

## Speaking About Letters of Recommendation: Their Motive and Content

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One very important college faculty task is to write letters of recommendation for our students. Those of us who are asked to write on students' behalf usually do so gladly; however, too frequently, students leave us in the dark as to the desired focus of such letters and fail to supply us with other pertinent information. This article is meant to help students seek good letter writers and to know how to better inform and guide writers to provide letter recipients information most likely to achieve student goals.

First, students need to choose wisely those individuals from whom help is sought. Not all people are good writers. Students should ask around campus about who has knowledge of good writers. The same writing components of style, organization, and content that students have been taught are expected by letter recipients. Poorly written or too terse and uniform recommendation letters may spoil your application success. Do not be reluctant to ask a prospective letter writer to show you examples of their writing. Most well organized people save recent recommendation letters and may be willing to show you what their recent letter writing is like. Examine such examples as if you were the receiver of such messages. If you would be impressed with such a letter, chances are you have a good letter writing candidate.

Most applicants are asked to garner multiple recommendation letters. Get assurances of all your letter writers **before** asking

them for detailed commitments. Request one more letter than is minimally demanded of you just in case one person forgets, gets delayed, or falls ill. Once you have all your writers promising to write for you, draw up a master outline showing the traits, skills, and experiences you want recommendation letter recipients to know about. From that master list, draw up separate lists for each of your letter writers on which you rank order for these writers what you need them to focus on. Remember, it is **your** needs that writers should focus on, not the writer's priorities! Let each letter writer know who else is writing on your behalf. Share with letter writers which of your skills, traits, and experiences are most important to be shared with receivers of recommendation letters. This will aid letter writers in focus, intensity, and priority, giving letters your desired emphasis.

The reason for separate lists is that you neither want clone letters nor do you want totally divergent letters written about you. Clone letters are typically rejected out of hand as not being honest, lacking personalness, and not reflecting a picture of who you are. Multiple letters including too little overlap of your characteristics, skills, and experiences suggest to readers that either you are not really known well by anyone or that none of your good traits impressed more than one person. You want some overlap in multiple letters. You want some unique priority variation too. This overlap, reasonable diversity, and varied priority is **your** job to secure. This is why above suggestions

are tendered. Do not leave letter content, organization, and priority totally up to the letter writer. Remember, however, that the recommendation writer is in final control of what is said in the letter.

Remind writers, in writing, what they know about you; do not rely on writers' memory. Remind professors of courses, grades, and particular traits shown in classes; remind employers of dates and duties you experienced with them. Written reminders reduce omissions and errors that could cause problems for readers.

Some recommendation forms and instructions ask you to waive your rights to inspect letter contents. Do not refuse to waive access to letters; your refusal may be interpreted negatively by recommendation recipients. However, do ask letter writers for copies of the letters they write. If someone is unwilling to share with you what they will tell others, I doubt you want them speaking on your behalf.

Be sure to start your recommendation letter projects early. Give yourself time to think about what you need in terms of informative recommendations and to prepare seeking such letters. Give requested letter writers time to do a thorough and relaxed job for you. Follow up on your requests. Give your writers reasonable deadlines for mailing their recommendations. Follow up with polite inquiries to see if the task is under way or finished. Do not just ask for letters and forget to follow up on those requests; your interests are too important. Supply letter writers with addressed, stamped envelopes in which to send their

letters. The more you do for the writer, the better your odds of success. Unless the recipient's status is clearly identified on a form or in an accompanying letter, find out who that person is and share that with letter writers. It may influence a writer to know whether the receiver is a personnel employee of a large company, who may see you once in your life, as opposed to the district manager or your prospective immediate superior in that same firm. Degrees of personalness, knowledge of what to say relevant to routine job duties, and letter tone may be influenced by such information.

Everyone is aware that you will only ask people who you expect to speak positively about you to write recommendation letters. It is important that you select people who truly know you and who can clearly, directly, and specifically address your character, your skills, your knowledge, and your experiences. Poor recommendation letters speak to poor applicant preparation.

Remember, letter writers are busy too. The more you can do to focus, limit, and contextualize your request, the easier the task becomes. The more preparation you, the letter requester, put into your request, the more impressed in you and your request will be the writer.