

Tips for Writing a Recommendation Letter

✚ Before you accept...

- Weigh your *total* experience with the student and the quality of his/her work, work ethic, personal qualities, etc.
- Get a clear sense of the program/school/job/etc. to which the student is applying. Decide if you feel that your experience with the student is appropriate to attest to that.
- If you feel that you don't have enough detail, ask the student for more information.
- Figure out what he/she would want you to stress about him/her?

✚ How to decide when to say no...

- (If you are a graduate student)...Recommend that the student ask his/her advisor if your status as a graduate student might affect the value of your recommendation.
- Consider not writing for someone about whom you feel "lukewarm" (i.e., if you do not feel that you have enough enthusiasm and detail about the student's performance to be able to write a persuasive letter).
- If you feel your honest view can only hurt the student's chances, then don't write the recommendation.
- Consider whether there is a chance the student would not reflect well on your program in the position to which he/she is applying. Remember that you represent an organization larger than yourself and your recommendation of a student reflects upon your program.

✚ How to decline...

- Be kind, but firm; don't let them think you will change your mind.
- Combine positive with negative (e.g., "While I appreciate all the hard work you did in my class, I do not feel that I am the best person to speak on your behalf.")
- You might encourage the student to ask others who might be in a better position to speak on his/her behalf (e.g., a professor in the major, a work-study supervisor, etc.).

Tips for Writing a Recommendation Letter (cont.)

✚ First Paragraph

- Identify the purpose of the letter (i.e., on whose behalf are you writing, and to which program is the student applying).
- The first paragraph can be very short. Begin with making the overall opinion of the student known—state degree of support (e.g., “...with the highest recommendation,” “...with very strong recommendation”).
- Provide general information about your relationship with the student (i.e., length of acquaintance, basis of relationship—instructor, capstone supervisor, advisor, etc.).

✚ Possible ways to structure the remainder of the letter

- The length of the letter depends on its purpose. Admission to graduate school might require more than a page. Work related recommendations (e.g., assistantship, internship, etc.) can remain at a page.
- You might divide the letter into a section discussing in-class performance (leadership, participation, writing, class work), and then a short section for things outside of the classroom if applicable (volunteering, etc.).
- An alternative would be to provide a section on the qualities/characteristics of the student (e.g., leadership capabilities, intellectual capabilities, etc) and then a section on performance in class (exam performance, writing capabilities, work ethic).
- Provide as many concrete examples as possible. The letter needs to tell a story about who the student is.
- It might be helpful to include a section on growing points. This could help to undo potential misconceptions about the student and address things that might seem like contradictions/discrepancies (e.g., “While upon a first meeting, he might appear to be unenthusiastic, with experience he has shown...”; “If there is one thing the student needs to work on, it would be...”)
- Talk about growth as you have experienced it with the student (e.g., “While at the beginning of the semester she seemed less invested, she showed ...”)

✚ How to avoid a cliché letter...

- Provide very concrete, specific examples. Don’t make broad pronouncements for which you don’t have examples.
- Make the letter well-rounded, encompassing aspects such as the quality of the student’s work, his/her commitment, work ethic, etc.
- Be clear for what you are recommending the student. You want the recipient to feel that the letter has been written for his/her specific program.