

Writing Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are often required to support most applications for jobs, scholarships, and graduate or professional schools. Due to the increasingly competitive nature of these programs, letters of recommendation are becoming even more important.

A useful resource for letter writers is "Writing Recommendation Letter" by Joe Schall, (2nd edition, available from Outernet Publishing, www.outernetpublishing.com). It includes sample letters for jobs, graduate schools and major fellowships.

Guidelines:

- A letter of recommendation is meant to be a letter of endorsement. If you feel uncomfortable writing a supportive letter on behalf of a student, then it is advisable to decline the request as soon as possible.
- Some programs ask for an evaluation and provide a form with instructions on how to rate the student's strengths and weaknesses. It is very important to follow the instructions on the form and include comments/examples, if possible, to reinforce the ratings.
- Students should inform you (preferably) in writing, whether or not they have chosen or are required to waive their rights to gain access to your letter. Confidential letters are usually given more credence in the selection process.
- Most letters are one page long. Two pages maximum.
- Proofread carefully and don't forget to sign your letter.
- Use your department's letterhead to print out your letter. Then seal the envelope and sign across the flap.
- Keep a copy of the letter.

Below you will find some suggested content/organization.

Beginning

- State why you are writing the letter and how long and in what capacity you've known the applicant
- Your assessment of the applicant compared to other students

Middle

- Discussion of the work/projects the applicant completed in your courses, including grades
- A detailed assessment of the applicant's qualifications, supported by specific examples
- An evaluation of the applicant's potential to succeed as related to the program/reason for the letter of recommendation

Depending on the nature of the application, you may wish to comment on the applicant's:

Intelligence

Originality

Capacity for hard work

Leadership skills

Communication skills

Writing skills

Analytical skills

Extracurricular activities

Leadership achievements

Maturity/integrity

Social skills

Teaching or research potential

Motivation

Knowledge of the field

End

- Reaffirm the recommendation
- Offer to answer additional questions, if necessary

Please note:

If any non-directory information (such as grades, GPA, class rank or personally identifiable information) is included in the letter of recommendation, the student's written permission is required. Personal observations are permissible without written consent.

Do not comment on student's appearance, family background, religion, health or other personal circumstances, unless they are immediately relevant to the application.

It is NEVER appropriate to ask a student to write his/her own letter.