

# Letters of Recommendation

## Most letters have four major sections:

1. Opening paragraph establishes your relationship with the student.
2. Second section is a discussion of student's work and academic ability
3. Address student's personal qualities and character.\*
4. Summation of any particular outstanding attributes of the student that you may wish to reiterate.
  - Most people recommend including an invitation to call for additional information. Some, however, see this as "code" for having negative information to impart. Circumstances and context can often indicate the difference.
  - Paragraph three is particularly critical. This is the paragraph that will differentiate your student from others and provide more insight into their personal side. Be sure to include specific examples and avoid generic statements and generalities.
  - Keep a copy in the student's record and in your "recommendation" folder for future use.

## Letters should be:

- Accurate in content
- Specific in example
- Relevant to the criteria identified
- Make distinctions between the student and other candidates
- Be sure to give the context. For example, are you comparing the student with all you have taught in a particular class, your history of teaching, etc?
- Highlight potential and character of applicant

## Tips:

- Use examples
- Use adjectives
- Traditional language has lost its lift. For example, when you say "good" readers may wonder why they are not great.
- Be enthusiastic and make your letter interesting

## Significance of letters:

A letter can determine a student's fate. A weak letter can be damning. Admissions deans estimate that 5% to 10% of letters received are negative or damn the student with faint praise. If the letter is not written in earnest or is a generic template, it will be viewed negatively against the student. If you cannot write a favorable, enthusiastic letter, it is better for both you and the student to turn them down. But being candid is important. If you feel you must mention a weakness, be sure you have supporting evidence available.

This document has been adapted from various articles found on this topic. For a complete list of citations, please contact the Fellowships Office. Brief list provided below.

Further Resources  
(Sources for Letters of Recommendation tip sheet)

Felton, George "How to Write a Letter of Recommendation." *Academe*; Jul/Aug2005, Vol. 91 Issue 4 p55-56

"Traditional language has lost its lift. If we say a student is good..."

Hartzell, Gary N; Nelson, Kate. "Writing for dollars: Composing recommendation letters for local scholarship committees." *School Counselor*; Mar93, Vol. 40 Issue 4 p. 312

"...accurate in content, specific in example, and make distinctions between the student under consideration and other students...highlight the most important features of the candidate's performance, potential, and character."

Sanoff, Alvin. "A steep road to admission." *USA Today*; 12/27/2005

"A letter can determine a student's fate." "Admissions deans estimate that 5% to 10% are negative or damn an applicant with faint praise."

Toglia, Thomas "Writing Recommendation Letters—without the stress." *Tech Directions*: March 2004 Vol. 63 Issue 8, p24-25

"...at least four parts. The opening paragraph establishes your relationship to the student...The second section should include a discussion of the student's work and academic ability...In the third paragraph; you want to address the student's personal qualities and character. ...etc" Also found in this article advice on saving two copies of letter.