



Dear Labby,  
How do I write a job letter for a so-so postdoc? This guy came to my lab soon after I got my first NIH grant but has not given me a sense that he will ever be an independent scientist. He does experiments I suggest but did little to generate a submission-ready paper (he is American so no language issues), and I am beside myself about how to write letters for him. He is applying for assistant professor jobs everywhere, all at reasonably or very research-intensive institutions and I almost feel embarrassed. I can't decline to write, but how do I handle this challenge? I now have had two other postdocs whose superior performances have reinforced my reservations about my first. I can't go so far as to trash him, but what should I do?

—Perplexed

Dear Perplexed,

Designing letters of recommendation is one of the most challenging things we are ever asked to do, including the analog of your case, writing letters for our students when they are seeking a postdoc. There are different views on the weight letters have in most situations. You can't decline to write them, as you noted, and in this case what you can write presents a vexing dilemma. While you don't think your postdoc is likely to ever be an independent investigator, there may be positive remarks you can make to place that reservation in context.

So Labby's advice is simple. Our profession is defined by a habit of truth. "Habit" in this context does not mean a repetitious action, like compulsively watching "House" or "Lost" on TV every week. It means a way of life, always seeking and stating the truth.

So the underlying foundation of your letter must be honesty. Chicanery such as "I'll never have a postdoc like Sam again" would be disingenuous. There is actually a book of such ambiguous phrases for letters of recommendation, but it should be read only for amusement, not copied. (Labby once heard a Nobel laureate say to a visitor at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole: "Your talk kept me awake all night" and pondered the ambiguity and the intended message, viz. explicit or *sotto voce*).

The best approach is to state all the positives, however many or few they may be. Getting along well with others, generosity with time and attention to students, comments on teaching ability (if any)—any or all of these could be just what a search committee is seeking. Then you can add your valid reservation, suitably phrased. In your case, this was your first postdoc. So you might position your conclusion in that context (i.e.,  $N$  is a small number and perhaps this postdoc needed to be pushed more into independence).

As to the specific sentence of endorsement (these letters usually can be distilled down to one key sentence), you need not express your reservation as a strong conclusion that this person has no future. The fact is, you can't be sure. So you might say: "To summarize, Martin has strengths, as I have seen and recounted here, and may well possess potential to prosper as an assistant professor in the right environment." Such a sentence conveys two things: there are strengths (whether assistant professor-worthy or not, left unsaid), and there exists the possibility that the search committee reading this letter is the very one that might, for whatever reasons, see all the positives in the context of their particular job search. That said, it is quite possible that in due course your postdoc may initiate another round of applications, aimed at less research-intensive positions. Clearly, that would provide an opportunity for you to refine your letter, perhaps in ways that would augment his chances.

Labby has written hundreds of letters for postdocs and all who were seeking them got faculty jobs, more or less scaled to their talent. Your query conveys an empathy for this issue, one for which we have both felt angst when sitting down to write letters. Your query has done a service in bringing this issue forth. ■

—Labby

*Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.*