

Preparing the Recommendation Letter

If you have been asked to write a letter of recommendation -- whether by a student or employee -- you must first make sure that you feel comfortable with the task. If you feel you are not familiar enough with the individual's performance or work style, let him/her down gently. **A vague, lukewarm letter is invariably a disservice to the applicant.**

Even if you do feel familiar enough with the individual's work to write the letter, it is always a good idea to request extra materials, to conduct a brief interview, or both.

EXTRA MATERIALS

If the applicant has not already done so, ask for extra materials that can give you a better sense of the individual's direction, focus, accomplishments, and future plans. Materials particularly useful for letters about academic applicants include transcripts, papers and writing samples, a copy of the Personal Statement, and/or a resume. The job applicants can submit a professional resume, a description of the coveted job, and summaries of projects completed.

THE INTERVIEW

Such an interview gives the applicant a chance to rehash his/her accomplishments, and it gives you the opportunity to get a better sense of the person's past experiences and aspirations. This, in turn, leads to a more tailored letter -- and, the more tailored the letter, the more convincing it is.

The interview should help you to clarify a number of points:

1. The Purpose of the Letter.

Ask the applicant about short-term and long-term goals, choice of school program or job, and reasons behind this choice.

2. The Applicant's Main Accomplishments.

Ask the applicant about major achievements, and how they relate to their choice of program or job.

3. The Applicant's Main Qualities.

Ask the applicant for a short list of adjectives describing his/her temperament and work style. If the letter of recommendation form specifically asks you to address the applicant's weaknesses, ask the individual to pinpoint areas of weakness that could be addressed through the program or job.

4. Anything Else the Applicant Would Like to Bring Up.

Make sure you give the applicant the opportunity to bring up any information which might be relevant to the letter of recommendation.

5. Practical Information.

Make sure you are clear on the deadline, how many copies/versions the applicant needs, and exactly where the finished letters must be sent.

Writing the Recommendation Letter

Once you have enough information to actually write the letter, set aside anywhere from an hour or two to write it. Remember that, if the applicant needs five versions of the letter (say, for five different graduate programs), you don't necessarily need to write five separate letters. Application forms usually request the same type of information, and you simply need to create variations based on a template.

MAKE A LIST

A great first step is to jot down a list of keywords and key phrases -- accomplishments and qualities -- you want to address within the letter. Such a list will help you avoid the **most common mistake made in these letters: vague, metaphoric writing. Anchor your writing to specific images and anecdotes; provide concrete, convincing evidence.**

Classify your keywords into:

- **professional/academic qualities**

Is this person a leader?

Is this person a strong team player?

Is this person a keen analytical thinker?

Is this person capable of conducting sophisticated research?

- **specific skills**

Strong communication skills?

Fluency in certain languages?

- **personal qualities**

Does this person get along with peers?

Does this person have a good sense of humor?

- **past accomplishments**

What are the principal two or three accomplishments this person has achieved under my guidance?

- **weaknesses**

What are some points this person must address to advance his/her career?

How well does this person learn from past mistakes?

- **future potential**

What do I believe this person is capable of achieving?

Letters of recommendation vary widely in content and form, but solid letters contain a number of common traits. Here below is an outline for a well-structured letter that covers all main points.

INTRODUCTION

First Paragraph: Introduce Yourself

Begin the letter by clearly stating your position, where you work, your relationship to the applicant, and how long you have known and/or worked with the applicant.

Second Paragraph: Give Your General Impression of the Applicant

BODY

Third Paragraph: Applicant Quality # 1

State the applicant's most noteworthy quality, and support that claim with a specific anecdote. For instance, you might say that Samantha is, first and foremost, a born leader; then, support that statement by telling about the time Samantha took the initiative to form a task force to deal with a glitch in the company's computer accounting system.

Fourth Paragraph: Applicant Quality # 2

Again, state your claim with specific anecdotes and concrete examples.

CONCLUSION

Sixth Paragraph: State why you think the applicant's plans suit him/her.

Seventh Paragraph: State how you think the applicant will contribute to the program or company.

Last Paragraph: Strongly reaffirm your confidence in the applicant's abilities and conclude by telling the readers they should feel free to contact you in case they need more information. Don't forget to include your contact information beneath your signature and name.

NOTES ABOUT THE FORMAT AND LENGTH:

Don't **handwrite** the letter; **type** it. Handwriting a letter is a sign that you are not serious about the task and will reflect poorly on the applicant.

Remember to use official letterhead, to sign the letter, and to include both complete contact information. When you have folded the letter and put it in an envelope, sign across the seal.

The length of letters of recommendation varies greatly, but five paragraphs is usually the minimum. On the same note, don't go overboard and churn out seven pages, even if you are highly enthusiastic about the candidate. Choose your content wisely, and remember that a concise letter is usually more effective than an overly verbose one.

Letters of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate. This letter should present a well-documented evaluation, providing sufficient evidence and information to help an admission committee get a better picture of you and your potential.

Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit letters of recommendation. Don't underestimate the importance of these letters. While your transcript, standardized test scores, and personal statement are vital components to your application, an excellent letter of recommendation can make up for weaknesses in any of these areas.

The best letters of recommendation come from professors or individuals who know you well. A well written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A letter of recommendation discusses applicant's personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make him/her unique and perfect for the programs to which he/she is applying.

Selection committees normally weed out mediocre application packets before focusing on the excellent ones. This means that **a brief letter with phrases like "good student" and "hard worker" that aren't substantiated with examples will get tossed aside in favor of the detailed letter that doesn't just tell but shows how qualified the student is.** Remember, what makes a student's application packet stand out from the others is not only grades and accomplishments, **but the specifics of what the student did and how he or she went about it.**

Dos and Don'ts

The following are lists of dos and don'ts to consider when writing personal statement. These lists are based on suggestions which I consider sensible and which are common to those providing guidance.

Do:

- Make sure that the Letter of Recommendation does not conflict with or duplicate the rest of the application (Personal Statement, Transcripts, Resume, etc.)
- Describe your qualifications for comparing the applicant to other applicants.
"I have been teaching for twenty years and have advised approximately 450 students on independent research projects over the last five years. "
"I have personally supervised ten interns every summer for the last five years plus worked with over two hundred college graduates in my capacity as trainer for Company X "
- Discuss how well you know the applicant.
"I was able to get to know Mr. Doe because he made it a point to attend two of my sections every week when only one was required. "
- Choose two or three (or more) qualities that you observed in the applicant.
"The combination of tenacity, analytical abilities, and good communications skills found in Mr. Doe is truly unique."
- **Support your statements with specific examples in which the applicant has demonstrated those attributes. Be as concrete and detailed as possible**
"He is the only student I ever had who came to all my office hours as part of a relentless, and ultimately successful, drive to master financial theory. He was one of just ten percent in the class to receive an A. "
- Try to quantify the student's strengths or rank him or her vis a vis other applicants that you have observed.

"He was in the top 10% of his class."

"She has the best analytical skills of any person her age that I have ever supervised. "

- Try to describe the student in terms that reflect that student's distinctive or individual strengths. Whatever strengths strike you as particularly salient, be prepared to back up your judgment with concrete examples - papers, exams, class presentations, or performance in a laboratory.

- Include some mild criticism, typically the flip-side of a strength.

"The only fault I have encountered in him is his retiring nature. His modesty sometimes hides a young man of remarkable strength and broad interests."

"Occasionally, her fortitude and persistence can turn into stubbornness, but usually her good nature and level-headedness prevail."

- Discuss the applicant's potential in his or her chosen field it may give the student the edge over other applicants, since most committees look not only for what the student has already done but what he or she has the potential to accomplish..

"I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Doe to your business school. This well-rounded student will be a fine businessperson."

"With her exceptional leadership, writing, and quantitative skills, Ms. Smith will be an outstanding strategic consultant and a credit to the business school she attends."

Don't:

- Use generalities and platitudes.
- Reference characteristics that can be the basis of discrimination, such as race, color, nationality, gender, religion, age, appearance, any handicapping condition, marital or parental status, or political point of view.
- Use 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.*
- Use empty, vague, overly-used words like meaningful, beautiful, challenging, rewarding, etc.
- Say "I hope", instead say "I am confident..." or "I am sure..."

Questions and Answers

What is the purpose of the Recommendation Letter?

Recommendation letters are letters written by professors who know you, assessing your capacity to meet the requirements of a program you are applying for. They're supposed to help decision-makers to get a better picture of your potential. The most helpful letters come from teachers who have had considerable contact with you, especially in non-classroom setting such as research labs.

What information should be included in the Recommendation Letter?

A letter of recommendation is a detailed discussion, from a faculty member, of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and perfect for the programs to which you've applied. A well written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. It should be written with the understanding that what makes a student's application packet stand out from the others is not only grades and accomplishments, but the specifics of what the student did and how he or she went about it. Selection committees normally weed out mediocre application packets before focusing on the excellent ones. This means that a brief letter with phrases like "good student" and "hard worker" that aren't substantiated with examples will get tossed aside in favor of the detailed letter that doesn't just tell but shows how qualified the student is.

Most committees look not only for what the student has already done but what he or she has the potential to accomplish. Addressing potential may take a little more time than discussing past deeds, but it may give the student the edge over other applicants.

Who should I ask for the Letter of Recommendation?

The best kind of letter is from someone who has been involved with you professionally. This person should know you and your work well and have a high opinion of you.

Good choices include:

- * The person who is supervising research on your part, such as your current or former scientific advisor
- * Your colleague from the lab with at least PhD
- * Your "seminarist" (and possibly also lecturer) with whom you have/had frequent interactions
- * The Dean or the Vice-dean of your department

Is it important for my recommender to be well-known person?

It is much to your advantage if your recommender is a well-known person in his field especially if members of the admission committee know his name. Just remember the general letter from the famous person who had little interaction with you and can just say that you are a good student but give no specifics of your joint research or other activities is no good. In this case you'd better off with the recommendation from somebody less famous but well acquainted with your research and personality and ready to write absolutely positively about you.

How many Letters of Recommendation do I need?

Most universities will ask you for 3 Recommendation Letters, rarely 2 or 4. Check with the particular department for details. As a rule you can submit 3 Recommendation Letters to all the programs.

How long should the Letter of Recommendation be?

The optimum length is between 2/3 of a page and one page. If the Recommendation Letter is shorter the admission committee might assume that recommender lacks enthusiasm.

Is it possible that the admission committee will contact the recommender?

It is possible but quite unlikely situation. The only cases I know when the recommenders were contacted is when the recommenders were quite famous people and their recommendations were too good to be true. In this case the admission committee might send the letter or e-mail or call (whichever information is provided on the recommendation) asking whether this person really gave this recommendation. Also, there is no need to provide the e-mail address on the recommendation letter if you don't want to. In my case, my recommenders have been contacted only ones by MIT (after I have been admitted) with the thank you letter for providing useful information.

General Outline of the Recommendation Letter

Recommendation letters are letters written by professors who know you, assessing your capacity to meet the requirements of a program you are applying for. They're supposed to help decision-makers to get a better picture of your potential.

First Paragraph

Recommendation letter usually starts by stating the name of the professor who writes the letter and his/her title, together with the name of the student for whom the letter is written. The professor should also state since when he/she has known the student: year, class or other activity. It should in any case be clear that the professor had the opportunity to get to know the student well and assess his/her capabilities. *If the person does research work under your guidance, indicate the type of research, the responsibilities of the student, and any significant projects undertaken by the individual.* You may wish to include a sentence about the nature of your research group and its activities. Here, you can also give a one-sentence summary or overview of your opinion of the recommended individual.

Next 2-4 Paragraphs

The assessment of the student's capabilities should be made from a multiple point of view over the next 3-4 paragraphs. From a professional point of view, it should give account of the student's knowledge, interests and capabilities, activities and results, work capacity, etc. Personally, it should assess the student's personal characteristics, character, social skills, his or her relations with the students and professors. Same as in other application documents, *the direction should be from facts/experience to qualifications, and from those, to value judgments.* Especially those skills relevant for the desired program should be outlined throughout the paper.

Concentrate on several different aspects of the person. Specifically identify his/her skills, attitudes, personal attributes, and growth, as well as his/her contributions to and performance within your organization. Also, if you do make negative comments, back them up with facts.

Beware of the power of words! Some words seem harmless in every day conversation, but carry positive or negative connotations to a prospective employer.

Avoid bland words such as:

nice, good, fairly, reasonable, decent, satisfactory, I hope, for sure

Use powerful words such as:

articulate, effective, sophisticated, intelligent, observant, significant, expressive, creative, efficient, cooperative, imaginative, assertive, dependable, mature, innovative

Some excellent points to address would be the following:

ability to communicate, intelligence, self-confidence, willingness to accept responsibility, initiative, leadership, energy level, imagination, flexibility, interpersonal skills, self-knowledge, ability to handle conflict, goal achievement, competitiveness, appropriate research skills, direction.

Final Paragraph

The final paragraph should provide an overall assessment of the student's potential to fulfill the requirements of the program, even though partial judgments can and should be provided in the body of the letter. You can make a more broad characterization of the individual and his or her demeanor. Finally, indicate the degree to which you recommend the individual to the program she or he is seeking: recommend without reservation, strongly recommend, highly recommend, enthusiastically recommend.

Some Remarks

Most recommendation forms contain a certain number of fields, the multiple-choice kind, where the professor has to assess, by checking cells, your abilities. Make sure those fields are checked and insert the text in the place left for additional remarks. Do not leave blank that portion of the form, but use it instead as a self-standing recommendation letter.

Some of the graduate study programs supply you with forms for the recommendation letters that ask the professor to ask a number of specific questions about your skills and qualifications. Sometimes, space for the answer is allowed after each question, and there is where the answers should be written, rather than on a separate sheet of paper. Other times, the questions come as a block, and in this case you have the option to answer the question still in the form of a letter. Should you choose this option, make sure the letter answers clearly every single question, preferably in the order in which they are asked on the form.

Don't forget to write the date and the name of the home university. The name of the program you are applying for should come out explicitly in the body of the text, in order to make clear that the letter has been written for that occasion.

Sample Outline of the Recommendation Letter

[Writer's Name or Company Letterhead]

[Street • City • State • Zip Code]

[Phone # • Fax phone # • Messages phone # • Email]

[Date today]

[Recipient's address block - optional]

[Address]

[Address]

Dear [Recipient's name] or To Whom it May Concern:

[First and foremost, if you don't feel comfortable writing a letter of recommendation, don't. A vague or fabricated recommendation letter might do more harm than good. Start by identifying your relationship with the person for whom you're writing the letter. Are you the person's manager, co-worker or professor? How long have you known or worked with the person?]

[Picture the person in his or her job role. Point out a variety of positive traits while focusing on work ethics, accomplishments, skills, and significant contributions (use specific examples). If you draw a blank, ask the person to refresh your memory. If you have access to the person's merit reviews, refer to them for hints. If for business reasons you're sorry to see this person go, say so. Avoid vague, powerless words such as *nice*, *good*, *fine* and *reasonable*. Use words such as *excellent*, *superior*, *instrumental*, *creative*, *innovative*, *efficient*, *dependable*, *articulate*, *meticulous*, *self-starter* and *confident*.]

[Wrap it up with a recommendation to admit or hire. Close by offering to provide more information. Include your contact information if it's not in the letterhead.]

Sincerely,

[Sign here]

[Your name]

[Your title]

Collection of Useful Phrases

Good Introductions

First, you need to express your positive feeling about writing the letter. Then explain how long you have known the person and what your relationship has been (supervisor, teacher, co-worker).

Sentences:

I am delighted to be called upon as a reference for John Smart. I first became acquainted with Mr. Smart in 1992, when he joined the...

Mr. Smart has asked me to write a letter of recommendation to accompany his application for PhD program in Physics at MIT. I am very pleased to do so.

It has been a pleasure to be Mr. Smart's supervisor since 1990.

I am happy to write this letter of recommendation for Steven Smart. In this letter I would like to express my respect and appreciation for this bright young person, who brought outstanding contribution to the work of my group.

I have no hesitancy in writing a letter of recommendation for Mr. Smart.

It is a pleasure to write a letter of recommendation for as Ms. Smart.

I have known Ms. Smart since 1993, when she enrolled in my accounting class.

I was Mr. Smart's teacher in two advanced quantum mechanics classes during winter semester, 1995.

Phrases:

am honored to support him as a candidate
 am pleased to provide a reference for
 am delighted to be called upon
 am happy to recommend
 am pleased to comment on
 can offer only the highest recommendation for
 first became acquainted with
 first came to my attention when
 has worked directly under my supervision
 has been a pleasure to supervise
 have known Ms. Doe for
 have no hesitation in recommending
 have been his supervisor since
 her performance as a
 his qualifications and performance
 have had the opportunity to
 in the past two years
 is a pleasure to recommend
 was a student in two of my classes

Describing Person's Qualifications

Discuss the person's qualifications for the graduate study in the chosen field. Statements of past performance, accomplishments, and contributions are helpful. The more relevant the items mentioned, and the greater the detail, the better your letter will communicate your positive recommendation. General comments provide a neutral recommendation or suggest that you do not really recommend the person highly.

Sentences:

Since the beginning of our collaboration I know him as an energetic and goal-oriented person.

Some of the main Irina's attributes are her persistence and diligence sometimes even ranging with obsession with work.

He grasps new concepts quickly and accepts constructive criticism and instruction concerning his work.

While she was with us she supervised the maintenance of all computer networks. This responsibility involved working with 42 separate offices.

He has proactively joined research at our institute.

I would like to mention here, that John is accurate and thorough in his research, pays attention to details and has no dread of routine work.

His extraordinary ability to analyze problems and outline necessary courses of action was invaluable.

In a class of thirty, he completed the course with the second highest grade.

That was mostly due to her assiduity and devotion to work that she was soon able to proceed with actual experiments.

I would like to say that it is pleasant to work with Michael, he is reliable and intelligent person with good sense of humor.

Her greatest talent is in developing innovations for new products.

John always takes an active part in scientific discussions, demonstrating maturity, strong ability to defend his ideas while paying careful attention to opponent's remarks.

She finishes her work on schedule. When she has a concern or question about an assignment, she speaks her mind clearly and directly, giving voice to what others may feel but cannot or will not say.

From our collaboration I can conclude that George has a strong motivation for scientific work. He is a focused and determined person.

Phrases:

a creative problem-solver
 always cheerful and dependable
 always behaves professionally
 broad range of skills
 can attest to his integrity
 careful attention to detail
 comments are well thought out and clearly articulated
 communicates her ideas clearly
 communicates effectively in writing

completely loyal and trustworthy
 demonstrated particular strengths in
 follows tasks through to completion
 gets along well with others
 handles responsibility well
 has a take-charge personality
 has a flair for organization
 her sensitivity and concern for others
 is innovative and creative
 is a tireless worker
 is mature beyond her years
 is intelligent and ambitious
 is personable and easy to work with
 keeps calm under pressure
 meticulous attention to detail
 one of our finest, most well-rounded undergraduates
 outstanding leadership abilities
 punctual and hard working
 self-motivated individual
 wide-range knowledge of
 willing to go beyond what is required
 willing to take on new responsibilities
 works efficiently and effectively
 works independently and effectively
 works well with little supervision

Good Endings

Close with a clear statement of your recommendation and a willingness to cooperate further.

Sentences:

Mr. Bright will be a great addition to your program. If I can further assist, please e-mail or call me.

Jane Bright has my strong recommendation. She will be a credit to your program.

I am confident that Mr. Bright will continue to be very productive. He has my highest recommendation.

I give her my highest recommendation, without reservation. Please send e-mail or call me if you have further questions.

I believe in John's outstanding abilities for scientific work and strongly recommend him for further education at your university, where he can develop and apply his bright talents.

It is satisfying to be able to give him my highest recommendation. I hope this information proves helpful.

I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Bright as a promising candidate.

Seldom have I been able to recommend someone without reservation. It is a pleasure to do so in the case of John Bright.

I will be pleased to answer any additional questions you may have.

I am very interested in Mr. Bright's application and will be happy to provide further information.

Phrases:

every confidence in her ability to
give my unqualified recommendation
has always proved satisfactory
has my highest recommendation
have admiration and respect for
have no reservations in
hope this information proves helpful
if I can further assist
if you have further questions
if you need additional information
if you would like more information
recommend without reservation
recommend her very highly
request your favorable consideration of
should be given serious consideration
should you have any questions
will meet your expectations
will be successful in any enterprise he undertakes
will be a credit to your
will measure up to your high standards
will be a great addition to
would be an asset to your program
would be a valuable addition to

Words to Avoid

Do not include comments about race, color, religion, handicap, sex, national origin, marital status, or parental status.

Skills and Characteristics of the Applicant (sobre o Personal Statement, mas também utilizável nas cartas de recomendação para avaliar o candidato)

What personal characteristics (integrity, compassion, persistence, for example) do you possess that would enhance your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics? This is an area where it is far better to "show" the reader how you embody these qualities, rather than simply "tell" him or her that you possess them. **You need to make strong connections between your experiences and the qualities you wish to convey.** The ideal is to recount personal experiences in such a way that your "compassion" or "persistence" or whatever else is fully evident without your having to mention those qualities by name. Here is a list of the qualities that admissions committees find most desirable in applicants:

- **Seriousness of Purpose** (to pursue graduate education)
- **Intellectual Ability** (to handle graduate study)
- **Intellectual Curiosity** (about the field you wish to enter)
- **Creativity** (as reflected in the way your mind addresses issues in the field of your choice)
- **Open-Mindedness** (to ideas, people, and circumstances different from your own)
- **Maturity** (as demonstrated by being responsible and trustworthy)
- **Concern for Others** (either by devoting time to social service activities such as tutoring or by being considerate and empathetic to others' feelings; the latter is more difficult to pull off in an application essay)
- **Initiative** (as in the ability to start a project or take on a responsibility on your own)
- **Enthusiasm** (as demonstrated by your eagerness to engage in activities)
- **Confidence** (in your ability to handle difficult situations and novel challenges)
- **Being Organized** (as in the ability to stay on top of multiple tasks)
- **Sense of Humor** (as in your ability to find humor in difficult situations; in many ways this is an index of maturity)
- **Diligence/Persistence** (as demonstrated by your ability to stay with a task until you complete it; this is particularly relevant for programs requiring a dissertation)
- **Leadership** (as shown in your ability to inspire others to work together to reach a mutual goal)
- **Risk Taking** (as shown in your ability to deal with uncertainty in order to reach your goal)
- **Insight** (as reflected in your ability to use introspection to understand aspects of yourself, such as your preferences and your motivations)
- **Optimism** (as reflected in your ability to find positive aspects in seemingly negative situations)
- **Compromise** (as in your ability to be flexible in negotiating with others; at a more abstract level this can mean the ability to reconcile ideological opposites or dialectical pairs among others or within yourself)
- **Overcoming Adversity** (as demonstrated by your resourcefulness in dealing with serious problems such as divorce, death, illness, etc.)

What skills (leadership, communicative, analytical, for example) do you possess? As in the previous question, strive to "show" rather than "tell." However, you can invoke these qualities by name with less chance of appearing insincere or conceited than if you attribute to yourself more personal, subjective qualities such as compassion and integrity.

Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school--and more successful and effective in the profession or field--than other applicants?

What do you have to offer the school--to your fellow students, to the faculty, to the broader community?

Why do you think you will succeed in this academic program?

What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

Why do you think you will be successful in your chosen career?