

BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

The Heller School  
FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

**CAREER**  
Development Center

*Career Guide*

# Recommendation Letters

*Gaining a professional endorsement*

<http://heller.brandeis.edu/careers/>

# Recommendation Letters

## What is a recommendation letter?

A recommendation letter is a written reference designed to offer information about your character and work ethic. Colleges and graduate schools require at least one recommendation letter during the admissions process. A recommendation letter is also helpful in the working world and may help you to get the job you want.

In requesting a recommendation letter, the admissions officers or hiring managers are looking to supplement their knowledge of your academic performance and professional aptitude -- They want concrete evidence that you are a dedicated, enthusiastic and true to your resume and cover letter or application.

## Drafting or Outlining Your Own Letter of Recommendation?

It is very common for references to ask students to draft or outline a recommendation letter on their behalf. Sometimes references will write it entirely themselves but other times they will use the draft or outline you provide as a basis and then add, delete, and edit the information from there.

### **Why Ask Students to Draft or Outline Recommendation Letters?**

Professors and employers are busy. They have many students. They've been asked to write many recommendation letters each semester. Additionally they may feel that your draft or outline will help remind them of the things they'd like to write about you. They may think very highly of you but when they're trying to write your recommendation letter and staring at a blank screen it's helpful for them to have reminders to ensure that you're well represented.

### **Outlining background Information for your references:**

It is also standard for students to provide references with a packet of information for writing the recommendation letter. The packet can include:

- Information about the program or job you are applying to
- Your goals
- Admissions essays
- Descriptions of significant research or other experiences

Professors and employers will ask students what they think are the important things to include and what they hope the letter will contribute to their application. Is this any different from asking students to draft a letter? Not really.

## Where To Begin...

Once you have the draft or outline for the letter, set aside anywhere from an hour or two to put it all together.

**Remember:** If you need 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** - Write down a list of 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. You want to provide concrete, convincing evidence.

### **THINK ABOUT AND EVALUATE YOUR:**

#### **1) Professional/Academic Qualities**

- Are you an effective leader, a visionary and forward thinker?
- Do you function as an active participant in a team setting?
- Are you a keen analytical thinker?
- Are you capable of conducting sophisticated research?

#### **2) Specific Skills**

- Do you communicate constructively, consistently and concisely?
- Do you have strong interpersonal or presentational skills?
- Fluency in certain languages?
- Digital or social media experience?
- Are you technologically savvy?
- Are you organized with meticulous attention to detail?

#### **3) Personal Qualities**

- Do you work well collaboratively with others?
- Are you flexible? Adaptable to change?
- Do you possess honesty/integrity/morality?
- Are you a highly motivated self-starter?
- Are you responsible, reliable, dependable?

#### **4) Past Accomplishments**

What are the principal two or three accomplishments you have achieved under this person's guidance?

#### **5) Future Potential**

What do you believe you are capable of achieving?

\*Letters of recommendation vary widely in content and form, but solid letters contain a number of common traits.

## Outline for a Well-Structured Letter That Covers All Main Points:

### INTRODUCTION

Begin the letter by clearly stating reference's position, where they work, their relationship to you, and how long you have known and/or worked with one another (what context) and general "thesis" statement regarding your abilities/suitability for position.

Give a general impression of yourself (as your reference) specific information on you and why you are qualified, what you can contribute, and why your reference is providing a reference letter.

### BODY

State your most noteworthy quality as it applies to this program or job position, and support that claim with a specific anecdote. How your skills match the position and target your reference letter accordingly

- **For instance**, you might say that Sarah is, first and foremost, a born leader; Support that statement by telling a brief story about the time Sarah took the initiative to form a policy task force to deal with a glitch in the company's computer system.

Include additional relevant and compelling traits and back them up by offering examples that clearly illustrate these qualities.

### CONCLUSION

State why you think your plans suit you (as your reference) and how you think you will contribute to the program or company.

Strongly reaffirm your confidence in your abilities (as your reference) and conclude by telling the readers they should feel free to contact you (the reference) in case they need more information. Don't forget to include their contact information beneath your signature and name.

### NOTES ABOUT THE FORMAT AND LENGTH:

Do not handwrite the letter; type it or submit it online.

Remember to have the reference also include complete contact information.

The length of letters of recommendation varies greatly, but five paragraphs is usually the norm.

**On the same note**, don't go overboard and churn out seven pages. Choose your content wisely, and remember that a concise letter is usually more effective than an overly verbose one.

# Sample Recommendation Letter

Dear Selection Committee,

When I think about a student who best exemplifies leadership and a commitment to socially responsible management, Robert Spector is at the top of the list! Robert immediately and consistently has impressed me with his maturity, vision and personal sense of responsibility about making an impact in the world.

During one of our first meetings, Robert talked about how he came to the Heller School to become the Executive Director that he never had in his past work experiences. He had originally imagined himself returning to the non-profit field in this capacity but now through his academic coursework, leadership roles with Net Impact and expanded awareness of the shifting delineation between the public, private and non-profit sectors, his vision of his future is very different. There is such an animation in Robert's face when he talks about Social Enterprise and its current and potential global impact – it's like he has discovered a whole new way to look at the world and his role in this world. It's always tremendous to see a student with such personal introspection, willingness to challenge himself and the ability to shift perspectives.

With his seven years background in the nonprofit sector, including marketing, fundraising, program management, and external relations at a diverse range of agencies, Robert brings a depth of experience and understanding to the MBA program; however, that is not what impresses me most about Robert. It is the manner with which he works to take initiative, problem solve and collaborate with students, faculty and staff. Robert has that unique capacity to balance experience, knowledge and emotional intelligence in a style that makes people want to be a part of his team. What a wonderful trait!

Based on all of this and more, I highly recommend Robert Spector for this opportunity and truly look forward to seeing what impact he continues to have in this world!

Best regards,

Angela Finley

Director

Career and Student Services

111-333-3333; AFinley@brandeis.edu

# Sample Fellowship Recommendation

To Whom It May Concern:

It gives me great satisfaction to recommend John's Simons for the McKenzie Fellowship in Specialized Journalism. I was John's professor in three undergraduate Communications courses and worked closely with him at both our college radio station and campus video center.

Like a number of my former students, John has kept in touch. Through his letters I stayed abreast of his television news career in Sacramento and witnessed his development as a professional journalist.

It came as a wonderful surprise last year when John announced his intention to return to school for his master's degree. Knowing John I am sure he has exhibited the same enthusiasm for his graduate studies as he did with us.

John is highly charismatic and has a terrific on air presence. More importantly, he thinks critically, reasons well and has all the instincts of a good reporter.

His grace under pressure became abundantly apparent to me during John's junior year. John hosted our weekly TV interview show, "Live on the Mall", which is fed via closed circuit across the university. As John was discussing campus politics with the president of the student government, a fire broke out in one of the dormitories. John immediately headed toward the blaze and began covering the story. Back at the video center the technician called all the local television stations, three of which wanted John's feed and went live with it for more than half an hour. The fire was quite unsettling and involved considerable damage as well as loss of life. John's calm professionalism shown through so much that his feed was also picked up briefly by two national cable news channels.

John also has a good feel for balanced and objective reporting. Case in point, while John was with us a supremacist group sprang up on campus. Although not sanctioned by the university, the group was allowed to conduct a rally. This drew protests from the vast majority of the student body. Nevertheless, John felt it important for freedom of speech to interview the group's leaders on his show.

The interview, conducted on the mall, drew a large demonstration with animosity directed not only at the group's leaders but also at John. A number of John's friends held this against him, but he unequivocally believed what he did was right. I would go so far as to say it was not only right but a reflection of mature journalistic judgment.

It was a real honor to witness John's development here at the university and it has been a joy to watch his growth since then. I cannot imagine a better recipient of this fellowship. I enthusiastically recommend him to you.

Sincerely,  
Richard Samuels  
Professor of Management and Communications  
Syracuse University

Source: <http://www.boxfreeconcepts.com/reco/sample.html>