

Tips for Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation

- If the student has too many shortcomings for you to be able to write a good letter of recommendation or if you don't feel you know the student well enough or if it's much too close to the deadline to write a solid letter from scratch (and you don't have one already written for this student), tell the student that someone else would likely write a stronger letter – If possible, help the student think about who might be more appropriate. Sometimes, with a first-year student for example, there won't be any great alternatives yet.
- **Most Important Tip!** Be specific and use concrete examples, anecdotes, or numbers to support and explain all major statements and opinions made about the student – Not doing this leaves the reader wondering what caused the writer to have these opinions or whether the writer really knew the student at all. Tell stories, give details, and try to make the student come alive as a person on the page.
- **Generate details for your letter by working collaboratively with the student** – Not only will this benefit your letter writing efforts, but this is a great opportunity for guided self-reflection on the student's part. This doesn't, however, mean that you need to share the letter with the student (unless you want to); confidential letters carry more weight in most contexts.

Ideas for generating details in a collaborative manner:

- Interview the student, either in person or by email. Students are very good at personalizing their own stories with some prompting from you.
 - Ask the student to provide work or writing samples, a summary of personal and academic strengths, or a list of academic highlights.
 - Have the student send a resume/CV.
 - Request relevant application materials such as personal statements, proposals, cover letters or other essays (and ask for more polished rather than first drafts).
 - Ask for more information about the purpose of the letter of recommendation. (Are specific topics requested or expected?)
- **Give context to your assertions about a student to help develop a coherent narrative.**
Explain anything you think will help the reader understand the student's accomplishments; your assessment of the student and why your opinion matters; and how and why the student stands out from the crowd.

Helpful context that should be included if relevant:

- An explanation of how you know the student and for how long
- Information about yourself (i.e., I've been teaching college physics for 20 years and have taught over 3000 students in that time. This student is in the top 5 students I have encountered.)
- Information about your academic field
- Descriptions of the courses taught to the student (i.e., a small discussion seminar)
- Information about Union College, the student body, and the Schenectady area
- Information about the student that isn't readily apparent but is useful to know

- Comparisons to other students in the past who have been successful in the same or a similar program, job, or endeavor
- **Give an explanation for why the insight the writer has shared about the student suggests that the student would be a good fit for the particular job, graduate program, fellowship, or award being sought** – Don't force the reader to connect the dots; make it so obvious that the reader cannot deny the logic of why the student is a good match. This usually requires the letter to be tailored at least a little (often in just a certain sentence or paragraph) and is more work but will make the letter a much stronger vote of support.
- **Give enough details in anecdotes and concrete examples to support the assertions made about the student, but don't get carried away** – Unless done very well, going into loads of detail about one particular story can become tangential to the point being made, taking up valuable space in a letter that could be filled with other juicy tidbits supporting the candidate. This may also cause the reader's attention to stray.
- **When describing the student, provide a balanced view of the student's strengths rather than focusing on one particular trait to the exclusion of others** – If this is not done, it may seem that the writer could only think of one positive trait for the student.
- **Be honest about the student. Don't describe a student with superlatives if they are not true.** Focus on the student's best qualities, but remember that not all students can be the best.
- **If you feel it is appropriate to mention any shortcomings, see if you can give an explanation for a poor performance that is out of character, a plan (or ability) the student has for overcoming a problem, or constructive suggestions for growth (suitable to the application)** – Pointing out a student's weaknesses can show that the student is a real multi-dimensional person. Not providing further explanation or discussion, however, may give the impression that the writer thinks these weaknesses are insurmountable and may garner more attention than intended—only do this if that is what you plan.
- **Start the letter with a strong first paragraph that is interesting to read and gives some insight into the student** – Don't let the reader's attention drift off before making a case for the student; instead, grab the reader's attention in the first paragraph to help make the student stand out as a candidate.
- **If the student has taken classes from you, state the titles (not just the numbers) of the courses in which the student was enrolled** – Those who read hundreds of letters of recommendation do not have the time to look this up.
- **Explain acronyms that you use in your letter and avoid excessive jargon without explanation unless you are sure your audience will understand** – Sometimes there are applications where evaluators will be specialists in a particular field but in general it's best to keep the language of the letter accessible to all potential readers.
- **Keep the length of the letter somewhere between 1 and 2 pages (unless specific instructions are given otherwise)** – Much less than 1 page is too short and comes across as not really knowing the student or not thinking enough of the student to write a more thorough letter of recommendation. More than 2 pages is too long for evaluators who read dozens or hundreds of applications.