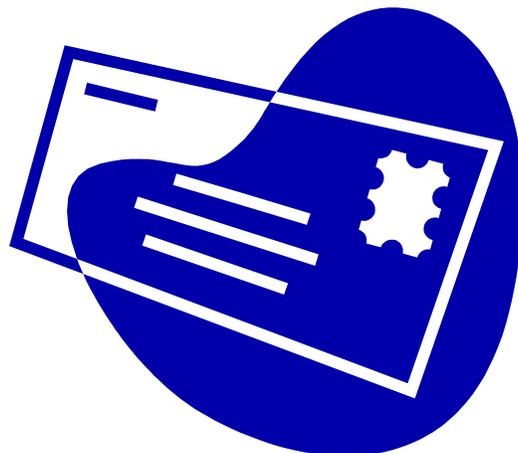


# Letters of Recommendation



Produced by the Career Services Office,  
and the Center for Graduate Studies



Before writing any recommendation letter, you should have a written FERPA release.

## **General Tips**

- ◆ Letters should be 2-3 pages, preferably 2
- ◆ Applicants should have 3-5 letters
- ◆ A meeting between the applicant and letter writer should take place to discuss everything from the applicant's goals to their experiences and the deadline for when the letter should be sent off
- ◆ Letters should tell how well an applicant accomplished what is laid out in the applicant's résumé or CV
- ◆ If a writer cannot think of supportive information to include in the letter, they should decline the applicant's request for a recommendation, be candid, be helpful, and suggest another writer (if possible)
- ◆ The letter should be written on letterhead when possible
- ◆ All letters will have items in common but each should be specific enough to be different from one another
- ◆ Letters should include multiple specific examples
- ◆ Only say what you are in a position to say
- ◆ Letters should be written with care and in the writer's best prose
- ◆ Letters should not include vague statements
- ◆ Statements of opinion should be clearly identified and explained
- ◆ Family members should never write a letter
- ◆ Formal thank-you notes should be sent from the applicant to each letter writer

### **What Information Should be Supplied to Letter Writers?**

- ◆ Any required forms with appropriate signatures
- ◆ Résumé that includes current name, address, e-mail address, and phone number; GPA; major(s) and minor(s); list of professional organizations/honor societies; awards; activities; skills; work experience
- ◆ Statement of purpose
- ◆ Position description/advertisement
- ◆ Description of short-term and long-term goals
- ◆ Course list with grades earned
- ◆ Titles and abstracts of research papers, exams(s), and/or lab reports
- ◆ Specific documents, such as papers, graded by the letter writer
- ◆ All information already provided to the organization (employer or graduate school, etc.)
- ◆ Service activities
- ◆ Information about specific ways the applicant approached given situations/problems
- ◆ Feedback from others, such as copies of teaching evaluations when applicable
- ◆ Stamped, addressed envelope

### **Who Should Write a Letter of Recommendation?**

- ◆ Advisor
- ◆ Faculty who taught the applicant in small/intensive courses
- ◆ Faculty with whom the applicant has worked on research
- ◆ People who have worked closely with the applicant, especially in a supervisory role

- ◆ A person who is in the field to which the applicant is applying
- ◆ People who are supportive of the applicant
- ◆ A person in industry
- ◆ A senior person in the department, especially if there is a problem between the applicant and their academic advisor (this person should address that situation)

#### **What Should a Letter of Recommendation Include?**

- ◆ Personal characteristics of the applicant
- ◆ Information on performance with examples
- ◆ Experience
- ◆ Professional promise (especially as compared to others)
- ◆ Examples and an assessment of the applicant's research skills
- ◆ Examples of thoughtful contributions to class discussions by the applicant
- ◆ Examples of the applicant's interpersonal skills
- ◆ Examples of the applicant's leadership skills
- ◆ An explanation of a weakness, such as a hardship that affected the applicant's record (this should only be done with the permission of the applicant)
- ◆ Information specifically relevant to the position description/advertisement

#### **What do Employers Look For?**

- ◆ The writer's relationship with the applicant
- ◆ Anecdotes about the applicant's strengths
- ◆ Information on a wide range of skills
- ◆ Specific experiences
- ◆ The applicant's ability to work with others
- ◆ The applicant's ability to accept positive and negative criticism
- ◆ The ability of the applicant to be professional
- ◆ The applicant's enthusiasm
- ◆ The applicant's ability to be in a supervisory role
- ◆ The applicant's ability to teach others
- ◆ Language particular to the position description (when applicable)
- ◆ The letter is specific to the organization to which the applicant is applying
- ◆ What's missing

#### **What Should not be Included?**

- ◆ Unflattering remarks about the applicant
- ◆ Comments on the applicant's race, religion, disabilities, national origin, and/or marital or parental status
- ◆ Any negative implication that may destroy the applicant's ability to obtain the position/award
- ◆ Faint praise

#### **Parts of a Letter of Recommendation**

##### Opening

- ◆ An explanation of the relationship between the author and the applicant, including type of experience, length of time known, and period of time known

- ◆ Identification of the letter writer's professional position
- ◆ An overview that details general impressions of the applicant

Body: Each paragraph should contain a specific example

- ◆ Verification of experiences
- ◆ Personal Characteristics: These could include creativity, confidence, dependability, patience, and poise
- ◆ Areas of Strength: These could include enthusiasm, excellent communication skills, high energy, strong background in subject area, research projects, and a ranking of the student as one of the most articulate, clear-thinking, curious, motivated, or original students/people you have known
- ◆ Teaching Abilities (if appropriate): Subject knowledge, problem-solving abilities, classroom management abilities, collegiality issues, and curriculum development experience

Closing

- ◆ Summary of points
- ◆ Clearly stated recommendation of the applicant

### **Employer Letters vs Academic Letters**

Employer Letters

Letters from employers should contain information such as the positions the applicant has held with the organization; a summary of the applicant's job responsibilities; the applicant's strengths, skills, talents, initiative, dedication, integrity, and/or reliability; the applicant's ability to work with a team; and the applicant's ability to work independently.

Academic Letters

Letters from faculty should address the applicant's academic performance, honors and awards, initiative, dedication, integrity, willingness to follow school policy, ability to work with others, and/or ability to work independently.

## **Tips for Applicants**

Letters of recommendation should be positive about you and your abilities and be written by someone who has known you for an extended period of time and has relevant expertise for the position to which you are applying. Throughout your studies, there should be faculty members with whom you have had a great deal of contact and who know your abilities and goals. Rather than choosing someone because of their stature in the field, it is best to ask someone who is impressed by you and will, therefore, write a good letter for you.

When asking for a letter, be sure to let the prospective writer know why you are applying for a particular position/award and ask them if they will support you and recommend you for that position/award. Supplying a packet of information to them ahead of time and sitting down with them for a meeting will help you and the prospective writer(s) decide if they are the right person for the job. In the materials and the meeting, speak well of yourself and stress your strengths. You should make the case that you are deserving of the position/award.

Remember that letters should take a great deal of time to write, so be confident the person you have asked wants to write and will write you a good letter. Letter writers should be given at least four weeks to write and send off the letter. You may give the letter writer a reminder approximately 10 days before the letter is due but should not ask to see the letter.

If you have any reservations about a letter writer, you should probably not have them write a letter and may want to ask them to suggest another letter writer. If you are asked to write the letter, which your writer will then sign, consider whether you have asked the right person.

If you have a troubled relationship with your advisor, especially the chair of your thesis or dissertation committee, make sure you get a senior member of your department to write a letter that addresses that situation directly or indirectly. If you cannot do so, then you should address the situation yourself.

It is best to have letters specific to each position/award. However, it is worthwhile to have letters in your Career Services placement file just in case. For each letter, you should write a thank-you note and keep the writer up-to-date with what you are doing as you will likely want them to write another letter in the future. Before you write the thank-you note, check to make sure that the letter reached its destination.

# **Legal Issues in Writing Letters of Recommendation**

## **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (“FERPA”)**

- ◆ Gives students the right to consent to disclosure before any part of the student’s educational record is disclosed by an educational institution or one of its employees.
- ◆ A letter of recommendation is considered an education record if a faculty member, in his/her role as a faculty member, writes the letter about the student’s tenure at the university.
- ◆ Students can waive access to their letters of reference. Once waived, the student has no right to review the letters of reference. This waiver must be explicit and in writing.

## **Right to Privacy**

- ◆ Specific areas are prohibited from disclosure, including age, disability, gender, marital status, medical information, national origin, race, and religion.

## **Defamation**

Verbal (slander) or written (libel) communication that:

- ◆ Harms the reputation, ability, or character of the applicant;
- ◆ Is received by a third party;
- ◆ Is untrue, substantially untrue, or communicated without regard to the truth or falsity of the statement; and
- ◆ Causes damages to any person.

## **Defenses**

- ◆ Truth of the statement
- ◆ Consent to release the information
- ◆ The statement was protected by a qualified privilege

## **Qualified Privilege**

Negative employment references may not be legally actionable if:

- ◆ The communication is based upon an evaluation of the person’s work and ability and is made by someone who has knowledge of the person’s work and ability;
- ◆ The communication is limited to information that is job-specific;
- ◆ The communication is disclosed to prospective employers to satisfy legitimate business needs;
- ◆ The communication is not done with malice or intentional harm; and
- ◆ The accuracy of the information provided is verified prior to its disclosure.

## **Negligent Referral**

- ◆ Writers must exercise reasonable care when referring a student for employment.
- ◆ If the writer has knowledge of issues that would make the potential employee dangerous and failed to provide this information to the prospective employer, the employer could bring an action against the writer for negligent referral.

### **Employer Immunity in New Mexico**

An employer is immune from civil liability from disclosure if the writer:

- ◆ Acts in good faith;
- ◆ Acts without malice or reckless disregard;
- ◆ Discloses accurate, job-related information; and
- ◆ Handles the information in a controlled, proper manner.

(This does not apply to administrators, faculty, or friends of the applicant.)

### **E-mail**

- ◆ E-mail is not protected correspondence.

# **Recommendation Letter Guidelines Specific to Schools**

## **Academic Graduate Schools**

Graduate schools are primarily interested in receiving letters of recommendation from professors who know the applicant and his/her work. These letters should include summary estimates of the candidate's promise as a graduate student. Specific examples should be included as often as possible.

The following questions should be answered by the letter (if possible and appropriate):

- ◆ How would you rate the candidate's overall intelligence?
- ◆ How well does the candidate learn and retain information?
- ◆ How skilled is the candidate in analysis and logic?
- ◆ Is the candidate able to deal with complex and abstract issues?
- ◆ Is the candidate creative?
- ◆ What is the candidate's breadth and knowledge of the field to which they are applying?
- ◆ Does the candidate have field and/or research experience?
- ◆ Does the candidate have appropriate laboratory techniques?
- ◆ Can the candidate effectively communicate verbally and in writing in a clear, forceful, well-organized manner?
- ◆ Is the candidate efficient and diligent?
- ◆ Is the candidate motivated?
- ◆ Can the candidate work independently?
- ◆ Is the candidate sufficiently mature for graduate study?
- ◆ Does the candidate have specialized skills in the field?
- ◆ How would you rate the candidate compared to others?
- ◆ Are there any situations that have affected the candidate's academic record?  
(Remember, the candidate must be asked before this information can be included.)

## **Business Schools**

Schools of business expect recommendations from professors and employers who know the applicant and his/her academic and professional work. Specific examples should be included as often as possible.

- ◆ Can the candidate effectively establish and maintain relationships?
- ◆ How does the candidate work with others, including supervisors, peers, and subordinates?
- ◆ Can the candidate delegate responsibility?
- ◆ Is the candidate sensitive to less competent persons?
- ◆ What is the candidate's potential for future success in business?
- ◆ Can the candidate work in a team environment?
- ◆ Has the candidate sought and been able to create opportunities?
- ◆ Does the candidate accept constructive criticism?
- ◆ How does the candidate accept a challenge?
- ◆ Does the candidate admit mistakes?
- ◆ Is the candidate able to ask for help?
- ◆ Is the candidate able to grasp new ideas?

- ◆ How has the candidate shown creativity?
- ◆ Can the candidate effectively communicate verbally and in writing?
- ◆ Is the candidate persistent? motivated? efficient?
- ◆ What is the probable performance of the candidate in business study?
- ◆ Has the candidate carefully considered plans for graduate study?
- ◆ How does this candidate compare with his/her peers who are applying to business schools?
- ◆ Are there any situations that have affected the candidate's academic record?  
(Remember, the candidate must be asked before this information can be included.)

### **Law Schools**

Law schools are specifically interested in recommendations from professors and employers. Letters should be specific and detail the capacity and length of time the writer has known the applicant. Specific examples should be provided.

- ◆ Is the candidate the type of person you would consult as an attorney?
- ◆ Is the candidate trusted and respected by faculty and students?
- ◆ How would you assess the candidate's analytical skills?
- ◆ Is the candidate able to quickly and effectively grasp new ideas?
- ◆ Can the candidate deal well with complex and/or abstract problems?
- ◆ Can the candidate effectively communicate verbally and in writing?
- ◆ Is the candidate persistent?
- ◆ Is the candidate motivated?
- ◆ What is your prediction of the candidate's ability to succeed in law school?
- ◆ In a rigorous program, where would the candidate be: the top quarter, half, or below?
- ◆ Are you specifically familiar with legal education?
- ◆ Are there any situations that have affected the candidate's academic record?  
(Remember, the candidate must be asked before this information can be included.)

### **Medical Schools**

Letters should be written by at least two science professors and one humanities professor. Letters should be specific.

- ◆ Is the candidate able to deal with complex and abstract issues?
- ◆ How would you rate the candidate's general intelligence?
- ◆ Can the candidate effectively communicate verbally and in writing?
- ◆ What evidence is there that the candidate has been a lifelong learner?
- ◆ Is the candidate capable of handling the load of medical school?
- ◆ Does the candidate have specific medical experience such as volunteering in a health-care setting?
- ◆ Does the candidate have the integrity and emotional maturity necessary for the field of medicine?
- ◆ Could the candidate discuss sensitive topics with a variety of people?
- ◆ Would you trust the candidate to care for a loved one?
- ◆ How does the candidate compare with past students who have applied and gone on to medical school?
- ◆ If you believe the candidate's curriculum has been particularly challenging, explain why you think so?

- ◆ What makes this candidate stand out?
- ◆ Does the student consistently help others?
- ◆ What observations have illuminated strengths or weaknesses of the candidate?
- ◆ Are there any situations that have affected the candidate's academic record?  
(Remember, the candidate must be asked before this information can be included.)

## Sample Letters

### SAMPLE A

"I first knew X in the spring of 1986 when she was a member of my Freshman Seminar, ' . . . ' In such small groups teacher and students come to know one another in a way that is seldom, if ever, possible in large lecture courses. In either forum something can be learned about a student's academic ability, but only in the former can one get a reliable measure of the student as a person. . . . Having kept in touch with X in the intervening years, I am confident in my knowledge of her.

To begin with, she is an excellent student, with a lively curiosity that makes her dissatisfied with superficial explanations. That curiosity frequently led our seminar down avenues and into areas that, otherwise, would have remained unexplored. . . .

One has only to speak to her to recognize her openness and eagerness. It is easy to mistake this for naivete, an error I made when she first told me she had signed up to be an apprentice teacher in one of Boston's more notorious inner city high schools. . . . Throughout the term, often at great cost to her own peace of mind, and sometimes in explicit conflict with the regular teacher, she continued to insist on a high level of performance from her students. She not only survived the term but won the admiration and respect of students accustomed to being patronized by teachers content to believe that nothing much can be expected.

I would expect X to bring these same qualities of character to . . . . That is, an openness to new places, peoples, cultures and customs; a keen intelligence, with which to analyze and order her experience; irrepressible curiosity; and an unusual ability for dealing with people of all ages and conditions. Those qualities, combined with her toughness of character. . . , will enable her to understand and empathize with others while never losing touch with who she is."

## **SAMPLE B**

"X has been an assistant in my laboratory during the past year, and has proven to be exceptional in several respects. First, X is exceptionally intelligent. He proved to be a very quick study, learning the elements of experimental design and the uses of microcomputers in record time. Furthermore, his questions are always thoughtful and penetrating. X threw himself into his assigned projects wholeheartedly, and shows every sign of having real talent in . . . . I was a little surprised by his high degree of enthusiasm because I knew that X was not primarily interested in . . . . When I mentioned this to him, I discovered that he has well defined career goals that mesh with the projects he was working on . . . .

Second, X is exceptionally diligent and hard working. He worked many extra hours over the summer. I vividly recall coming into the lab late in the evening. . . and finding X at work. X invariably finished projects well in advance of our projected target date. X was always cheerful during this intense period, and was a joy to have in the lab.

Third, X is very good at working with other people. He is exceptionally nice and considerate and sensitive. X is not only good humored and friendly, but also is good at gauging other people's level of knowledge and attitudes. . . .

All in all, I think X has a very bright future, and I am sure that he would benefit from . . . . Given his great intelligence and sensitivity, I am sure that he could put . . . to good use.

In short, I give X my highest recommendation, and very much hope that the committee judges his application favorably."

### **SAMPLE C**

"I am writing in support of X to . . . . I have known X since September, 1986. He was a member of a small . . . tutorial that I taught in 1986-87. . . . X was an active and conscientious member of the class. He challenged the rest of the class to consider issues from new perspectives and often asked very penetrating and important questions. He chose to take on difficult topics and handled them well. His assignments were well-written, well-supported, organized, neat, and timely. It was evident that X really desired to learn more and challenge himself. . . .

X also has interest outside of academics. He has been an active member of . . . , a Harvard singing group, and a member of the campus . . . club. He is also a member of the . . . House film society. X's personality is wonderful. He is outgoing and friendly, but not dominating. He has an obvious and sincere concern for others. . . .

X would be a wonderful student to have at . . . . He has skills that he is eager to share, but he is just as eager to learn. . . . I feel very confident that he will be extremely successful in all his future endeavors. He is a focussed and determined young man. I highly recommend him for . . . ."

## **SAMPLE D**

"I am pleased to write to you on behalf of X, who is applying for a fellowship to study . . . . I have known X for two years. She took my course in . . . . More recently, I have been advising her on her thesis.

X has done well in Harvard's . . . concentration. The concentration includes preparation in . . . . In addition, she has had substantial exposure to the "practical" aspects of her topic, for example through her work at . . . . Thus she is extremely well prepared to fulfill her proposed project.

X has selected an area, . . . , which is of growing interest. . . . In my view as someone who studies . . . among other topics, questions such as this are severely under-researched. The proposed topic - . . . - seems to be both worthwhile and feasible, and should prove very interesting.

X is an independent self-starter. While she has no trouble working in groups, or interacting with others, she can also work well on her own. Furthermore, she is mature and personable. I would expect her to perform well in a wide range of environments. In fact, her personality and skills should place her high on any list of good "representatives" for the U.S.

I hope that you will consider her application strongly."

## **SAMPLE E**

"This letter is in support of X, who is applying for a . . . grant. I have read his statement of purpose with great care; in fact, I have had many discussions with him about his project, which I find both compelling and important.

X is a rare combination: he is already at this young age a seasoned expert in both literature and iconography . . . . Having taught him in a language-intensive course last year, I can bear witness to his superb command of German . . . .

His project's focus of interest, the . . . , is admirably suited to someone of X's talents and industry. The . . . Institute is the ideal place to carry out such research, and I am confident that X's discoveries will in the long run make an impact on learning in that field.

Add to all this that X is a very congenial person, well-liked by teachers and fellow-students alike, and you will see why I am so positive about this bright and energetic young scholar. I endorse his candidacy with confidence and enthusiasm."

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Letterhead

Date

To:

I was Tom Smith's cooperating teacher during his student teaching assignment in the Spring 2002 semester. Tom completed sixteen weeks of student teaching in seventh grade social studies under my supervision. I am pleased to be able to write a letter of recommendation for Tom.

During Tom's student teaching experience, he was highly motivated to learn as much as he could and perform to his best capabilities. He frequently put in long hours to develop lesson plans and monitor student progress. He asked for feedback on a daily basis and accepted constructive criticism with maturity. He understood his limitations as an inexperienced teacher and observed experienced teachers closely in order to improve his own teaching abilities.

Tom has several strengths but his main strength, from my observations, is his ability to motivate students. He always seemed sincerely interested in their progress and presented new material in a way that captured their attention. For example, he had a group of students map out a "road-trip" across the United States. The students had to plan the trip to include a given number of state and national parks, major cities, and historic battle sites. The students really dived into the project. He soon learned that the best way to manage a classroom is to keep students on-task with projects that were both interesting and challenging. He also did a good job of recognizing when a student needed special assistance or attention.

In summary, Tom displayed the qualities that make a teacher successful. He is dependable, motivated, and is in tune with the needs of his students. He works well with colleagues and administration and is able to learn from those around him. I highly recommend him for a teaching position.

Sincerely,

