



# Writing Effective Reference Letters

Fabrice Labeau, PhD

Lisa Travis, PhD

Associate Deans Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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# Overview

- Objectives of this session
- The value of your reference letter
- Referee's obligations
- What to expect from students
- Elements of an effective reference letter
- Pitfalls to avoid
- Saying No

# Objectives

- To understand your responsibility when writing a letter of reference.
- To understand the essential features that should be present in a reference letter.
- To be knowledgeable about the common mistakes made when writing reference letters.
- To be able to tailor a letter of reference based on varying levels of performance.

# What is the “value added” of a letter of reference?

- Adds life to the paper dossier
- Introduces what is unique and exciting about the individual
- Gives a flavor of what it would be like to interact with this person
- Gives information not communicated by the rest of the application

# Your obligations

- To the student
  - Help obtain deserved funding and recognition
- To the reader
  - Provide useful data to select the best candidate(s)
- To the institution
  - Help obtain additional funding and recognition
- To society and the profession
  - Give credit where credit is due
- To yourself
  - Maintain your honesty, integrity and reputation

# The student's obligations

Must provide:

- At least 2 weeks notice
- Deadline for submitting the letter
- Up-to-date CV
- Draft of their personal statement (if available)
- Complete information about the award/ fellowship/ scholarship (criteria)
- Memory jogs: which class, comments on papers, etc.

# Elements of a “good” Letter

- 1) Introduce the Student and your relationship
- 2) Body (Scientific)
- 3) Body (Personal)
- 4) Conclusion



# 1) Introduction

- Address letter to specific person, if possible
- A few sentences
- Introduces you & the student
- Identifies your relationship/context
  - How do you know the student?
  - How long have you known the student?
  - In what context do you know the student?

## 2) Body - Scientific (applicant's strengths)

- List accomplishments
  - significant intellectual contributions (awards)
  - research skills (with specific examples)
  - passion for the field, the subject, the topic
- **Situate** accomplishments
  - gave a paper at a conference with a 10% acceptance rate, etc.) keeping in mind the reviewers
- Add details that are not obvious from the rest of the application
  - role in manuscripts, unpublished work)



### 3) Body - Personal

- Interpersonal skills, personal attributes and special interests that make the candidate unique
- Personality/Character
- Community service
- Teaching involvement (above & beyond what's required)

### 3) Students' strengths - Personal

- Interpersonal skills, personal attributes and special interests that make the candidate unique
- Personality/Character
- Community/teaching involvement (above & beyond what's required)



## 4) Conclusion

- Wrap up your thoughts
- Final comments on the student's impact
- Consider ranking the student (he is in the top 5% of students I have mentored....)
- Include your contact information

# Not Helpful...

- Too short with no specific examples
- Generic letters (drop in name).
- Repetition of info available elsewhere in application
- Faint or undocumented praise
- Description of letter writer's research/status
- Too much focus on how the writer knows the applicant without describing the student and his/her accomplishments
- Too much focus on the research topic and not on student's original contribution



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# When You Cannot Write a Good Letter

- Note impressive improvements in the student's work
- Focus on what was accomplished (i.e. completed all the reading assignments, was punctual) **EVEN** if accomplishments were expected.
- Highlight previous successes (May repeat details from CV/academic record)
- Mention interpersonal skills before research for candidates with a weak academic record

# If you don't have anything nice to say...

- Seriously consider saying no or at least disclose beforehand
- Limit criticism to one paragraph late in the letter
- Phrase criticism in an affirmative way, e.g.
  - “I’m confident that her interpersonal skills will improve as she gains more experience working on a team....”
  - “He readily accepts and incorporates feedback regarding his need to work on....”

# When to Say No



- When you feel that you cannot write a letter positive enough to be helpful to the applicant
- When you have little or no recollection of the time you spent with the applicant
  - Latter point can be remedied by:
    - Keep copy of all evaluations
    - Keep copies of presentations
    - Ask during your meeting (What accomplishment in the lab/class are you most proud of?)

# The Secret Language



## Rank Words

- Outstanding
- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Solid
- Appropriate for level of training

## Recommend

- Wholeheartedly
- Enthusiastically
- Without reservation
- With confidence
- With pleasure
- With comfort
- Strongly

# Essential Features



## Describe

- Knowledge
- Skill set
- Professionalism
- Character
- Work ethic
- Sense of responsibility
- Communication skills
- Personality
- Fit between role and environment

## Give

- Personal anecdotes
- Specific examples
- Interviewer something to ask candidate about
- A ranking (...in my experience, top 25%)

# Articulating Student Strengths

- Intellectual ability/curiosity
- Originality
- Critical thinker
- Technical skills
- Ability to incorporate new ideas
- Leadership ability
- Initiative
- Work ethic/ hard working
- Communication skills (verbal & written)
- Academic performance
- Honors and awards
- Integrity/ reliability
- Willingness to follow lab policy
- Ability to work with others
- Ability to work independently
- Maturity

# Best Practices for Writing Reference Letters

1. Authentic: based on adequate 1st hand knowledge of the candidate's skills
2. Honest: accurate; avoid exaggeration or hyperbole
3. Explicit: highlight what you can to be helpful
4. Provide specific examples to support praise
5. Confidential: avoid unnecessary disclosure
6. Of appropriate detail and length: content relevant to the institutional or individual requests
7. Technically clear: avoid unnecessary jargon
8. Use the right code words
9. Personalized: Remember to tailor comments for the applicant
10. PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD!!

# Bibliography

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