

Letters of Recommendation¹

Most letters have four major sections:

1. Opening paragraph establishes your relationship with the student.
2. 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. ¹

¹ This page has been adapted from various articles found on this topic. For a complete list of citations, please contact the Fellowships Office.