

Writing Recommendation Letters

Joe Schall
Giles Writer-in-Residence
Writing Tutor

College of Earth and Mineral Sciences
Penn State University





My Background

B.S., Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA, English Education

M.A., Penn State, English, Fiction Writing Emphasis

Taught five years at a home for juvenile delinquents

Writing tutor for 18 years at Penn State

Publications range from short stories to style guides, including
Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook



Overview

Take an historical look at recommendation letter writing

Discuss common ethical and practical dilemmas for faculty letter writers

Consider a few student cases and how to respond to them

Discuss ten ideas for improving writing in recommendation letters



Historical Look at Recommendation Letter Writing

About 80 articles on the subject in journals ranging from the *Chronicle* to *Journal of Applied Psychology* to *Journal of Surgical Research*.

Most articles appeared within the last 40 years, and typical concerns are with sexism, gender and cross-cultural differences in writers, legal issues, exaggeration in letters, and grade inflation.

In 2002, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?*

In the 1930s, two theses were completed on the subject of recommendation letters as evaluative tools.

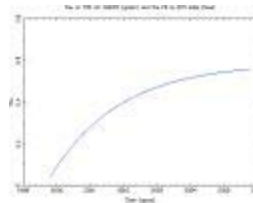
Historical Look at Recommendation Letter Writing

1935: Lloyd Morrisett writes a thesis: *Letters of Recommendation: A Study of Letters of Recommendation as an Instrument in the Selection of Secondary School Teachers*

THESIS

...and, when games, and other such media to growing, and growing fast. Media today isn't making people into killing machines, but expanding our knowledge of what is, and will change our lives. Media is the future, and attempting to stop it is pointless.

1936: Frank Evans Berkheimer writes a thesis: *A Scale of Evaluation of School Administrators' Letters of Recommendation for Teachers*





Quotes from the 1936 Study

- “Some people in this section have questioned her deportment on certain occasions. . . . I feel that she might do better work in another community.”
- “Miss N came to us a year ago. She has been in three different systems in the four years of her experience. . . . We don’t feel that we should prevent Miss N from continuing her annual change.”
- “His pupils are fairly well interested in their work, but never excel. I believe you could procure his services at his present salary.”
- “She is married but her husband is not with her. . . . If she were not my sister I would like to speak of her in detail.”
- “Please destroy this letter when you have read it.”

Findings from the 1935 Study

1. The writer of testimonials and letters of recommendation is likely to view the task lightly.
2. The writer for mere accommodation will often exceed personal knowledge or falsify it.
3. There is no way of checking against errors.
4. Bias or carelessness of the writer is a factor.
5. The writer may overstate or underestimate the case of the candidate.
6. The writer may simply make inadequate statements perfunctory in character.

Dilemmas we face as Letter Writers

Maintaining energy and interest in the task

Proper use of boilerplate material

Lack of material specific to the student

Balancing praise and criticism

The need to comment outside our area of expertise

Concerns over legal issues—confidentiality, access, grades

Avoiding our own biases and potentially discriminatory practices

Fear of repercussions—even lawsuits—from students

Inappropriate requests from students and hazy protocol

Saying “no”



Using Student Cases

Discussion of Student Cases:

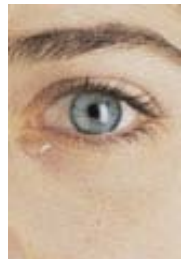
Reminds us of the ethical dilemmas we face as letter writers

Invites us to share “war stories” about our own students and circumstances

Promotes spirited debate and a reinvigorated approach among faculty

Generates content ideas through discussion

Helps faculty feel good about students and a bit more empowered about letter writing



Responses to Student Cases



Rafael: a likeable bumbler of protocol whose performances as a fiddler and as a personality are stronger than his performance as a student.



Tasha: a first-year student with boundless energy and unrealized potential who may just need a push in the right direction.



Jonathan: a whiz-kid with both a technical mind and whimsical dreams asking your help in something that might feel beyond your reach.



Adria: A student for whom you have previously written a recommendation letter, but who is undergoing unknown personal problems.



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

- 1) Say “no” based on the circumstances and devote your energy to other letters you should be writing.**

Ways I've Said "no"

“Because six years have passed since you took my class, I’m not likely an effective reference for you, from either my point-of-view or a graduate committee’s.”

“When you made the request, I assumed you were applying to writing programs, but I see now that you’re applying to psychology programs, and I only have experience with you as a writer of fiction.”

“You have not waived your right to access your letters of recommendation, which is looked upon unfavorably both by a selection committee and by me.”

“I’m saying “no” for now, but I’m open to being persuaded if you can prove more readiness on your part.”

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

1) Say “no” based on the circumstances and devote your energy to other letters you should be writing.

Reasons to say “no”:

Your support of or knowledge about the student doesn’t match the weight of the opportunity.

For reasons of time, temperament, or because you have a performance-specific reason not to support the student, you’re not inclined to write a letter.

The student approaches you in such an unprofessional manner that you cannot endorse the student honestly.

Because you have a suggestion for an alternative reference better suited to the student.



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

2) Be mindful of content and style that can unintentionally undermine you or the student.

Student Bloopers . . .



MISTAKE

“If someone is a vegetable, it is fruitless to try to keep him alive on a machine.”

“If you smell an odorless gas, it is probably carbon monoxide.”

“Mushrooms always grow in damp places and so they look like umbrellas.”

“If I could go back to Christ’s time, I would hear him speak and think, ‘Wow! His words are almost exactly as they appear in the Bible!’”

“In the 1920s, no one intelligent believed in God.”

“I don’t see the big deal about Shakespeare; in fact, he used a *lot* of clichés.”

“Romeo cannot really be blamed for Ophelia’s death.”



Faculty Bloopers . . .

“I imagine that he would be a good candidate for the Rhodes Scholarship.”

“Her last years in my laboratory were impacted by serious health problems that have fortunately gone away—she had really debilitating problems with a herniated disk that apparently was a paraneoplastic phenomenon that went away once an early carcinoma of the left ovary was identified and removed.”

“For a single mom with an inner city background, she has done an incredible job at our small liberal arts college, which has few African-Americans.”

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

2) Be mindful of content and style that can unintentionally undermine you or the student.

Poorly presented material, even to the point of irrelevancy or seeming incompetence.

Lack of necessary information about the scholarship or opportunity for which the student is applying.

A generic letter with no specifics about the student or a letter praising the student beyond credibility.

Seemingly “coded” language or seeming criticism through omission of expected information.

Fawning praise that is so personal and affectionate that the reader questions the writer’s ethos.



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

3) Create boilerplate contextual information that you might re-use in other letters.



Boilerplates about USM Programs

The School of Polymers and High Performance Materials at the University of Southern Mississippi trains students for careers in academia, commerce, and manufacturing. The faculty of our Polymer Science Research Center are drawn from disciplines including chemistry, physics, and chemical engineering. Our program enjoys extensive collaboration among faculty members, with the aim of understanding the fundamental principles underlying the properties of polymeric materials.

Women's Studies at USM seeks to understand the contributions of women to human cultures and their experiences as women in those cultures. Women's Studies courses explore such issues as gender, race and class, multiculturalism, cultures of work, and global feminism. Women's Studies courses are for all students--male and female, white students and students of color, middle class and working class--who are interested in embracing a pluralistic approach to these issues.

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

3) Create boilerplate contextual information that you might reuse in other letters.

Possible boilerplate information:

The foundations of education at USM.

Specific details about the reputation of your program, the level of work done in your lab, the nature of students who major in your program, etc.

The content of a course that you teach, course objectives, typical grades, number and nature of projects, etc.

A brief relevant summary of your background—both personal and professional.



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

4) For recommending a student who will work outside of your field, consider the value of transferable skills.

A Portal into the World of Psychology Graduate Programs



<http://www.psychgrad.org/>

excerpted from “Characteristics of Graduate School Superstars”

- *Visibility*: The most often mentioned behavioral characteristic was visibility. Superstars were observed to be . . .
- *Willingness to Work Hard*: The next most often mentioned quality was that they were hard working. It is important to point out that the superstars were . . .
- *Reflection of Program Values*: A consistently mentioned quality was the faculty's perceptions of their professional values. These values were concordant with . . .
- *True Interest in Research*: Many students preparing for graduate school in clinical psychology may assume that clinical and counseling skills will be much more valuable to them in graduate school than their ability to perform research. However, potential clinicians should . . .
- *Development of Relationship with a Mentor*: From the time they entered graduate school almost all superstars attached themselves to one or two faculty members with whom they continued to work during the course of their training. Faculty reported . . .

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

4) For recommending a student who will work outside of your field, consider the value of transferable skills.

Common transferable skills cited in recommendation letters:

Analytical thinking

Problem solving ability

Creativity

Work ethic

Communication and presentation skills

Ability to work as a team member

Success in overcoming obstacles



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

5) When recommending a student for a national scholarship, match your evaluation to specifics of the scholarship criteria.

A Portal into the Truman Scholarship Criteria



THE HARRY S. TRUMAN SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION

For Candidates

For college students interested in becoming Truman Scholars

http://www.truman.gov/candidates/candidates_show.htm?cat_id=481&doc_id=248879



excerpted from “Are You a Potential Truman Scholar?”

CAREER AND GRADUATE STUDY INTERESTS

I hope to be a "change agent," in time, improving the ways that government agencies, nonprofit organizations, or educational institutions serve the public.

There are conditions in our society or the environment which trouble me.

I want to work in government, education, the nonprofit sector, or the public interest/advocacy sector to improve these conditions.

I am comfortable committing to work in public service for three of the first seven years after I complete a Foundation-funded graduate degree.

I would like to get a master's degree, a doctorate, or a professional degree such as a law degree or a Master of Public Administration, Master of Public Health, Master of Social Work, Master of Education, Master of Public Policy, or Master of International Affairs.

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

5) When recommending a student for a national scholarship, match your evaluation to specifics of the scholarship criteria.

The Udall Scholarship expects students to be concerned about environmental public policy.

The NSF Fellowship considers the value and efficacy of a student's research project.

The Fulbright Scholarship expects the student to have a maturity of character for successful study abroad.

The Rhodes Scholarship and Marshall Scholarship selectors desire a “British level of evaluative candor” from letter writers.



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

6) When praising, choose specific superlatives tied to examples demonstrating performance rather than generics such as “excellent,” “great,” or “outstanding.”



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

6) When praising, choose specific superlatives tied to examples demonstrating performance rather than generics such as “excellent,” “great,” or “outstanding.”

When praising Amanda Winters, a 2003 Goldwater Scholar, Robert Bateman, chair of the department of chemistry, referred to her as “quiet and hard-working.”

Superlatives from *Writing Recommendation Letters*

Intellect

imaginative
insightful
intelligent
discerning
knowledgeable
original
analytical
far-sighted
logical
skilled
astute
adaptable
resourceful
self-reliant
thoughtful
judicious
perceptive
inquisitive
bright

Work Ethic

precise
persistent
resolute
serious
committed
orderly
prompt
efficient
responsible
persevering
sure
alert
businesslike
thorough
confident
tenacious
hard-working
methodical
determined

Temperament

good-natured
likeable
considerate
affable
patient
tolerant
composed
restrained
earnest
bold
gregarious
polished
adventurous
team-oriented
spirited
sociable
open
frank
assured

Vigor

active
energetic
self-starting
enthusiastic
vigorous
pace-setting
eager
diligent
zealous
fast
productive
enterprising
certain
speedy
self-driving
independent
ambitious
on-the-ball
industrious

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

6) When praising, choose specific superlatives tied to examples demonstrating performance rather than generics such as “excellent,” “great,” or “outstanding.”

Specific superlatives:

Help express transferable skills

Suggest thoughtful assessment rather than arbitrary or generic evaluation

Can be tied credibly to specific behaviors and examples (one handling radioactive waste must be “fastidious” but not “creative”)



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

7) When offering praise, use narrative technique and show the student in action.



Praise Excerpted from *Writing Recommendation Letters*

“Mr. Lerner is willing to share his ideas with colleagues and capitalize on opportunities to learn from others. For instance, he attended and presented his work with web-based portfolios at the Holmes Partnership Meeting (2004) in San Diego, CA, where the teacher education program in which he is enrolled was awarded the Nancy Zimpher Award for Best Partnership. As I noted at this meeting, he is poised and articulate as a presenter, and his contributions are worthy of accolades.”

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

7) When offering praise, use narrative technique and show the student in action.

Effective narrative praise:

- puts us “in the moment” with the student
- avoids hyperbole and cliché
- is tied to specifics about the student
- is linked directly to appropriate evaluative criteria
- doesn't reach inappropriately beyond the scope of the writer's experience



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

8) Be willing to offer credible, even-handed criticism in the right circumstances, and create context for the criticism.



Criticism Excerpted from *Writing Recommendation Letters*

“Given the substantial two-year stipend of the UCD Graduate Scholarship and your express request that recommenders voice their criticisms as well as their praise, I offer a few comments in that regard. . . . I have known students with more concrete long-term goals than John has, I have worked with better writers, and for all his academic accomplishment, John is still a slightly withdrawn figure and at times the best in him needs to be coaxed forth.”

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

8) Be willing to offer credible, even-handed criticism in the right circumstances, and create context for the criticism.

Effective Criticism:

avoids the highly negative, ambiguous, or unexplained
can be tied to the express desire of selectors for honest
criticism

is often limited to one sentence or paragraph

may have already been shared with the student—a fact
perhaps noted in the letter

may cite the writer's ethic of being a holistic evaluator



Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

9) Partner with the student on the process and establish protocol.

Excerpts from Written Policies by Professors

“If you have made no impression in my class, it is unlikely that you will get a good letter.”

“You need to have completed at least two of my courses. . . . You need to have earned a grade of B or better in all courses taken from me, received an A in one of my courses, and have at least a 3.0 GPA overall.”

“Ask me if I have the time to write the letter and if I would feel comfortable writing a supportive and positive recommendation letter for you. . . . I would rather decline writing you a recommendation letter than to write you a vague or irrelevant one.”

Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

9) Partner with the student on the process and establish protocol.

Positive Ways to Partner with Students:

Review their resume and personal statement.

Interview the student for 20 minutes about their plans.

Have students teach you about the scholarship or program to which they've applied.

Ask who the other evaluators are and what the substance of their commentary is likely to be.

Decide if and how you want to use e-mail contact.

Invite students to do a self-evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses, perhaps even in writing.

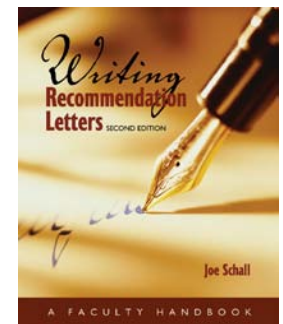
Ten Ideas for Improving Letter Writing

10) Study models, read and write articles on the subject, educate yourself on national scholarships, and re-evaluate your own practices.

Numerous articles in *Chronicle of Higher Education* about recommendation letter writing.



Thorough discussion of ethical, practical, and stylistic issues, information on national scholarships, and models for study in *Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook*, by Joe Schall.



Excerpt: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/u3w/WRLSample.pdf>