

Writing a Letter of Recommendation – The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Define What You Are Asked For (types of letter)

- Letters of Support for research proposal
- Letters of recommendations for a job or award
- Letters for promotion and tenure
- Letter of Reference

How to acquire enough information on an applicant's performance

- 1) Take notes during your time with a candidate so you are not winging it when asked to write a letter of recommendation
- 2) Meet with the candidate
 - a. Figure out what type of letter it is (rec, support, P&T, etc.)
 - b. Discuss the candidate's past accomplishments, future plans, or why the candidate is making this particular application
 - c. Have them bring: a CV, a copy of their application essay/statement, a description of the program/award/position that the candidate is applying for, and the due date.
 - d. Decline if needed (see below)

Letter Structure

- 1) **Format:**
 - a. Use a professional letterhead in business style; 11-12 point font
 - b. Date it
 - c. Use appropriate greetings and closings (real names are always better)
- 2) **Length:** Depends on the type. General rule: 3-5 paragraph essay. 1 paragraph is a kiss of death as it gives the impression of a lack of interest in the candidate. Anything more than 2 pages too much - will likely overwhelm the reader. Golden range: 1-2 pages.
- 3) **Structure (general structure – varies depending on type of letter)**
 - a. Introduction: state the purpose of the letter (who and what is it for), how long writer has known the candidate and in what context, and overarching comment regarding candidate's abilities/suitability
 - b. Body: 2-3 paragraphs
 - i. Provide specific information about the candidate that committee members can use to determine the candidate's strengths and that will help shape an interview. Back up your judgment with concrete examples
 - c. Conclusion: provide a brief summation, giving the main thrust of your recommendation for the candidate.
 - i. State explicitly the level of recommendation
 1. "My strongest/highest", "recommend", "recommend with reservations" [must provide explanation]
 2. Consider placing the candidate in a larger context: "among the three best students I have taught. "top 5% of students in my 20 years of teaching",

3. Consider specific “mosts”: the most articulate? original? clear-thinking? motivated? intellectually curious?
- ii. End with a farewell close and contact info

The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Writing Letters of Recommendation

1) *The Good*

- a. Point to specific examples/stories/anecdotes of what the candidate has done and why it stood out for you
- b. Differentiate the candidate from the masses (how this person is unlike the others based on specific strengths)
- c. Considering including remarks from colleagues for supporting evidence or the acknowledgement of specific strengths.
- d. If there is a specific project: discuss the merits, validity and feasibility of the project, as well as the candidate's qualifications for fulfilling the project. Pay particular attention to the to the language of the grant/award.
- e. Especially for awards: Convey the potential impact that it will have on the candidates goals, and how it fits into candidate’s trajectory.
- f. If you cant say glowing things about a candidate, try to frame it on particular qualities that were outstanding using specific examples (“out of all the students I have worked with in the last 10 years, she was the most motivated to improve transitions for patients on our ward team...”

2) *The Bad*

- a. Don't just recite the resume or summarize information available elsewhere in the application.
- b. Don't give unsupported praise without specific examples
- c. Don't write generic letters without regard for the purpose of the rec
- d. Don't spend all your time in the letter describing the recommender and the context of how the writer knows the candidate (e.g., descriptions of the rotation, fellowship, etc)
- e. Avoid “doubt raisers”
 - i. Negative language: “while not the best resident that I have had...”
 - ii. Faint Praise: “she worked hard on the projects she accepted”, “he is punctual...”
 - iii. Hedges: “he *appears to be* highly motivated...”
- f. Avoid jargon, clichés
- g. Don't use form letter words (i.e. “the *applicant* is well suited your *institution/award/program.*”)
- h. Don't scan the document – save it as a PDF with your signature. Don't cause eye strain for the reviewers
- i. Don't be too dry and formal—it really helps if you come across as really knowing the individual—and sounding like you really like them (use personal anecdotes and examples)

3) *The Ugly (the hardest situations to deal with)*

- a. Saying No to Writing a Letter
 - i. Why to Say No

1. You can help the candidate to consider other possible letter writers
2. Un-due praise can affect your professional credibility if you write a very supportive letter for someone who is not qualified
- ii. When to Say No
 1. If you feel that you cannot be supportive of a candidate
 2. If the candidate asks too close to the deadline.
 3. If a candidate approaches you in a highly unprofessional manner.
 4. If you cant remember anything specific of the candidate
 5. If you think that you are not the best person to write a letter.
 6. If you simply do not have the time to write a good letter for a candidate
- b. Letters of Recommendations drafted by candidates
 - i. Good:
 1. It is helpful to have the detailed information about the candidate when writing a letter of recommendation for them.
 2. It saves the letter writer a lot of time
 3. It expedites the process: (makes sure it gets done)
 4. It makes it congruent with the rest of the application
 - ii. Reasons to be weary of “draft letters”
 1. Some would consider it unethical to request that candidates provide drafts of their own letters.
 2. Candidates may give the same information to each recommender and following this material too closely can lead to letters that sound too much the same
 - a. Avoid similar word choice, phrases, style
- c. Writing Your Own Letter of Recommendation
 - i. Consider what the recommender can truthfully, reasonably say about you.
 - ii. Think about specific experiences/examples that the recommender can comment on, as well as specific qualities.
 - iii. Always ask yourself, what do I want the reader to learn about me when reading this letter.
 - iv. Avoid similar word choice, phrases, style if writing multiple letters, as well as similar content

And the Most Important Tip of All:

- 1) Always save the letter for the future: they came to you once because they think you are a good mentor. They will come to you again!

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