

Writing Letters of Recommendation

What is the purpose of a letter of recommendation?

A letter of recommendation is “expert testimony” regarding the ability of a person to perform a task. The tasks may include performing a job, succeeding in a doctoral program, or profiting from a particular experience (such as research or an internship). This purpose is the ultimate reason for a letter of recommendation; everything in the letter supports the act of making an **informed** recommendation.

An informed recommendation is no small matter for the letter writer. Graduate programs, for instance, make very clear they need letters which comment on a student’s likelihood of succeeding in graduate school. Letter writers must be confident of the applicant’s ability or they are unable to write convincingly. There is some risk to professional credibility if the writer consistently writes letters for applicant’s who are not qualified.

Further, there is a kind of “code” for levels of confidence. Generally speaking, there are four levels of confidence as suggested by graduate school forms themselves: strongly recommend (writer is very confident of the applicant’s ability); recommend (writer is confident); recommend with reservations (writer is somewhat confident, but has specific areas of doubt); do not recommend (writer does not believe in applicant’s ability to succeed). Letter writers use these phrases at the beginning or end of the letter to express their professional evaluation. Applicants should not ask writers who cannot support them at the first two levels of confidence to write letters on their behalf.

What kinds of letters of recommendation are there?

There are two basic types of recommendation letters: 1) “field specific/expert” and 2) “character/non-expert”. The “field specific” letter writer is an “industry expert” within the applicant’s field – a restaurant manager can give an industry perspective on whether an applicant should be able to succeed in the restaurant business. A science professor provides specific feedback on a future scientist’s likelihood of success in the field.

A “character” letter is usually written by someone who is outside or on the fringe of the applicant’s industry. This person comments on other traits the applicant possesses that should lead to success. A “character” letter is still an expert’s testimony; in this case, the expert comes from outside the applicant’s intended field. Character letters often come from volunteer or work supervisors, internships, outside professors.

Very often, academic programs ask the applicant to provide 2-3 letters from field specific experts and 1 character-type letter. Job applicants, on the other hand, usually rely solely on field expertise, except at the beginning of their careers, when character-type letters are all the experience they’ve got!

Character letters should not come from someone who is not qualified to make an informed, expert recommendation. School counselors and pastors may know you well, but are not usually able to comment convincingly on your likelihood to survive the rigors of medical school.

What makes a letter of recommendation successful?

A letter of recommendation succeeds on the same merits as any forms of persuasive writing: good control of vocabulary, solid essay structure, appropriate content, and details details details.

Vocabulary – use strong, vivid language in both nouns and verbs; may get a little creative

Essay Structure – sounds odd, but think of the letter as a 4-5 paragraph essay with a “thesis,” well-organized body including an introduction and conclusion – this actually makes the letter easier to write and much easier to read

Appropriate Content – the letter must not exaggerate or lie; writer must not speculate outside recommender’s knowledge base; must follow some of the “business” like aspects of form, including:

- 1st paragraph – state how long writer has known applicant, in what context (employer, instructor, supervisor, etc), and general “thesis” statement regarding applicant’s abilities/suitability for position
- Body Paragraphs – should have 2-3 well explained examples or qualities – each example or quality should have its own paragraph – must include not only details, but interpretation (i.e., what should the reader learn about the applicant from the example and why does it matter for the position?)
- Conclusion – may begin with brief additional info (good place for “non-essentials” such as personality traits), then states EXPLICITLY level of recommendation (strongly/highly [my strongest/highest], recommend, recommend with reservations [must provide explanation], do not recommend [must provide explanation]) with farewell close and contact info

Details -- Much like a good application essay, the letter of recommendation is most convincing when a few well-chosen examples are used that are obviously within the recommender’s sphere of knowledge. For instance, a character reference might be able to comment convincingly on the applicant’s ability to handle stress and pressure, but is unlikely to argue for the applicant’s research abilities. On the other hand, the lab supervisor can present a strong case for an applicant’s scientific abilities, but be an unconvincing reference for the applicant’s communicative abilities in diverse contexts. No one recommender can convincingly cover all aspects that are important to success which is why more than one type of letter is required.

What is the format of a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendations are official documents, therefore are written on professional letterhead in business style. This means appropriate addressing, block flush-left paragraphs, appropriate greetings and closings, 11 pt. Times New Roman font. Generally speaking, the letter should not exceed one page in length unless the recommender has a long association with applicant. When possible, letters should be written on organizational letterhead; many programs actually require this!

Example Letters for Analysis

Letters are written for specific programs for specific purposes. This must be taken into account when reading a letter. On the other hand, a couple of actual examples should make better models than a generic, non-real one. Below are examples, divided according to basic sections of the letter: intro, body, close. Comments in red offer explanation.

Introductory paragraphs

[written on university letterhead, therefore, no writer address is offered]

February 26, 20XX [date is either flush left or right, one space up from or across from addressee]

To: Junior Honors Medical Program, Admissions Committee [addressee]
Fr: Recommender, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer [recommender's name, title/position]
Re: Letter of Recommendation, Applicant [purpose, applicant's name and ID # if provided]

Dear JHMP Admissions Committee, [greeting – usually to personnel director or admissions committee]

Each time I receive a request to write a letter of recommendation for the JHMP, I challenge the student to explain why they believe this advanced track is of actual benefit to them and what they've got to contribute to the program. I rarely get a satisfying answer. Sometimes the student just leaves, choosing not to accept the task of producing a persuasive reason before I'll agree to write a letter on their behalf. Occasionally, the student takes the question to heart, does some soul-searching, and returns with a really good explanation. Such is the case with Applicant. His intelligence is without question. What distinguishes him from his peers is where he wants to end up in the medical field and why. This is also where Applicant can make an excellent contribution to the Junior Honors Medical Program. [opening salvo is a bit different – recommender knows the applicant better than usual and has an actual history with recommending applicants to the program; partially this establishes credibility and partially it makes for a more interesting opening line – still, the opening sentences are TRUE; it is not a fabrication – always stay honest in writing letters. Finally, the last two sentences do set up the rest of the essay – the recommender must provide evidence for the contribution and why it is unique]

To: Graduate Admissions Committee
Fr: Recommender, Ph.D.
Re: Letter of Recommendation, Applicant, application for M.S.W.

Dear Graduate Admissions Committee,

Applicant was a student in my "Professional Communication in Sociology" class, Fall 20XX. My initial impression was that Applicant was a very quiet, even demure, individual with less self-confidence than I like to see in my students. And while it's true that Applicant is not a rowdy character, she blossomed in class as she saw her ideas bear fruit in a very interesting piece of research. When I last met with Applicant, she was a happy, confident young woman who is excited about her future goals. I believe Applicant will make an excellent graduate student and social worker. She is intelligent and hard working, with a good feel for social issues, and a warm, empathetic smile that will put clients at ease. [a more standard introduction – explains context of relationship, gives some basic information, makes a statement of confidence regarding student, and provides basis for organization of essay in final sentence of intro]

To: Law School Admissions Committee
Fr: Recommender, Ph.D.
Re: Letter of Recommendation, Applicant, # L1234354

Dear Law School Admissions Committee,

My acquaintance with Applicant began in the course, Professional Communication in Sociology, Spring 20XX, where Applicant proved herself an exceptional student. Our relationship continued as I became a last-minute mentor for her McNair Scholarship research project. Through both of these experiences, Applicant showed excellent qualities for advanced work – she was hard-working, intelligent, ambitious, and even delightful to work with. [pretty standard opening for a positive recommendation]

Body Paragraphs

Applicant was a student in my Spring 20XX “Writing and Speaking for Premedical Students”. This is a challenging course requiring both individual and collaborative work. Further, the class requires research be conducted with primary sources (no *WebMD* allowed). Because of family history, Applicant chose to do his individual work on treatment for low back pain using acupuncture and acupressure. Applicant did an excellent job on the paper itself. He formatted appropriately, made good use of the medical literature, and presented a clear review of the material. What I most appreciated about his paper was the care he took to remain neutral regardless of how much he wanted to believe in the medical value of these therapies. In fact, he found good evidence for the efficacy of alternative therapies; he also found how difficult it was to assess these methods given the standards of western science and practice of eastern medicine. [specific example within recommender’s area of expertise – also provides means to comment on other character/intellectual qualities in order to set up argument for positive recommendation]

Professional Communication in Sociology is a demanding upper-level class requiring students to conduct original research—from coming up with a testable idea, designing a feasible (IRB exempt) study, carrying out the research and analysis, to writing up a professional quality report and finishing with an in-class poster presentation. Applicant was more highly prepared than the usual student. She had a strong idea of what she wanted to know and was ready to begin source searching immediately. She separated herself from the pack yet again by turning in a 7 page literature review, complete with appropriate subheadings. Applicant’s research questioned public perception of criminal insanity. She designed a clever survey which yielded some interesting data, specifically, that her sample (mostly college students) admitted to having little contact with mentally incompetent people, yet felt mentally ill people were both common and dangerous, that they should be institutionalized yet were competent to stand trial. Applicant’s project showcased her interest in legal matters, and a mind capable of ferreting out subtle, important perceptions regarding lay perceptions of law. [body paragraph with explanation, examples, details, and what reader should understand about applicant]

Applicant’s choice of topic and understanding of the results also showcases an intuitive understanding of social issues and realities. Applicant understood there was a difference between the way people perceived an event (explained their experiences to themselves) and the way they actually behaved when engaged in the event. I was impressed by her ease with this concept, though she did struggle somewhat initially when trying to reconcile what she found in the literature with her own perceptions. Part of doing research is learning intellectual stances, and Applicant came to understand how to express herself in academic terms. All in all, her learning curve in the class was remarkable. This is one reason why I feel confident of her abilities to succeed in graduate study. [body paragraph with explanation, examples, details, and what reader should understand about applicant]

Writing in CSD is a challenging, upper division course whose goals are to prepare students for the kinds of writing done in graduate school and the field of speech therapy. Students write a review paper, a S.O.A.P. note, and a Progress Report. Each assignment offers a different challenge. For her Review paper, Applicant wrote on the impact of premature birth on language development. The challenge of this assignment is classic to academics and the beginning researcher: finding sources and synthesizing them. Most undergraduate students have relatively little experience reading journal articles and even less experience finding them. Applicant did very well on this assignment. The annotated bibliography she prepared was outstanding, and I will be using her entries as examples in future classes. The paper itself was well-written, well-researched, and written in appropriate academic style. More importantly, Applicant made a point of drafting the paper early enough to get feedback, and then took the critique to heart. This kind of attention to scholarship and performance bodes well for her success in graduate school. [body paragraph with explanation, examples, details, and what reader should understand about applicant]

The first writing project for this class is a review paper. Applicant chose to review a type of heart injury following concussive injury. It was a longish, fairly technical paper, but well-written and excellently researched. His presentation – assigned as a brief, 5-6 minute oral report – also included a power point presentation which ended up being something of a distraction. Allow me to clarify: it was a very good presentation, but the inclusion of audio-visual support when it was not recommended made the presentation too long and complicated for its purpose. This is an element of Applicant’s ambitious nature. He is highly intelligent and sometimes must learn by harsh experience rather than through straightforward instruction. The pedagogical purpose behind the presentation was for students to learn how to communicate medical ideas using just words, since that is often how the information gets relayed. Applicant enjoys technology, though, and he is still learning the boundaries of when it is useful. His sheer pleasure in the use of equipment will make him a fine researcher. [example of body paragraph with both positive and negative traits; setting up for a “problem” that will culminate in a “recommend with reservations” level of confidence]

Body Paragraphs Attesting to Qualities (can be included in both field expert and “character” letters, but is more common in character/non-expert letters)

For his collaborative project, Applicant worked with 4 other students who chose to go with his main idea for the paper: “The Many Faces of Discogenic Back Pain Treatment.” In doing so, Applicant emerged as a leader. In fact, this was a difficult task as it was not a completely harmonious group. I was proud that Applicant took the lead in being honest about the dysfunction, and consulted with instructors on how to best handle it. It is never easy to lead peers, and Applicant did a good job of being fair yet firm in order to guide his group to success. In addition, he was also challenged to expand his own interests as the paper included western surgical and non-surgical treatments. In the end, Applicant found himself at a crossroads which motivated him to really begin questioning how to effectively test and measure alternative therapies. This is where his desire for the JHMP is centered: he sees himself as a medical practitioner who must be trained in both conventional therapies and alternative therapies; one who must embrace both technology and tradition. To do so effectively is going to take a while, and he is ready to begin now. For this reason, I believe the JHMP is a fair route for him to travel. [Example of opportunity to talk about other aspects of professional success: leadership, communication abilities, ability to develop as an intellect]

As stated, Applicant's research showed important contradictions in public understanding of mental competency and criminal behavior. In addition to working on writing and poster presentations, we also spent time speculating where these contradictions might come from. During these discussions, Applicant showed her ability to think carefully about complex behavior. She was able to muse intelligently without jumping to conclusions. Also, her own thinking generated more questions and excitement about her research project, which is a good sign that she'll be able to maintain longer term, more complex projects. While being her project mentor, I was pleased with Applicant's "professional" communication skills. During her presentation, she was questioned intensively by one professor, and handled the grilling smoothly and calmly. She understood both the strengths and limitations of her own work, which bodes well for her abilities to handle legal work. I was also impressed by her dedication – when she veered off her goal, she quickly got back on track. [Example of opportunity to talk about other aspects of professional success: leadership, communication abilities, ability to develop as an intellect]

Closing Paragraphs and Recommendations

Applicant's interest in alternative and "traditional" medicine is also why he'd make an excellent contribution to the program. He's a really smart guy with a deep interest in two diverse approaches. He embraces the rigors of western science while understanding the idiosyncrasies common to alternative therapies. He feels the conflict between the classic double-blind randomized control group study and individualized therapeutic approaches. Best of all, he wants ultimately to become a medical practitioner who knows the value of both and can lead patients toward the best health possible. I'd value John as my own physician, and would gladly take my family to him or his practice. I strongly recommend that Applicant be accepted into the Junior Honors Medical Program. He will benefit from the early start, and the program will get a fresh perspective. If I can be of further help, please contact me at 555-5555 or recommender@here.edu. [note: hyperlink has been removed so letter prints in one color or is received electronically w/out outside links] [strongly positive recommendation – some "summary" given content, emphasis on qualities, link made to benefit of both applicant and program, appropriate language used for recommendation]

Sincerely, [standard close]

[3 spaces in between farewell and name so it can be signed]

Recommender, Degree, Position/Title

Finally, in addition to intelligence and perseverance, Applicant is a really nice person to work with. She is mature and up-beat, takes responsibility for her decisions, has a terrific smile and energetic personality. Personally, I feel these additional "non-academic" qualities are nearly as important as scholarly abilities. In Applicant, I believe any law program will get the complete package: ambition balanced with compassion; intelligence edged with humor; scholarship enhanced by strong interpersonal skills. I strongly recommend Applicant be accepted into your law program. [another example of a strong positive recommendation – note that you can use some of those humanities writing skills mostly untapped in scientific prose!]

Perhaps Applicant's strongest attribute is determination. As his resume shows, he has participated in a number of research projects at various levels. He has the sort of appreciation for research expected in an MSTP applicant. Applicant will make a contribution to the field of medicine, and I believe he will develop solidly as both a clinician and a scientist. For these reasons, I recommend him for acceptance into medical school. [middle recommendation – recommender did not have a particularly strong relationship to applicant and was neither enthusiastic or negative regarding applicant – problem is this kind of recommendation is not very useful to either applicant or admissions committee – applicant must rely on test scores and other letters for success – highlights the importance of choosing recommenders wisely]

This has left me somewhat ambivalent regarding this letter, despite the fact I agreed to write it. For his part, Applicant insists that he wishes to become a clinical practitioner in order to “help people.” I believe this to be true. But I am not sure what kind of “people training” the JHMP provides. For other applicants, with more mature communication skills, this has not really been an issue. For Applicant, though, it is a concern. He needs to learn how to talk to real people, face to face. If this is something the JHMP can provide, then I recommend him for admission into the program. He has much to contribute, and also much to learn. [a slightly hedged “recommend with reservations” conclusion – in fact, recommender did not believe applicant to be qualified or ready for program; even after discussing this fact with applicant, applicant still chose to go ahead with the process; applicant did not get in].

Writing Your Own Letter

The same strategies for writing a letter for someone else apply when you are requested to write one for yourself which the “recommender” will sign. Here are some steps to help the process.

Step One: Consider carefully what the recommender can truthfully, reasonably say about you. While it is always possible for any recommender to note qualities about you, mostly, recommenders stay within their areas of expertise.

Step Two: Muse upon your experiences with the recommender and list the specific examples and qualities this person can comment on. Write out “little stories” from your experience with the recommender than can illustrate the qualities you want them to attest to.

Step Three: Select the strongest items from Step Two to include in the letter. Write out the whole paragraph including the “what the reader should learn” part. Make sure to include the context and length of the relationship in paragraph one.

Step Four: Put it all together in the correct format!