



How to Write an Effective Letter of Recommendation

The letter of recommendation is a ubiquitous feature of that quaint custom of academic life and death known as “appointments and promotions.” In principle, letters of recommendation should provide important insights into a candidate’s character, scientific accomplishments, potential, personality, and general abilities.

However well-intentioned, too many letters fall short of this goal. All too often letters are nearly useless. It is regrettable both for the candidates and for institutional committees when letters fail to provide accurate, fair, or transparently honest assessments or fail to place the candidate in proper perspective relative to his/her place in the field. Although many of us have come to understand this, committee group dynamic all too often results in letters being used as *de facto* decision making tools: candidates are dismissed if a letter is deemed to contain coded negatives, dangerous since not all letter writers or nationalities use the same code. Alternatively, candidates can be elevated by unexplained laudatory comments from well known luminaries. This, too, is dangerous, since not all letters are thoughtful, and many writers are afraid to say anything that it is at all negative. It is also easier and less time consuming to be positive than to provide thoughtful criticisms, especially for busy luminaries.

A successful letter imparts the writer’s enthusiasm for an individual, but does so realistically, sympathetically, and with actual data to support the writer’s contentions. It also gives the reader what he/she needs to make a wise decision, and tries to convince the reader that you, the writer, know what you are talking about. Also, remember your own credibility and judgment are at stake.

The principle that guides nearly every aspect of this approach is also the simplest: *write what you know*. The better a writer knows the work of the candidate, the better the resulting letter. That does not mean that the letter will be more “positive”, but rather that it will be more honest and transparent, describing and balancing the

various attributes and limitations of the candidate. As such, it will provide more useful information to the committee.

Everyone has good points and not-so-good points, and unless the writer acknowledges and describes these clearly and fairly, the resulting letter is less likely to have an impact. The letter will also be best received if it is written in an engaging fashion. This helps distinguish your letter and candidate, and also keeps the reviewers from falling asleep. An enthusiastically positive letter that is uncritical may have less influence than a more balanced letter that is thoughtful and personal.

Ironically, being fully honest about strengths and weaknesses allows the writer to be positive about everybody, but in a way that allows you to demonstrate clearly why you are positive. To paraphrase my first creative writing teacher: never tell what you can show.

Here are the general rules of constructing almost any letter of recommendation:

- **Only write about people you know.** A senior investigator has an obligation of course to write for any former student, fellow, or staff member. On the other hand, one should be selective about writing on behalf of colleagues who may be in one’s field but whose work is not well known to the writer. If a potential writer has to read the CV to find out who someone is and what they have done, then the writer may not be qualified. This is also the message that should be communicated back to the originator of the request. It is often useful, however, to review the CV and interests of even the closest colleague. Before beginning to write, reflect a bit on the individual, his/her history and contributions, and your relationship with the person (wine or something even stronger often helps at this stage of the process).
- **Summarize what you know about the candidate and why.** Begin with a paragraph introducing the candidate, how you know them,

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their influence on the field, and their most important scientific and personal characteristics. Remember, not everyone can be the best postdoc or student you have ever had. Committees know this, so such statements can appear gratuitous: they should be stated only if they are literally true. If you do make a comment like, “Clio is one of the best students ever to have walked the face of the earth”, the rest of the letter must provide credible supporting evidence for this claim. The goal is to demonstrate that the writer knows the candidate well enough to make an informed judgment, and that the judgment is objective. You want readers to take your opinion seriously. If not, why waste time writing in the first place?

■ **Summarize the candidate’s work and its context.**

Write one, two, or sometimes even several paragraphs about the subject’s work. One hopes that the committee already knows what the candidate does, but this is not always the case (even if no one admits it). Moreover, and more importantly, it helps to define the person in the eyes of the readers. Do not enumerate facts and specifics, individual papers (pointing out the number of *Science* papers published is obnoxious), or describe every last discovery this person has made. Present the big picture, but without being superficial. This does a great service for your candidate: having a knowledgeable “expert” place the candidate’s work in the context of the field is something a candidate can never do him/herself without appearing obsequious, self-serving, or unctuous. Clearly discuss how the candidate has advanced understanding and in what areas. By far, the most important piece of information to provide is the extent to which someone’s work has influenced the field or the work of others—even unknowingly. If you can say that a person has done this at every stage of their career (student, postdoc, junior faculty member), that is the single most important piece of information you can relay to a committee. Therefore spend most of your time and care supporting your contention that the candidate can walk on water (or at least wade through it). This is also a chance to present the candidate’s supporters on a committee with pre-packaged evidence (yes, academics like sound bites) to support their views in discussion. Be as laudatory and enthusiastic as possible in this section, since

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enthusiasm will always be self-limited by the stark reality of an individual’s accomplishments.

■ **Summarize the candidate’s personality.** Does he/she play well with others? Have they been an important member of the laboratory or scientific community? Are they generous with time and effort? Give examples.

Saying someone is a wonderful person is not enough since without evidence, you are almost telegraphing that they are anything but wonderful. If the individual in question is a bit shy, cantankerous, argumentative, or tells bad jokes—features that will come out soon enough in an interview—always reveal this in writing, to help mitigate the problem beforehand ... that is, assuming the problem can be mitigated.

■ **Discuss extenuating circumstances.** If a

candidate has had personal difficulties to overcome that had an effect on his/her career progress (children, illness or family issues), or illustrates an aspect of personal motivation, bring it up. It can be difficult for the candidate to do so, and readers like some personal insights. Obviously, do not reveal details that might be of too personal a nature, or have nothing to do with the professional considerations at hand.

■ **Evaluate the candidate’s potential.** Also critical is how the writer feels the candidate will do in the future, as an independent investigator, postdoc, or recipient of a grant or award. Here again, it is possible to discuss this topic logically and with objective support: how does the picture painted lead to this conclusion?

■ **Evaluate the candidate’s “suitability.”**

Consider the place the candidate wishes to go, or the objective of the grant/fellowship program to which he/she has applied. Leverage that knowledge to explain why the candidate is a good match for the job and institution. As always, it is much more effective to “show” this, rather than simply to state it. If the factual information does not sufficiently support the suitability argument, or if the writer cannot logically indicate good reasons for why the person is a good match, the committee does not have to read between the lines, since the lines will simply be missing. Of course, to ensure this, a future essay will consider, “how to read a letter of recommendation.” ■

—Ira Mellman

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