has enabled her to produce a very high volume of work while maintaining very high standards for quality. Staff has often said that "I can't believe that Jane is done with that job already"! Jane was able to follow complex directions in a thorough and detailed manner and also worked very independently without close supervision when it was appropriate. Rarely did staff need to explain a process or procedure to Jane more than once and she was particularly adept at learning computer applications. Jane is an organizational whiz who can work on multilayered tasks and balance multiple projects concurrently.

Jane's upbeat demeanor and can do attitude brightened the office and made her a very low maintenance employee. Her strong human relations skills enabled her to interface very effectively with many different constituencies including alumni, students and employers. Jane's strong verbal and written communications skills allowed her to relay information in a clear and coherent manner. Jane is a naturally caring person with a strong helping orientation who consistently demonstrated a solid service orientation towards our clients.

As you can tell by now, I am quite impressed with this outstanding young woman and give her my strongest recommendation for roles which require intelligence, organization, communication skills, service and a positive attitude. Please feel free to contact me if you need additional information or perspective.

Sincerely,

First Name Last Name
Director, Career Office
212-580-5888
email@college.edu

Sample Five--Employment from a Manager

I have worked very closely with Ms. Moody during the several years while she has served as an assistant in my office. Michele has excelled in this role and maintained one of the highest levels of productivity for an assistant during my 20 year tenure with the company. Michele produces a high volume of work while maintaining high standards for quality and accuracy.

Ms. Moody possesses the ultimate "can do" attitude while taking on all tasks with a positive energy and a smile. Her upbeat personality and engaging personal style enables her to interact effectively with clients and staff. Michele is very well organized and keeps track of the details necessary to coordinate events of this kind and run an efficient office.

Ms. Moody takes initiative to go beyond the expected parameters of her job. All the intangibles that lead to success in the workplace are in order with Michele. There will be no unpleasant surprises and I am confident she will fit in and add to office morale.

I volunteered to write this recommendation for Michele because I am very grateful for her contributions to our office and very confident that she has the intelligence, work ethic and communications skills to add value wherever she works. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this outstanding young woman.

Sincerely,

First Name Last Name
Manager
ABCD Company
212-530-1234
email@abcd.com

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References for Professional Use

References should not be listed on a resume but should be compiled on a separate sheet. Review the tips listed below and the template for a suggested format as to how to put the information in writing. Bring your reference list to interviews printed on the same type of paper as your resume and have it prepared for employers when requested.

Who should you ask?

Consider professional people who know you best:

- Current employers, former supervisors, professors
- Select people who you feel will have positive comments, ask them in advance if they would feel comfortable providing a positive recommendation

Help by providing information:

Reach out to your references early in the job search to inform them of your interests. Send information about the types of jobs you are applying for so they can position you in the best light if contacted by a potential employer. Send them a copy of your resume and some suggested situations that you and the person shared so that they are best prepared to recommend you if they are contacted by an employer.

Format tips:

- Copy your personal info from the top of your resume to the top of the references page
- List 2-3 references, with the following information: Name, title, company/organization, address, phone number and email (if possible)

REFERENCES

Your Name and Contact Information

Name of your reference
Title
Company Name
Address
Phone number
Email address

Name of your reference
Title
Company Name
Address
Phone number
Email address

Name of your reference
Title
Company Name
Address
Phone number
Email address

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References for Academic Letters

If you are planning on applying to graduate school, you should also plan to request letters of recommendation. Most graduate programs require at least two letters of recommendation. Important pieces of your application include transcripts, standardized test scores, and a personal statement/essay, in addition to a glowing letter of recommendation. The letter of recommendation can give admission committees a picture of you that the other pieces of your application cannot.

Definition of a recommendation letter:

A detailed discussion, from a faculty member, of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and suited for the program to which you have applied.

Typically, one or more of the people in your network and/or your mentors will write your recommendation. It is important to be consistent in communication with them about goals and needs. The more familiar they are with these the better the recommendation they can write. It is important to get your request in for a recommendation early. It takes a significant amount of time to write an effective letter, so give the writer at least 8 weeks' notice before the deadline.

Who should you ask?

Consider professional people who know you best: faculty members, administrators, advisors, internship supervisors, and employers. The person who writes your letter should:

- Know you for a significant amount of time (at least one year)
- Know the quality of your work
- Have a high opinion of you, both personally and professionally
- Describe your work and character in a positive light
- Know your educational and career goals
- Have the ability to write a well-written letter

How to request a letter:

When you approach a potential letter-writer, it is best to set up an appointment to meet with them. First, ask if they feel that they know you well enough to write a letter of recommendation for you. Pay attention to their reaction. If you sense any hesitation, thank them and ask someone else. Remember the earlier you ask the better. The closer it is to the end of the semester, the more hesitant a faculty member may become due to time restraints and work load.

Help by providing information:

The person writing your letter can compose a fuller picture of you if you provide the necessary information. Don't assume that they will remember everything about you! Give your letter-writers plenty of time and background information. You may want to request a letter at least 8 weeks prior to the application deadline.

Helpful resources to include:

- A cover note and resume that includes your contact information
- Transcripts
- Admissions essay/personal statement
- Copies of graded papers/assignments from the course you took with them
- A list of schools to which you are applying, due dates for each application with the earliest due date listed first
- Copy of the application recommendation forms
- An addressed and stamped envelope (if the letter needs to be mailed separately) As the application deadline approaches, check back with your letter-writer to follow-up with them that the letters were sent on time. Contact the graduate program to inquire whether your materials were received. Once you have confirmed that the letters have arrived, be sure to thank those who wrote the letters. Always send a thank you note to each person who contributed a recommendation letter.

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