



Hints for Writing Excellent Letters of Reference

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As an academic, you will inevitably be asked to write a letter of reference for any of the following: a student who took a course with you, a student who is studying or conducting research under your supervision or a colleague. The purpose of the letter may be for any of the following: admission to a postgraduate program, a scholarship, a recognition award, a promotion or a job.

Make sure the fit is right:

A strong letter of reference is easier to write if you are convinced that the applicant is right for the position or award. It may be appropriate to provide guidance to the applicant to make sure the fit is right. Do they have the skills and capabilities for the job or award they are applying for? It is better to decline the request for a letter of reference than to write a letter that is not enthusiastic.

Experience in writing letters of reference:

If you have not written letters of reference, then it would be of value to get experience reading such letters. This experience can be obtained by serving on admissions committees and scholarship committees.

Gather information:

No matter how well you think you know the person you are writing the letter for, it will benefit them if you get to know them a little better. Ask for a CV, and meet with them to discuss their experiences and capabilities. Become familiar with the criteria for the position or award that is being applied for. Be sure you have appropriate forms, method of providing the letter and the deadline for submission.

Dedicate sufficient time to write an excellent letter:

Be sure you have the time to write a carefully crafted and accurate letter. You will probably want to proof-read/edit the letter, so begin the writing several days before the date you will have to submit it.

Introduce yourself and describe the candidate:

Those reading the letter of reference will want to know the relationship between you and the candidate. Once this is documented, describe the features of the candidate with respect to the requirements for the position or award. Present their accomplishments, dedication and potential. Describe specific examples of their contributions to publications or presentations. Relate their skills and capabilities to others in your group. An excellent letter of reference will go on for several paragraphs, usually at least a full single page, but don't be concerned if the letter goes onto a second page.

A memorable letter is stronger:

Consider that the reader will probably have to wade through several letters of reference. Make your letter memorable. Identify a key feature or skill that makes the candidate unique. This could be accomplished by telling a simple but interesting story of one of their accomplishments or a demonstration of their critical thinking ability. Specific examples of success and accomplishments are more memorable than simply stating that they have experience in writing for publication or that they get along with colleagues. Read over your letter and ask yourself “what will the reader remember from this letter?” Sometimes presenting numerical comparisons can help with this aspect of a reference letter. Is the candidate the best in a class of 40 students? Were they in the top ten percent when evaluated for a term paper? Keep the letter honest and informative.

Avoid presenting irrelevant personal information:

An individual’s commitment to family, or religious fervor are not items to discuss in a letter of reference. Focus on the criteria for the award or position and avoid discussion of irrelevant items or characteristics that might not help them in their quest.

Keep the letter honest:

It is okay to mention weaknesses of the candidate, particularly if they have been ameliorated, and you can go on and describe how they have improved. Alternatively, you can explain why the weakness persists, if it is beyond the control of the applicant. Sometimes it is better to omit than describe a major fault. Omission of key characteristics that are identified as criteria for the award or position will probably be viewed as weaknesses. You don’t need to point them out. Remember, you are representing the student who has requested the letter of reference. Keep in mind that you are not doing a favor to the applicant if you blow their accomplishments out of proportion. The reader will understand that some-one who is too good to be true probably isn’t real.

Avoid gender bias:

Research has shown that letter writers tend to use stronger adjectives to describe male candidates than female candidates. Keep this in mind when you are writing your letters. The descriptive terms used to describe the candidate should fit the candidate. An outstanding candidate, regardless of sex, should be described with appropriate superlative terms.

Feedback:

You will rarely get feedback on the quality of the letter that you have written. However, you will be able to find out if the candidate was successful. If you strongly believed that the candidate should have been successful, and they were not, then you need to ask if you could have written a stronger letter of reference.