

Writing Recommendation Letters

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George Adams, Philosopher

“There is no such thing as a ‘self-made’ man. We are made up of thousands of others. Everyone who has ever done a kind deed for us, or spoken one word of encouragement to us, has entered into the make-up of our character and of our thoughts, as well as our success.”

Letters of Recommendation are Important

- It is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate.
- It should present a well-documented evaluation, providing sufficient evidence and information to help a selection committee in making its decision.
- Typically the letters are given a lot of weight in the decision and can be as important or more important than other components of the application
- Allows the reader to get a clear idea of what the person is “really” like

Who Are You Writing Letters For?

- Students applying for studies/rotations (*Shorter, state their maturity, ability to learn*)
- Students applying for jobs/ postdocs (*Longer, talk about their projects, unpublished projects, what was their contribution to each and to lab*)
- Faculty members who are up for promotion (*Super important, be sure to take seriously, takes many hours to write a good one*)
- All of the above who have been nominated for awards

Think About Your Reasons for Writing

- To help an individual get to the next level
- To help your institution get its learners to well-known institutions
- Provide potential employers/ program/ fellowship directors with useful data to select the best/appropriate candidates
- Because you were asked and didn't know how to say no

Your Letter Builds on Your Reputation and Integrity

- Don't write a stronger letter than is deserved
- Don't give half-truths or fail to disclose the whole truth
- Don't fear repercussion for writing truthful criticisms
- If you write untruthful criticisms beware of repercussion

Suggested Letter Format

- The Student Introduction
- Body (Scientific)
- Body (Personal)
- Conclusion

The Student Introduction

- Address letter to specific person, if possible
- 1-3 sentences
- Introduces you & the student
- Identifies your relationship
- Demonstrates the context

The Body of the Letter (Scientific)

- Demonstrates your relationship

How do you know the student?

How long have you known the student?

In what context do you know the student?

- Talks about applicants work (role in manuscripts, unpublished work)

- Indicates the applicant's strengths

Strengths of the Student (Personal)

- Interpersonal skills, personal attributes and special interests that make the candidate unique
- Personality/Character
- Community/teaching involvement (above & beyond what's required)

The Conclusion

- Wrap up your thoughts
- Final comments on the student's impact
- Consider ranking the student (he is in the top 5% of students I have mentored....)
- Include your contact information

Strengths of the Student (What you don't say is as important as what you do....)

- Intellectual ability/curiosity
- Originality
- Critical thinker
- Technical skills
- Ability to incorporate new ideas
- Leadership ability
- Initiative
- Work ethic/ hard working
- Communication skills (verbal & written)
- Academic performance
- Honors and awards
- Integrity/ reliability
- Willingness to follow lab policy
- Ability to work with others
- Ability to work independently
- Maturity

Tip: Choose one to highlight and give personal anecdote

Impact Words

Comfort

Efficient

Dedication

Intelligent

Motivated

Confidence

Team
Player

Observant

Articulate

Enthusiasm

Pleasure

Shows initiative

Self directed

Exceeds expectations

Effective

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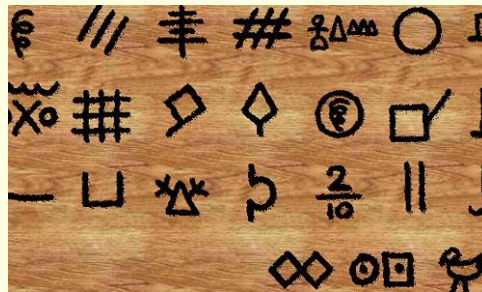
The Secret Language

Rank Words

- Outstanding
- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Solid
- Appropriate for level of training

Recommend

- Wholeheartedly
- Enthusiastically
- Without reservation
- With confidence
- With pleasure
- With comfort
- Strongly



General Tips for Your Letters

- Ideally 1 page in length but no longer than 2
- Font no smaller than 10 point
- Bold or italicize important information
- Add personal remarks/ stories
- DON'T FORGET TO PROOFREAD!!!!
- Create your own identifiable letterhead
- Include your contact information
- Use the Common Application form if requested
- Try to write two days in advance and get back to it just before you send.
- Keep copies for your records
- E-mail the student once you have submitted the letter

What's Not Helpful!

- Short, uninspired or non-specific letters
- Generic letters (drop in name) (*to avoid this always start from scratch*)
- Summary letters of scores, class rank, etc.
- Faint or undocumented praise
- Letters telling about yourself

When You Can't Write A Great Letter

- Note impressive improvements/response to feedback
- Focus on what was accomplished (i.e. completed all the reading assignments, was punctual) EVEN if accomplishments were expected.
- Highlight previous successes
 - May repeat details from CV/academic record
- Put interpersonal skills (3rd paragraph) as the 2nd paragraph for more academically weak candidates

If you don't have ANYTHING nice to say. . .

- Seriously consider saying no or at least disclose beforehand
- Limit criticism to one paragraph late in the letter
- Phrasing criticism in an affirmative way
 - “Her teaching will improve once she gains a higher level of confidence....”
 - “His fund of knowledge will improve as he continues to read about his patients....”
 - “I’m confident that her interpersonal skills will improve as she gains more experience working on a team....”
 - “He readily accepts and incorporates feedback regarding his need to work on....”

Sir Winston Churchill

“We make a living by what we
get. We make a life by what
we give.”

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