

## WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Recommendation letters are an important and mandatory component of students' applications to many education and employment opportunities. As the application process has become increasingly competitive, a persuasive recommendation letter can have a significant impact on an applicant's candidacy.

### The Basics

- *Should you agree to write a letter of recommendation?* Think carefully about under what circumstances and how well you know the student who is requesting a recommendation letter. For example, do you know the student well enough to write an endorsement for an award, postgraduate study, or employment? If for any reason you do not feel that you can write positively on a student's behalf, be honest and decline to write the letter.
- *Secure information you need to write an effective letter of recommendation.* Students should give recommenders information about:
  - ✓ The purpose of the letter (award, graduate school, job, etc.);
  - ✓ Qualifications, qualities, or specific types of information sought by the requesting organization;
  - ✓ Letter submission directions and deadline;
  - ✓ Their aspirations and accomplishments including academic studies, employment history, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, and research.Ask for this material if it is not provided.
- Sit down with the student and discuss his/her interest in the program/profession/award for which they are applying.
- It is the student's right to decide if they waive their right to see the letter that you compose. In general, programs give more credence to letters for which the student has waived their rights to see.
- All letters should be on official letterhead. UC letterhead templates are available from the [UC Branding Templates](http://www.uc.edu/ucomm/branding/templates.html) website ( <http://www.uc.edu/ucomm/branding/templates.html>). Sign your letter. Make sure to use your full name and professional title.
- A student may provide you with a program/company/school-specific recommendation form, including a chart or grid where you are asked to rank students.
- Proofread. It is often helpful to ask a "critical friend" or colleague to read over a letter to make suggestions regarding content and impact. Check for errors in spelling, grammar, recipient address details, name and details regarding the student, or formatting; be sure all revisions to your letter have saved correctly.

## What to Include

An author's personal style influences the format for his/her letters. However, many writers follow a composition similar to the following:

- Express your pleasure at having the opportunity to recommend the applicant.
- Indicate how long and in what capacity you have known the applicant.
- Note that you would recommend this student specifically for the relevant program or opportunity. Address the specific interests of the letter's recipient.
- Explore how this applicant compares to other students you have encountered this year or in previous years. Be sure to explain the context for the comparison and your rationale.
- Evaluate the student's potential in their field of interest. How has the student demonstrated a commitment to the field? Does he/she strike you as an individual who will excel in this endeavor? Has this student demonstrated potential to make a significant contribution to his/her field? Does the student seem familiar with the program to which they are applying?
- Discuss the student's coursework, including the nature of the course(s), difficulty of coursework/major, grades received, notable work assignments, etc. This may be a good opportunity to reflect on the student's academic ability, including communication skills (oral and written), listening and observational abilities, attention to detail, capacity for hard work, interactions with peers, foreign language skills, organizational ability, originality, and resourcefulness.
- Discuss the student's strengths, areas of expertise, or relevant experiences that you know well and wish to highlight. Use action-oriented words to name specific skills or knowledge sets, the context in which you saw them demonstrated, and the resulting accomplishment or outcome. These may include:
  - ✓ Intellectual ability, such as capacity for critical thinking, the ability to understand, analyze, and synthesize information, problem-solving skills, and teaching or research potential.
  - ✓ Interpersonal skills, including ability to collaborate and get along with peers, response to criticism, attitude toward supervision, and leadership.
  - ✓ Personal qualities, such as maturity, compassion, responsibility, empathy, creativity, self-awareness, demonstrated judgment and initiative.
  - ✓ Extracurricular activities, including depth of involvement and achievements.
  - ✓ Special attributes, assets, or circumstances. There might be special strengths or abilities that warrant mention; while not obviously relevant to the student's interest in this endeavor, such talents make the candidate unique and help programs or employers distinguish between applicants.

- You may wish to conclude your letter with a reaffirmation of your endorsement of the student's application and an offer to answer follow-up questions if necessary.

### **What to Avoid**

- Don't speculate. Be as specific and factual as possible. Give concrete examples to illustrate your characterizations of the student. Base your statements on observations and information obtained through direct contact with the student or their school record.
- This may go without saying but remember to avoid discussing an individual's race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, marital or family status. Also avoid commenting on a student's appearance, family background, health, or other personal circumstances unless they are immediately relevant to their application.
- Superlatives or other similar descriptors without offering an explanation. For example, words like "invaluable" or "life-changing" should be connected to discussion of specific contexts.
- Use care when sharing how a student has overcome personal adversity to excel, e.g. significant life changing event or circumstance, such as a severe car accident. While it is appropriate and desirable to use examples that demonstrate positive qualities such as tenacity, some readers may interpret your example as a potential liability. Before submitting it, ask a colleague or "critical friend" to read and critique a letter that contains personal or potentially sensitive or information.
- Students should not be asked to draft their own letters of recommendation. In addition, if another person assists you in writing the letter, the pronoun "we" should be used throughout the letter and it should be co-signed. This pertains especially to situations where teaching assistants are assisting you with writing letters.

### **How to Submit Your Letter**

Recommendation letters can be submitted several ways. Check with the student or receiving organization to confirm specific submission requirements. Some examples are:

1. Submit the letter directly to a brick and mortar location through campus mail or postal service to an address provided by the student.
2. Provide the letter (in a signed and sealed envelope) directly to the student so that they can include it in an application packet.
3. Submit the letter directly to an application service website.