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Recommendation letters are generally used by students applying to college and by people in the workforce who are applying for jobs. At some point in your life, you may need to write a recommendation letter.

# Before You Write

Writing a recommendation letter for another person is a large responsibility and should be taken very seriously. Before you agree to the task, make sure you have a clear understanding of what the letter will be used for and who will be reading it. You should also make sure that you know what kind of information is being expected from you.

If you feel that you can not properly convey the necessary information, offer to sign a letter that has been drafted by the person who is requesting the reference. This is a very common practice and often works well for both parties. However, before you sign something written by someone else, make sure that the letter honestly reflects your true opinion. You should also keep a copy of the final letter for your records.

# What to Include

Every recommendation letter should include three key components:

A paragraph or sentence that explains how you know this person and the duration of your relationship with them.

An evaluation of the person and their skills/accomplishments. If possible offer specific examples that illustrate the person’s strengths and qualifications.

A summary that explains why you would recommend this person and to what degree you would recommend them.

# Things to Discuss

The content of your recommendation letter will depend upon the needs of the person who is requesting it, but there are some common topics that you can address:

Potential

Skills/Abilities/Strengths

Dependability

Consistence

Character

Contributions (to class or community)

Accomplishments

# Letters of Recommendation for Graduate School Admissions

A letter of recommendation is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate. This letter should present a well-documented evaluation, providing sufficient evidence and information to help an admission committee get a better picture of you and your potential.

Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit letters of recommendation. Don't underestimate the importance of these letters. While your transcript, standardized test scores, and personal statement are vital components to your application, an excellent letter of recommendation can make up for weaknesses in any of these areas.

The best letters of recommendation come from professors or individuals who know you well. A well written letter of recommendation provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A letter of recommendation discusses applicant's personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make him/her unique and perfect for the programs to which he/she is applying.

Selection committees normally weed out mediocre application packets before focusing on the excellent ones. This means that a brief letter with phrases like "good student" and "hard worker" that aren't substantiated with examples will get tossed aside in favor of the detailed letter that doesn't just tell but shows how qualified the student is. Remember, what makes a student's application packet stand out from the others is not only grades and accomplishments, but the specifics of what the student did and how he or she went about it.

# General Outline of the Recommendation Letter

Recommendation letters are letters written by professors who know you, assessing you capacity to meet the requirements of a program you are applying for. They're supposed to help decision-makers to get a better picture of your potential. Due to different reasons, if you are a student in Eastern Europe (including Russia) you will often find yourself in the position to write these letters yourself. The professor will, in this case, only proof-read and sign the text.

First Paragraph

Recommendation letter usually starts by stating the name of the professor who writes the letter and his/her title, together with the name of the student for whom the letter is written. The professor should also state since when has s/he known the students: year, class or other activity. It should in any case be clear that the professor had the opportunity to get to know the student well and assess his/her capabilities. If the person does research work under your guidance, indicate the type of research, the responsibilities of the student, and any significant projects undertaken by the individual. You may wish to include a sentence about the nature of your research group and its activities. Here, you can also give a one-sentence summary or overview of your opinion of the recommended individual.

Next 2-4 Paragraphs

The assessment of the student’s capabilities should be made from a multiple point of view over the next 3-4 paragraphs. From a professional point of view, it should give account of the student’s knowledge, interests and capabilities, activities and results, work capacity, etc. Personally, it should assess the student’s personal characteristics, character, social skills, his or her relations with the students and professors. Same as in other application documents, the direction should be from facts/experience to qualifications, and from those, to value judgments. Especially those skills relevant for the desired program should be outlined throughout the paper.

Concentrate on several different aspects of the person. Specifically identify his/her skills, attitudes, personal attributes, and growth, as well as his/her contributions to and performance within your organization. Also, if you do make negative comments, back them up with facts.

Beware of the power of words! Some words seem harmless in every day conversation, but carry positive or negative connotations to a prospective employer.

Avoid bland words such as:

nice, good, fairly, reasonable, decent, satisfactory, I hope, for sure

Use powerful words such as:

articulate, effective, sophisticated, intelligent, observant, significant, expressive, creative, efficient, cooperative, imaginative, assertive, dependable, mature, innovative

Some excellent points to address would be the following:

ability to communicate, intelligence, self-confidence, willingness to accept responsibility, initiative, leadership, energy level, imagination, flexibility, interpersonal skills, self-knowledge, ability to handle conflict, goal achievement, competitiveness, appropriate research skills, direction.

Final Paragraph

The final paragraph should provide an overall assessment of the student’s potential to fulfill the requirements of the program, even though partial judgments can and should be provided in the body of the letter. You can make a more broad characterization of the individual and his or her demeanor. Finally, indicate the degree to which you recommend the individual to the program she or he is seeking: recommend without reservation, strongly recommend, highly recommend, enthusiastically recommend.

Some Remarks

Most recommendation forms contain a certain number of fields, the multiple-choice kind, where the professor has to assess, by checking cells, your abilities. Make sure those fields are checked and insert the text in the place left for additional remarks. Do not leave blank that portion of the form, but use it instead as a self-standing recommendation letter.

Some of the graduate study programs supply you with forms for the recommendation letters that ask the professor to ask a number of specific questions about your skills and qualifications. Sometimes, space for the answer is allowed after each question, and there is where the answers should be written, rather than on a separate sheet of paper. Other times, the questions come as a block, an in this case you have the option to answer the question still in the form of a letter. Should you chose this option, make sure the letter answers clearly every single question, preferably in the order in which they are asked on the form.

Don't forget to write the date and the name of the home university. The name of the program you are applying for should come out explicitly in the body of the text, in order to make clear that the letter has been written for that occasion.

# Sample Outline of the Recommendation Letter

[Writer's Name or Company Letterhead]

[Street • City • State • Zip Code]

[Phone # • Fax phone # • Messages phone # • Email]

[Date today]

[Recipient's address block - optional]

[Address]

Dear [Recipient's name] or To Whom it May Concern:

[First and foremost, if you don't feel comfortable writing a letter of recommendation, don't. A vague or fabricated recommendation letter might do more harm than good. Start by identifying your relationship with the person for whom you're writing the letter. Are you the person's manager, co-worker or professor? How long have you known or worked with the person?]

[Picture the person in his or her job role. Point out a variety of positive traits while focusing on work ethics, accomplishments, skills, and significant contributions (use specific examples). If you draw a blank, ask the person to refresh your memory. If you have access to the person's merit reviews, refer to them for hints. If for business reasons you're sorry to see this person go, say so. Avoid vague, powerless words such as nice, good, fine and reasonable. Use words such as excellent, superior, instrumental, creative, innovative, efficient, dependable, articulate, meticulous, self-starter and confident.]

[Wrap it up with a recommendation to admit or hire. Close by offering to provide more information. Include your contact information if it's not in the letterhead.]

Sincerely,

[Sign here]

[Your name]

[Your title]

# Dos and Don'ts for Recommendation Letters

The following are lists of dos and don’ts to consider when writing personal statement. These lists are based on suggestions which I consider sensible and which are common to those providing guidance.

Do:

Make sure that the Letter of Recommendation does not conflict with or duplicate the rest of the application (Personal Statement, Transcripts, Resume, etc.)

Describe your qualifications for comparing the applicant to other applicants.

"I have been teaching for twenty years and have advised approximately 450 students on independent research projects over the last five years. "

"I have personally supervised ten interns every summer for the last five years plus worked with over two hundred college graduates in my capacity as trainer for Company X "

Discuss how well you know the applicant.

"I was able to get to know Mr. Doe because he made it a point to attend two of my sections every week when only one was required. "

Choose two or three (or more) qualities that you observed in the applicant.

"The combination of tenacity, analytical abilities, and good communications skills found in Mr. Doe is truly unique."

Support your statements with specific examples in which the applicant has demonstrated those attributes. Be as concrete and detailed as possible

"He is the only student I ever had who came to all my office hours as part of a relentless, and ultimately successful, drive to master financial theory. He was one of just ten percent in the class to receive an A. "

Try to quantify the student's strengths or rank him or her vis a vis other applicants that you have observed.

"He was in the top 10% of his class."

"She has the best analytical skills of any person her age that I have ever supervised. "

Try to describe the student in terms that reflect that student's distinctive or individual strengths. Whatever strengths strike you as particularly salient, be prepared to back up your judgment with concrete examples - papers, exams, class presentations, or performance in a laboratory.

Include some mild criticism, typically the flip-side of a strength.

"The only fault I have encountered in him is his retiring nature. His modesty sometimes hides a young man of remarkable strength and broad interests."

"Occasionally, her fortitude and persistence can turn into stubbornness, but usually her good nature and level-headedness prevail."

Discuss the applicant's potential in his or her chosen field it may give the student the edge over other applicants, since most committees look not only for what the student has already done but what he or she has the potential to accomplish..

"I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Doe to your business school. This well-rounded student will be a fine businessperson."

"With her exceptional leadership, writing, and quantitative skills, Ms. Smith will be an outstanding strategic consultant and a credit to the business school she attends."

Waive your rights. You have the legal right to read the stuff colleges have in their files about you. Virtually all recommendation forms include a little box where you can waive this right by signing your name. By all means, waive the right. Colleges won't pay attention to your recommendations if they think the people who wrote them were worried that you would be reading them. Sign the waiver before you give the forms to your teachers.

Don’t:

Use generalities and platitudes.

Reference characteristics that can be the basis of discrimination, such as race, color, nationality, gender, religion, age, appearance, any handicapping condition, marital or parental status, or political point of view.

Use the misconception that the more superlatives that you use, the stronger the letter. Heavy use of stock phrases or clichés in general is unhelpful. Your letter can only be effective if it contains substantive information about the student's qualifications.

Use empty, vague, overly-used words like meaningful, beautiful, challenging, rewarding, etc.

Say "I hope", instead say "I am confident..." or "I am sure..."

# Useful Phrases for Recommendation Letters

If you want to see other examples check out Sample Letters of Reference

Good Introductions

First, you need to express your positive feeling about writing the letter. Then explain how long you have known the person and what your relationship has been (supervisor, teacher, co-worker).

Sentences:

I am delighted to be called upon as a reference for John Smart. I first became acquainted with Mr. Smart in 1992, when he joined the...

Mr. Smart has asked me to write a letter of recommendation to accompany his application for PhD program in Physics at MIT. I am very pleased to do so.

It has been a pleasure to be Mr. Smart's supervisor since 1990.

I am happy to write this letter of recommendation for Steven Smart. In this letter I would like to express my respect and appreciation for this bright young person, who brought outstanding contribution to the work of my group.

I have no hesitancy in writing a letter of recommendation for Mr. Smart.

It is a pleasure to write a letter of recommendation for as Ms. Smart.

I have known Ms. Smart since 1993, when she enrolled in my accounting class.

I was Mr. Smart's teacher in two advanced quantum mechanics classes during winter semester, 1995.

Phrases:

am honored to support him as a candidate

am pleased to provide a reference for

am delighted to be called upon

am happy to recommend

am pleased to comment on

can offer only the highest recommendation for

first became acquainted with

first came to my attention when

has worked directly under my supervision

has been a pleasure to supervise

have known Ms. Doe for

have no hesitation in recommending

have been his supervisor since

her performance as a

his qualifications and performance

have had the opportunity to

in the past two years

is a pleasure to recommend

was a student in two of my classes

Describing Person's Qualifications

Discuss the person's qualifications for the graduate study in the chosen field. Statements of past performance, accomplishments, and contributions are helpful. The more relevant the items mentioned, and the greater the detail, the better your letter will communicate your positive recommendation. General comments provide a neutral recommendation or suggest that you do not really recommend the person highly.

Sentences:

Since the beginning of our collaboration I know him as an energetic and goal-oriented person.

Some of the main Irina’s attributes are her persistence and diligence sometimes even ranging with obsession with work.

He grasps new concepts quickly and accepts constructive criticism and instruction concerning his work.

While she was with us she supervised the maintenance of all computer networks. This responsibility involved working with 42 separate offices.

He has proactively joined research at our institute.

I would like to mention here, that John is accurate and thorough in his research, pays attention to details and has no dread of routine work.

His extraordinary ability to analyze problems and outline necessary courses of action was invaluable.

In a class of thirty, he completed the course with the second highest grade.

That was mostly due to her assiduity and devotion to work that she was soon able to proceed with actual experiments.

I would like to say that it is pleasant to work with Michael, he is reliable and intelligent person with good sense of humor.

Her greatest talent is in developing innovations for new products.

John always takes an active part in scientific discussions, demonstrating maturity, strong ability to defend his ideas while paying careful attention to opponent’s remarks.

She finishes her work on schedule. When she has a concern or question about an assignment, she speaks her mind clearly and directly, giving voice to what others may feel but cannot or will not say.

From our collaboration I can conclude that George has a strong motivation for scientific work. He is a focused and determined person.

Phrases:

a creative problem-solver

always cheerful and dependable

always behaves professionally

broad range of skills

can attest to his integrity

careful attention to detail

comments are well thought out and clearly articulated

communicates her ideas clearly

communicates effectively in writing

completely loyal and trustworthy

demonstrated particular strengths in

follows tasks through to completion

gets along well with others

handles responsibility well

has a take-charge personality

has a flair for organization

her sensitivity and concern for others

is innovative and creative

is a tireless worker

is mature beyond her years

is intelligent and ambitious

is personable and easy to work with

keeps calm under pressure

meticulous attention to detail

one of our finest, most well-rounded undergraduates

outstanding leadership abilities

punctual and hard working

self-motivated individual

wide-range knowledge of

willing to go beyond what is required

willing to take on new responsibilities

works efficiently and effectively

works independently and effectively

works well with little supervision

Good Endings

Close with a clear statement of your recommendation and a willingness to cooperate further.

Sentences:

Mr. Bright will be a great addition to your program. If I can further assist, please e-mail or call me.

Jane Bright has my strong recommendation. She will be a credit to your program.

I am confident that Mr. Bright will continue to be very productive. He has my highest recommendation.

I give her my highest recommendation, without reservation. Please send e-mail or call me if you have further questions.

I believe in John’s outstanding abilities for scientific work and strongly recommend him for further education at your university, where he can develop and apply his bright talents.

It is satisfying to be able to give him my highest recommendation. I hope this information proves helpful.

I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Bright as a promising candidate.

Seldom have I been able to recommend someone without reservation. It is a pleasure to do so in the case of John Bright.

I will be pleased to answer any additional questions you may have.

I am very interested in Mr. Bright's application and will be happy to provide further information.

Phrases:

every confidence in her ability to

give my unqualified recommendation

has always proved satisfactory

has my highest recommendation

have admiration and respect for

have no reservations in

hope this information proves helpful

if I can further assist

if you have further questions

if you need additional information

if you would like more information

recommend without reservation

recommend her very highly

request your favorable consideration of

should be given serious consideration

should you have any questions

will meet your expectations

will be successful in any enterprise he undertakes

will be a credit to your

will measure up to your high standards

will be a great addition to

would be an asset to your program

would be a valuable addition to

# Sample Letter of Reference for PhD Program

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**Letter of Recommendation for Ms. X  
Department of Y, PhD Program**  
I first knew X in the spring of l986 when she was a member of my Freshman Seminar, '. . . .` In such small groups teacher and students come to know one another in a way that is seldom, if ever, possible in large lecture courses. In either forum something can be learned about a student's academic ability, but only in the former can one get a reliable measure of the student as a person. . . . Having kept in touch with X in the intervening years, I am confident in my knowledge of her.  
To begin with, she is an excellent student, with a lively curiosity that makes her dissatisfied with superficial explanations. That curiosity frequently led our seminar down avenues and into areas that, otherwise, would have remained unexplored. . . .  
One has only to speak to her to recognize her openness and eagerness. It is easy to mistake this for naiveté, an error I made when she first told me she had signed up to be an apprentice teacher in one of Boston's more notorious inner city high schools. . . . Throughout the term, often at great cost to her own peace of mind, and sometimes in explicit conflict with the regular teacher, she continued to insist on a high level of performance from her students. She not only survived the term but won the admiration and respect of students accustomed to being patronized by teachers content to believe that nothing much can be expected.  
I would expect X to bring these same qualities of character to . . . . That is, an openness to new places, peoples, cultures and customs; a keen intelligence, with which to analyze and order her experience; irrepressible curiosity; and an unusual ability for dealing with people of all ages and conditions. Those qualities, combined with her toughness of character. . ., will enable her to understand and empathize with others while never losing touch with who she is.

# Sample Letter of Reference for Graduate Studies

Letter of Recommendation for Jane Doe

Office of Graduate Admissions, Institute of Design

I'm honored to recommend Jane Doe for admission to graduate studies at the Institute of Design. Since Jane will be visiting you soon, the following information should help introduce her as well as convey my wholehearted recommendation that she be admitted to your program.

My association with Jane--I've known Jane closely for three years, during which we've collaborated on many projects. Her role has been that of a consultant to our architectural firm. Jane and I have also conversed privately on theoretical and practical matters of style, aesthetics, and philosophies of design. I've always been impressed by her know-how--from how to design an arboretum to good principles of document design.

Jane's integrity--The hallmark of Jane's character is her honesty. This extends from those areas where we easily see it (in relationships and business transactions) to integrity of thought. Scientific, thorough, and meticulous, she approaches any analytical task with an exacting eye. This is the kind of care and concern I mean by integrity of thought.

Jane's scholarship and balanced education--As a student of the humanities, Jane pursued a course of study that could serve as a model for any general education curriculum. She knows not only Shakespeare but mathematics. She's as comfortable in a wood shop as at the opera.

Her professional manner--Jane Doe is one of the most pleasant persons you'll ever meet or work with. She's forthright, but neither intimidates nor intrudes. She's open, friendly, and authentic--the Jane you'll soon meet is the Jane you'll get, without any surprises.

Jane has my unqualified professional endorsement and my deep personal respect. Please feel free to call at any time if I can be of further assistance.

# Sample Reference Letter Template for Business

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| --- |
|  |

It is my great pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for Mr. Li Yan, one of the best staffs in my company, for entrance into your MBA program.  
I have known Li for about two years since he joined my company. I hired him as a software engineer for FOX product of my company, CGI Japan, in May of 2000. CGIjapn is the Japan subsidiary of CGI Corp, which is the fourth largest independent IT services provider in the world (ranking No.1 in Canada) . CGIjapn's clients are mainly the large financial companies in Japan. FOX is our key software package. It is an advanced system for real-time stock trading, providing customers with real time market information and maximum uptime services. Due to the high productivity of the financial industry where loss may count to million dollars for a single system-down, it is a really challenge to any IT professional who wants to pursue a career success. It has proven that Li is the very person from the beginning. He shows his ability to handle every critical situation. His professional skill, plus his personality and gifts of perception, gains the trust of his customers and colleagues. Besides, his communication skill has helped us overcome some very difficult situations and brought back a very important customer.  
Li has the potential to be a good leader. First of all, he is quite ready to take the responsibility and deal with the subsequent difficulties. In August 2000, after the sudden leave of his team leader while they were doing a project for SANWA Securities, Li was appointed to take the leadership. He took over the management despite of the strict schedule and the complicated situations. Thanks to his effective communication with the customers (he could speak very fluent Japanese), the project was finished on time and was highly evaluated by the customer. Secondly, Li is very good at learning and applying his knowledge to practice. He spent his spare time to study project management, and finally got a certification as Project Management Professional (PMP) from Project Management Institute. I should say it is a quite difficult certification. Moreover, he effectively utilized some software tools in his project planning and management: a website integrated with such tools was constructed under his proposal to facilitate the communication and cooperation among his team members. All these have helped him to finish several projects on time and on budget.  
Lastly, Li always keeps very good relations with people around, such as his supervisors, colleagues and customers. His team is composed of members from different countries. I know that they all have very good impression of Li. This should largely rely on his humility. Whenever there's some trouble, he never blamed others or shirked his responsibility. Instead, He could concentrate on finding the cause of the problems and solve them. This helped to keep his whole team as a high-efficient and harmonious professional group. Li also keeps very good relations with his customers, even after the project is over. I remembered what he has said to me, that "the finish of contract is the beginning of relationship".  
As I know, Li is an ambitious young man who desires for further development through a systematic study of business knowledge. For this, he would even abandon his position of now. I am very sorry for his leave but I respect his decision and I believe he would have a very success future. I also believe he could make outstanding contribution to your college.  
Yours truly,  
Jimmy

Director of Capital Market Dept.  
CGI JAPAN