

Writing a Meaningful Letter of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation requires you to provide two things: your insight and your support. The letter is essentially a conversation between you and the reviewer.

Before agreeing to supply a letter of recommendation, remember:

- **The letter should be honest, positive, and detailed.** If these three criteria are not met, the letter may not be a strong addition to the student's dossier.
- **A neutral letter can be worse than no letter at all.** Consider your knowledge of the student. Would your letter simply reiterate the information in the student's transcript? If you have insufficient knowledge of the applicant's achievements, it may be best to direct them to a different source.
- **Specificity is key.** Providing concrete examples of the student's achievements will set them apart from other applicants. Which work/project/paper was particularly exceptional? Which traits make the student a pleasure to work with?
- **Exercise caution if addressing a student's weaknesses.** Committees take critical comments very seriously. If not meticulously balanced with positive feedback, this could put the student at a significant disadvantage (and could be considered libel in some cases).
- **Say no to the request** if your ability to supply a thoughtful, articulate letter is in doubt.

To help your students understand the process:

Create a brief document highlighting your recommendation procedure and expectations (minimum GPA, level of acquaintance, required supporting documents, etc). Consider circulating this to your students or post it on your website - this could reduce inappropriate requests and give your students a very clear idea of your standards.

Items to request from the student:

- Examples of written work / Copy of application / Statement of Purpose
- Transcript
- Program/scholarship description
- CV
- Due date
- Address to which the letter should be sent
- Where appropriate, a copy of the proposal

Formatting & content:

- Letters should be one to two pages in length, printed on institutional letterhead and signed
- The following 4 sections should be included:
 - ❖ Paragraph 1: Identification / relationship to student
 - ❖ Paragraph 2: Discussion of academic strengths and noteworthy achievements
 - ❖ Paragraph 3: Discussion of character, leadership skills (be specific), academic/ professional potential
 - ❖ Paragraph 4: Summarize and conclude with a recommendation

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Recommendation Checklist

Did you....

Establish your link to, and knowledge of the student?

- Provide the student's name and level of study
- Provide the name of the program/opportunity to which they are applying
- Describe how long you have known the student, in what capacity, context of your opinion (level of expertise)

Provide detailed information on the student's background and credentials?

- Discuss the student's performance and motivation in your course(s), labs, research group
- Comment on the student's academic / intellectual capacity and potential
- Provide at least one specific example of a noteworthy achievement (academic, research, publication, etc.)
- Provide at least one specific example of evidence of leadership and/or positive character traits

Link the student's background to the current recommendation:

- Discuss why the student is a good candidate for the program / opportunity / job / award
- Summarize by formally recommending the student for the program /opportunity

Provide your professional mark?

- Print the letter on institutional letterhead
- List your title and contact information
- Sign the letter

Online Resources

Harvard Center for Teaching & Learning:

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Verba-recs.html>

Stanford Center for Teaching & Learning:

<http://ctl.stanford.edu/handbook/writing-letters-of-recomnendation.html>

UniversityAffairs.ca: The Ubiquitous Reference Letter:

<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/the-ubiquitous-reference-letter.aspx>

UC Berkeley Career Center: Guidelines for Writing Letters of Recommendation:

<https://career.berkeley.edu/letter/letterguidelines.stm>

Worcester Polytech: What Makes for Strong Letters of Recommendation:

http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/FS/writin_gletters.pdf

About.com: Writing Letters of Recommendation:

http://gradschool.about.com/od/writingletters/Writing_Letters_ofRecommendation.htm

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Advice for Referees:

- Ask yourself: Are you the right person to write a reference letter? If you are asked to write a letter of reference, you may need to discuss this subject with the requester. Can you justly write outstanding things about the person who has requested the letter? If not, you should bow out gracefully at the beginning. On the other hand, if you feel you qualify, brainstorm with the requester so you can write what he or she wishes to be said, and be sensitive to his/her deadlines.
- Have the person give you a list of accomplishments, organizations that he/she belongs to, or any other relevant information. It might surprise you to see how much that person has done outside of your personal contact with them. This can also help you get a more accurate picture of the individual. Having the person give you a copy of his/her resume is an easy way to have this information at hand. Keep in mind that you can only vouch for what you know from your own personal experience with the individual, i.e., be prepared to provide concrete examples for attributes you mention in your letter.

Important notes:

- Do not raise false expectations and waste time, if a student doesn't meet certain eligibility criteria or standards outlined in the program description and application/eligibility instructions. Provide upfront and honest advice.
- Realize that applications are evaluated using a set of criteria. Excelling in only one doesn't guarantee success. It's the overall package that makes an application competitive.
- If, in your opinion, there are weaknesses in the application, such as poor grades, lack of work experience, change in programs, gaps, etc., encourage and help the student to explain them.

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TEMPLATE 1: MASTER'S STUDENT (to be printed on institutional letterhead)

Date

Name

Position / Title

Address

Dear X,

Paragraph 1: Identification (position/relationship to student/length of acquaintance)

Example: I am pleased to write this letter on behalf of Student X, who is applying for (position/award). I have known Student X for 2 years, beginning with his enrollment in my Psychology 101 course in September 2011. In my 20 years as a faculty member in this department, I have had very few master's students with the motivation and intellectual capacity of Student X,...

Paragraph 2: Discussion of student's noteworthy academic / research achievements

Example: Student X's outstanding CGPA (4.2/4.3) and rank at the top of his class are two of many signs of his academic excellence. He demonstrated an exceptionally high level of initiative in project Y. He performed key data analyses and later presented some of the findings at a national conference, for which he received an award for "Best Student Presentation". Student X is now embarking upon his own program of research on (topic). This is an unexplored area of research; as such, this work has the capacity to make major contributions to the field...

Paragraph 3: Discussion of student's leadership qualities and personal characteristics

Example: Student X's sense of humor and enthusiasm, combined with his research and analytical skills, make him a top-tier candidate for (position/award). Student X easily maintains an excellent relationship with his peers and supervisors. His level of professionalism is outstanding, and he has garnered a great deal of respect from his peers. He is also a skilled teacher, demonstrated by his performance as a teaching assistant and undergraduate mentor. Student X's contributions outside of academia are equally notable. Though relatively new to Montreal, he quickly established ties to community organizations and frequently volunteers at a local shelter for homeless youth...

Paragraph 4: Conclusion

Example: In light of the comments above, it is with great enthusiasm that I formally recommend Student X for (position/award). Support for a student of this caliber is profoundly justified. I have no doubt that he will excel in all future endeavors...

Sincerely,

(Name, title, organization, contact information)

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TEMPLATE 2: DOCTORAL STUDENT (to be printed on institutional letterhead)

Date

Name

Position / Title

Address

Dear X,

Paragraph 1: Identification (position/relationship to student/length of acquaintance)

Example: I am pleased to write this letter on behalf of Student X, who is applying for (position/award). I currently stand as Student X's PhD supervisor, a position which has granted an exceptional preview of this student's formidable capabilities. We first met 2 years ago when she presented at my department's research rounds. I was so impressed by the quality and novelty of her work that I approached her directly and ultimately invited her to join my research group.

Paragraph 2: Discussion of student's noteworthy academic / research achievements

Example: Student X has already established herself as a strong new voice in the field. She has four first author publications in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. She has been instrumental in the development of our lab, catalyzing two new programs of research (for which we have recently received CIHR funding) and going out of her way to guide and support the work of our master's students. Perhaps most notably, her work on pain management recently led to extensive revisions of existing clinical practice guidelines at a local hospital.

Paragraph 3: Discussion of student's leadership qualities and personal characteristics

Example: Student X is a consummate professional. She presents her ideas with the utmost clarity, and she has impressed our entire department with her engaging presentation skills. A born leader, she embraces any opportunity to assemble and manage a team, and she does so with highly productive results. She has an uncanny ability to navigate the often tenuous relationship between research and practice, demonstrated by her dynamic collaboration with area clinicians and the deliverables produced by this partnership.

Paragraph 4: Conclusion

Example: Student X is a most deserving recipient of (position/award). Her work has already begun to shape the future of this field, and I look forward to many future years of collaboration.

Sincerely,

(Name, title, organization, contact information)