



How to Read a Letter of Recommendation

If everyone exercised rigorous thought in writing letters of recommendation,¹ then it would be happily unnecessary to offer advice on how to read them. In this perfect world, all letters would be transparent, they would contain all of the information we need, and therefore they would not require interpretation. Unfortunately, we are not quite there yet. So, here is some humble advice on how to read recommendation letters in the real world.

Most importantly, always keep letters in perspective. Although some will provide honest, accurate, and useful assessments of a candidate, other letters will fall well short of the mark. The challenge for the reader is to distinguish one from the other. The best training for reading a letter is knowing how to write one, but even this wisdom is not foolproof. Therefore, letters must never be used as a substitute for one's own assessment of a candidate based on his/her accomplishments and ideas, or the impression he/she makes when interviewed. All too often, particularly when considering promotions, letters are taken as a substitute for a faculty's collective judgment, with committees tending to use a stack of glowing letters as a crutch to support a positive decision rather than relying on their own, often more direct, observations. Conversely, if one or two letters in a pile are deemed "negative" (or anything less than embarrassingly enthusiastic), one or more committee members typically get spooked, losing confidence in their own assessments; or they will use such letters as an excuse to derail a candidate they do not like but against whom they could not otherwise make a persuasive argument. Even when well written, one must remember the obvious: letters of recommendation are inherently subjective. Unless an opinion of a candidate can be supported by convincing, objective, and factual arguments, be wary of placing too much

emphasis on what any writer has to say.

If letters are potentially so flawed, what use are they? Why do we even bother? In actual fact, letters can be extremely important, but only as one component of the evaluation process. Letters have two purposes; neither of them is to on their own predominantly determine the fate of the candidate.

First, when written by a close colleague or mentor, a letter can provide helpful insight into a candidate's motivation, thought processes, personality, creativity, potential, independence, and ability to work with others. At the very

least, this assessment should be used to sensitize a committee to look for certain qualities in an interview: i.e., give committee members a chance to obtain primary data to test every aspect of the accuracy of the letter's assessment.

Second, when written by a more "impartial" expert (thesis committee member, outside referee), a letter can provide a

highly useful opinion into the importance of a candidate's work in advancing knowledge and understanding in a given field. This is especially helpful when the committee does not contain experts in the candidate's area. A mentor can provide this information as well, but readers must beware that a mentor's assessment may be biased by the mentor's interest in advancing (even unintentionally) the perception of his or her own legacy and accomplishments. With that disclaimer, a mentor's evaluation of a candidate's place in the scientific universe can be valuable, as the mentor can probably assess this better than anyone else. Obviously, if the candidate is already an independent investigator, the longer he or she has been on their own, the less the committee need consider the mentor's assessment of the importance of the candidate's contributions.

Deconstructing the process of letter writing provides a blueprint for reading a

Many of us engage in an almost semiotic analysis of precise words used, or not used, to describe a candidate.

As a mature evaluator, it is your obligation to independently and intellectually assess the quality of a candidate—not relinquish this solemn responsibility to unseen others.

letter. Although subjective, effective letters are supported by actual evidence. If a candidate is deemed to be brilliant and creative, does the letter make a convincing case based on the candidate's record or specific personal observations? The extent to which this is or is not the case should be in direct proportion to the weight you place on the letter.

The number and prestige of awards held by the letter writer is almost always irrelevant. A thoughtless and dismissive letter by a famous scientist ('since I do not have time to write, suffice it to say that I am wonderful and I believe the candidate is wonderful, therefore the candidate is wonderful') is just as useless as a similarly thoughtless letter from an unknown scientist. However, a thoughtful letter from a respected colleague who has a sense of perspective can be incredibly valuable.

What else should one look for, or not look for? Here is a partial list:

Code words. Many of us engage in an almost semiotic analysis of precise words used, or not used, to describe a candidate. Is 'outstanding' better than 'excellent'? Is being 'the best' in the field better than being merely 'one of the top three'? Does that mean the candidate is #3 and therefore not as good as #1? Are his/her contributions "solid", meaning boring and inconsequential? If we all used the same codebook, this exercise would be useful, but we do not. Therefore do not place much faith in this exercise. Even using language and word choice to gauge overall enthusiasm is dangerous, as different individuals exude enthusiasm in radically different ways. The guiding principle is to look for the evidence that substantiates the platitudes.

Comparisons. Another common technique that should be read with skepticism is the comparison: the candidate is as good as Dr. X and Y, but not as good as Dr. Z. This type of information simply compounds the subjectivity problem: unless it is explicitly stated why the contributions or other qualities of the individuals mentioned distinguishes them from each other, you are just getting someone's opinion, one which may or may not be better than your own. Some institutions even ask for such comparisons in their requests for letters; these requests should be ignored. A statement from an expert naming other players in an area

can be extremely useful, so you (or an expert on the committee) can explore whether your candidate's contributions are as exciting or high quality as those of his/her peers or colleagues.

Paper counting and the "CNS Syndrome."

The number of papers matters less than their quality. Further, the journal that publishes a paper is not a guarantee of quality. Believing otherwise is the product of what I call "The CNS Syndrome:" a condition in which letter writers (and committee members) pay morbid attention to how many papers were published in *Cell*, *Nature*, or *Science*. CNS Syndrome bequeaths to unknown reviewers and editors a disproportionate influence on the appointments and promotion process. As a mature evaluator, it is your obligation to independently and intellectually assess the quality of a candidate—not relinquish this solemn responsibility to unseen others. When faced with a letter that

goes out of its way to extol the number of papers a candidate has published in *Cell*, *Nature*, or *Science* (or even worse, in their F1 spawn), let the reader beware. This can be an indication that the writer is overly influenced by superficial rather than substantial considerations. On the other hand, if extolling CNS publications is in the context of a thoughtful description of why the work is important,

then it should be considered seriously. The guiding principle here parallels the discussion above: the journal in which a paper is published is only significant in the context of a substantive description of why the work is important.

Time is precious. Some people are called upon to write a disproportionate share of letters, as well as to perform a variety of other community and professional responsibilities. As a group, these individuals may not have as much time as they—or you as a reader—would like them to have prepare their letters. Make allowances for this as you read.

Dealing with negativity. It is rare that one receives a truly "negative" letter; more common, we sometimes interpret as negative letters that merely include mention of a candidate's shortcomings. There is a general phobia about being too honest; writers often fall victim to another disorder, The Mr. Rogers Syndrome: "everyone is

The number and prestige of awards held by the letter writer is almost always irrelevant.

A technique that should be read with skepticism is the comparison: the candidate is as good as Dr. X and Y, but not as good as Dr. Z. This type of information simply compounds the subjectivity problem.

"The CNS Syndrome:" a condition in which letter writers (and committee members) pay morbid attention to how many papers were published in *Cell*, *Nature*, or *Science*.

See *WICB*, page 10

Writers often fall victim to another disorder, The Mr. Rogers Syndrome: “everyone is special.”

special." Thus, a negative letter should be evaluated carefully and in the same way as one evaluates a positive letter: does the writer support his/her contentions with facts and objective observations? Does the writer have professional or personal biases, even inadvertent ones? This writer may be doing a difficult but honest and helpful thing by alerting the reader to problems with a candidate, but he/she may also just be expressing an opinion, however deeply and honestly held, that may not coincide with your own. Do not let even a truly negative letter kill a candidate unless you can independently verify what it contains,

A believable and influential letter is one that gives an honest opinion based on demonstrable fact.

and you agree that the negative features should affect your decision.

Reading letters is the same as writing them: a believable and influential letter is one that gives an honest opinion based on demonstrable fact. The closer a given letter comes to reaching this goal, the more influential it should be.

At the same time, an evaluator must never ever allow a letter – or even a set of letters – to substitute entirely for her or his own judgment. Doing so is intellectually lazy and a recipe for making wrong decisions. ■

—Ira Mellman

¹ASCB Newsletter, May 2005, Vol. 28, No. 5. I. Mellman: How to Write an Effective Letter of Recommendation.

LETTER to the Editor

The Challenge of Children

To the Editor:

I enjoyed Ira Mellman’s informative article on *How to Write an Effective Letter of Recommendation* in the May 2005 *ASCB Newsletter*. However, the author uses some unfortunate language regarding career interruptions.

He explains that “If a candidate has had personal difficulties to overcome...,” the writer of a letter of recommendation should mention this.

Good advice. Ironically for a WICB column, he includes children in his examples of “difficulties to overcome.” Admittedly, children can be difficult, but they are not a problem to “overcome.”

Although the example of children is appropriate to the topic, the particular language used perpetuates negative perceptions (real and imagined) about the effects of child-rearing on scientific careers that writers in this column, and the ASCB in general, have been actively fighting.

—Neil Adames

University of Alberta

Ira Mellman responds:

Perhaps Neil Adames never had teenagers. Seriously, I accept his point that children do not comprise the same type of problem to overcome as does an “illness.” It would have been better to characterize the issue as the “challenges and time demands” of having children, although this was a very minor point in my essay.

But as long as the issue was raised, I disagree with Neil Adames’ implied conclusion. While child-rearing and -raising should not be allowed to get in the way of a scientific career, the fact is that they do. It is also true that a scientific career gets in the way of raising children. Until we are willing to recognize these facts, we will never be able to force our institutions to deal realistically with solving this most serious challenge. ■

MEMBERS in the News



Eric Olson of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, an ASCB member since 1984, was named the Annie and Willie Nelson Professor in Stem Cell Research.



John A. Smith of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, an ASCB member since 1971, was awarded a Doctor of Science (*Honoris causa*) from Purdue University. He was also named Vice President-elect of FASEB.