



Guidelines for Writing Letters of Recommendation¹

The goal of a letter of recommendation for an academic position or promotion is to provide an overall assessment of the candidate's potential to excel in a new position. In other words, what is the candidate's professional promise and your evidence to support the assessment? Thus, your letter will identify the characteristics and achievements that are directly relevant to the candidate's potential job performance. The key to effective and accurate letter writing is focusing your comments on criteria that are relevant for this evaluation. Traits that should be considered for discussion in a letter include past job/task performances, experience and expertise, intellectual ability, and personal attributes as they pertain to leadership quality, teambuilding, perseverance, and communication skills.

Useful letters of recommendation include the following elements:

1. Focus on the applicant
2. Description of the applicant's record
3. Evaluation of accomplishments of the applicant
4. Discussion of personal characteristics only to the extent that they predict potential growth and job performance

Letters missing any or all of these elements provide the reader with only a limited understanding of the candidate's qualifications.

Letters should be complete but concise, and they usually consist of three parts: introduction and background, specific assessments, and summary of recommendation. Letters from primary mentors, supervisors or close collaborators are generally somewhat longer than letters from others. The more detailed the narrative, the more persuasive the recommendation is. An excessively brief letter, even if giving high praise, is often viewed as a weak recommendation, at best interpreted to imply that the writer knows very little about the candidate or (worse) that the writer intends to convey doubt about the qualifications of the candidate without specifically making such statements.

Introduction and Background

A good letter identifies the candidate, the position for which she/he is applying, and the relationship between the recommender and the candidate. If the recommender wishes to write a strong and supportive letter for the candidate, it is often helpful to make it clear from the outset of the letter and then provide clear documentation of such a favorable recommendation. It is also helpful to describe the type of experience and length of time that the candidate has been known to the recommender.

¹ These guidelines were drafted by the UM STRIDE committee in response to a request from a UM faculty member. We offer them in the hope that they may be helpful both to experienced faculty letter-writers concerned about writing fair letters, and to new letter-writers who value some guidance in the process.

Specific Assessments

This is the section of the letter that contains the "data" or evidence for your argument. It should provide specific information about the candidate. Generalizations will be much better received if specific examples can be cited. Ask yourself "how does the information I just wrote support my assertion that this person is a quality candidate?"

In this section, personal traits that are directly relevant to the job performance can be discussed. Characteristics such as motivation, dependability, patience, creativity, ability to troubleshoot, poise, listening skills, etc. can be discussed. Avoid personal statements that are not related to job performance (past or future). For example, avoid irrelevant statements such as "she is practically part of my family" or "he is very active in his church or other community organization." These may be true, but they decrease the professionalism and impact of the evaluation.

Other characteristics that can be discussed include problem-solving abilities, management skills, teaching abilities, knowledge of the subject area, and ability to work with colleagues. Avoid "doubt raisers." These include negative language such as "while not the best student I've had" or faint praise such as "she worked hard on projects that she accepted." Other types of doubt raisers include hedging statements such as "he appears to be highly motivated." (Avoid such words as "appears to" or "seems"—you are the one writing with concrete experience about the candidate). Finally, also avoid potentially negative or unexplained comments. Make your comments direct. For example, unexplained comments that could be open to negative interpretations include: "now that she has chosen to leave the laboratory," and "bright, enthusiastic, responds well to feedback."

Summary Recommendation

This section briefly summarizes the main points of the letter and clearly states (or re-states) that you recommend the candidate for the position. The language should be straightforward and to the point. Avoid using jargon, clichés, or language that is too effusive. These are all elements that can be lost on your readers, depending on their experiences, culture, and training. The most effective recommendation letters also include a comparison of the applicant to a reference pool. For example, "...ranks in the top 10% of all undergraduate students that I have ever taught." You should avoid direct references to another individual: "she/he is better than Joe Smith" or "she/he is almost as good as Jane Chen."

Reading Recommendation Letters

Finally, the suggestions in this document are recommendations that can be used to construct effective, fair recommendation letters. You can also apply criteria based on these suggestions when you read and evaluate recommendation letters. Did the letter writer present you with an honest, concise and fair document with which to evaluate the candidate?

Notes on Special Circumstances

How do you handle personal circumstances in the applicant's history that may affect time-to-degree or productivity? It is generally better to address this issue than leave it unaddressed. However, talk to the applicant about it first. How do they want to address it? Do they prefer to not address it? Do they need help in deciding if and how to address it? Please keep in mind that if you, as a letter writer, address this situation but are too vague, it can leave a worse impression than not addressing it at all. To create the strongest letter, it is often helpful to present the situation as evidence that the applicant has faced adversity and overcome it, making him/her even stronger.

For additional reading:

Trix, F. & Psenka, C. (2003). Exploring the color of glass: Letters of recommendation for female and male medical faculty. *Discourse & Society* 14(2): 191-220.