

SAMPLE RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Prepared by Richard E. Hughes, Ph.D.

Many students come to me to do research, and many of them ask me later for letters of recommendation. I see this as a very important part of my job. I want to write the most outstanding letter for you - a letter that will open doors for you. I have written these kinds of letters for undergraduates, graduate students, and medical students. A lot of students do not have a concrete idea of what kinds of things are said in letters of recommendation. Therefore, I am providing you with an example of three kinds of letters for a hypothetical student (Mr. Smith): (1) a mediocre letter; (2) a good letter, and (3) an outstanding letter. *I want to write an outstanding letter for you. The key is for you to get an outstanding letter is to exhibit outstanding qualities during your time in my research group so I can write about them.* Please read these three example letters and reflect on what sort of effort it will take to demonstrate the qualities so that I can write an outstanding letter for you. If you are excited about putting sufficient energy and creativity into a project for me to write an outstanding letter for you, then please join our team. If you only want to put in the effort to achieve a mediocre or good letter, you may want to explore an opportunity in some other research lab.

Mediocre letter

In truth, mediocre letters are actually *bad* letters. Since nobody every writes an outright bad letter, everyone experienced in reading letters of recommendation know that a mediocre letter is the worst thing that could be said about an applicant.

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing to recommend Mr. Smith for your program. I know Mr. Smith because he worked in my lab for one summer. Mr. Smith was given a project to work on. He was in the lab the amount of time required by the program that was funding him. He was diligent in his work, and he completed all assignments. I met with him regularly to detail the work that needed to be completed. Mr. Smith is a personable young person, and it was a pleasure to have him in the lab. In summary, I recommend Mr. Smith for your program.

Sincerely,
Richard Hughes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

Good letter

The following is a good letter, and it may actually help Mr. Smith.

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to strongly recommend Mr. Smith for your program. I know Mr. Smith because he worked in my lab for one summer. Mr. Smith came to me a year ago to discuss the possibility of spending a summer working in my lab. I met with him and outlined a project. I gave him some background reading at our first meeting. By the time of our second meeting he had read what I had given him and prepared a two-page project description. This level of effort is typical of a good medical student who joins my lab, so I agreed to take him on for a summer.

During his time in my lab, Mr. Smith demonstrated a good work ethic and interpersonal skills. We outlined a scope of work to be completed, and he successfully completed that work in the time required. He put in extra hours as necessary in order to meet specific deadlines that I set. I teamed him up with another student to work on the project. He seemed to work well with the other student, and I found him very personable. Mr. Smith put in sufficient work to be a co-author on a manuscript. Overall, I would strongly recommend Mr. Smith for a position in your program.

Sincerely,
Richard Hughes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor

Outstanding letter

This is the letter you want to have written about you. I have written these letters for a few people, and I want to write one for you if you give me the raw material to work with. The reason this is an outstanding letter is that it provides detailed descriptions of many qualities that admissions committees and employers seek: hard work, independence, creativity, problem solving ability, and the ability to get along with people. Mr. Smith is seeking a residency in orthopaedic surgery, so it is also useful to have an evaluation of Mr. Smith's dissection skills mentioned in the letter. Another noteworthy aspect of this letter is that it is detailed and provides specific anecdotes of outstanding performance. People who read letters of recommendation often look for this because it demonstrates that the person writing the letter actually knows the details of the applicant's work experience. At the end of your time in my lab, I will ask everyone (staff and other students) who has worked with you to provide anecdotes of outstanding performance that I can include in your letter.

Dear Selection Committee,

I am writing this letter to give my highest possible recommendation for Mr. Smith. I know Mr. Smith through his work in my laboratory. Mr. Smith first approached me two years ago about the possibility of work in my laboratory for a summer. At our first meeting I described the general outline of the project the he might work on. He asked good questions and appeared intelligent. He then went to the library and found many papers on the subject and read them carefully. He did this independently - I did not ask him to do this. I learned that he had done this at our second meeting, and I was quite impressed at his motivation and independence. Mr. Smith obtained funding from a program at our University to work in the lab for a summer.

During that summer, Mr. Smith demonstrated the ability to work independently with great creativity and enthusiasm. He also put in many long hours. He worked as hard as my best graduate student. I teamed Mr. Smith with another student to work on a project involving testing of patients having shoulder pathology. The project included recruiting patients, testing patients using biomechanical instrumentation, and data analysis. Mr. Smith excelled in each one of these areas. His interpersonal skills were excellent. He "schmoozed" the clinical staff to facilitate recruitment of patients. He tested the patients professionally. Sometimes this testing required long days due to the extensive setup and calibration of equipment each morning before the clinic began operation. He stayed after the testing sessions to back up data, clean up the area, and start data processing programs to run overnight. He was usually the first one in the lab in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.

The other student working with Mr. Smith commented favorably about working with Mr. Smith. He said the Mr. Smith got along well with everyone, pulled his own weight on the project, and had the ability to compromise with other team members. One incident illustrates this point. There is a staff member in an adjoining lab that is a rather prickly person who has had many problems with students in the past. Mr. Smith had to interact with this staff person in order to get his project done. Mr. Smith was able to find a common interest with this staff person, which was folk dancing, and build a rapport based on this mutual interest. At the end of the summer the staff person noted what a pleasure it was to work with Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith also volunteered to help others in the lab. One of the other students was doing a project on knee biomechanics, and it required harvesting knees from the University's morgue. Mr. Smith volunteered to help harvest the knees on several occasions. I asked the graduate student in charge of that project about Mr. Smith, and he commented that Mr. Smith has excellent dissection skills.

I was especially taken by Mr. Smith's creative mind and independent work ethic. He continued to read the literature independently and generate interesting hypotheses. We met about every other week, and at several meetings he presented papers and information that was new to me. By the end of the summer he was introducing me to scientific papers that were directly relevant to his study that I hadn't seen before. Mr. Smith also showed remarkable problem solving ability. Our instrumentation system began having problems midway through his experiment. Mr. Smith spent a full weekend troubleshooting the system. He discovered there was a loose wire in the A/D connection box.

Mr. Smith is going to be first author on a manuscript that he is preparing for publication. He followed through on his promise to write the manuscript during his M2 year. Moreover, he handled the manuscript revisions and saw the manuscript through to publication. This illustrates his high level of motivation.

In summary, Mr. Smith is clearly the best student I have worked with in the last 10 years. I would very much like him match to our residency program. Even though I hope he stays here, I think he would be an outstanding asset to your program. I give him my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,
Richard Hughes, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor