

**Writing Letters of Recommendation:
A Form to Help Students Help You, So You Can Help Them**

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Abstract

This short article discusses a form for streamlining the frequently onerous task of writing letters of recommendation. Students who seek recommendations often do not know (and are not asked to consider) how they could help their professors write more effective letters. Professors tend to dislike writing letters, in part because they have insufficient information to provide accurate, specific, and honest evaluations. I offer a one-page handout that can be given to students in order to facilitate the letter-writing process. The form encourages students to provide a timely and detailed package of information; consequently, it can help students help their professors write better letters, more efficiently.

Introduction

Writing letters of recommendation is an important but often dreaded aspect of college teaching. Students need references to apply for graduate school, internships, employment, study abroad programs, and other opportunities. They sometimes even need letters to satisfy potential landlords. Part of the job of being a professor—something that future academics often don't think about while in graduate school—is writing effective letters that help students achieve their goals. As students' application deadlines come and go, professors find themselves receiving waves upon waves of requests for recommendations, and they deal with these requests in *ad hoc*, idiosyncratic ways. Some of these letters are quickly dashed out and forgotten. Other letters can have a life of their own, growing and evolving over long periods of time. A professor who sits on a dissertation committee may be asked to update and revise a letter of recommendation repeatedly over the course of many years, if not decades.

This article first discusses the frequently onerous nature of letter writing; it then offers a form that professors can use to facilitate the process, followed by an appraisal of the form's potential benefits and drawbacks.

The Drudgery (and Occasional Joys) of Writing Letters of Recommendation

Sometimes it is an absolute delight for a professor to write a letter of recommendation. Some students who request letters are bright, personable, energetic; they may have taken several courses from the professor and excelled consistently; the

professor may have in-depth knowledge of such students and earnestly wish to see them succeed.

Other times—probably more often than not—writing letters of recommendation can be a rather dull, difficult, or unrewarding experience. Some students are not very remarkable; they may have been quiet or performed unexceptionably in class; the professor may know very little about the students' accomplishments, interests, or goals in life; the professor may want these students to succeed in a purely abstract sense (“It’s good to help our students”) rather than in a personal sense (“This student is a perfect fit for this program!”).

For these and many other reasons, writing letters of recommendation can feel like an unpleasant obligation, a service task that is expected but likely unappreciated when listed in annual reviews and tenure applications.

The onerous nature of letter-writing is compounded by the manner in which students ask for those letters. Students want to succeed but sometimes put very little thought and effort into helping their professors write letters that will support their goals. It is not rare for students to wait until virtually the last possible day or week before asking for a letter of recommendation. Students may request a letter of recommendation by dropping off a 3x5 card that contains only the address to which the letter should be sent. Students neglect to mention their positive accomplishments, and they sometimes forget to specify exactly what opportunity they are applying for—and why. In short, it often does not occur to students that they can take pro-active steps to increase their chances of obtaining strong letters from their instructors.

If encouraged to give the matter some thought, however, many students are highly motivated and will actively help themselves by helping their professors write better letters of recommendation. What these students need is an invitation and a bit of guidance. Students may feel they need explicit permission before they attempt to provide information and suggestions to their professors¹.

A Form to Aid the Letter Writing Process

I have developed a brief handout that facilitates the process of letter writing. Whenever a student suggests that he or she may need a letter, I print out or email the student a form with detailed instructions on how he or she can help me write the best recommendation possible².

See Appendix at the end of this document, on page 8

[[Or insert form here]]

The “Pros” and “Cons” of Using This Form

I believe there are several advantages to using this form (or one that is similarly designed). I will discuss four general benefits.

¹ Some students may wonder whether it is ethically proper for them to give their professors tentative suggestions regarding what to put in a letter of recommendation. I believe that it is proper, but some professors may react negatively to being advised what to put in a letter—an issue which is mentioned by Lang (2004).

² Zimbardo (1976) suggests taking an even more pro-active approach, by informing students early in their college careers how to position themselves to ask for high quality letters of recommendation, e.g., by putting announcements in syllabi for introductory level courses or in freshman orientation packets.

- 1) Using this form can reduce the frustration a professor feels when forced to write a letter based on insufficient information. Professors who want to be helpful, precise, and honest in their letters may experience less of the “cognitive dissonance” that can result when they feel compelled to write ambiguous and uninformative recommendations.
- 2) Using this form can help professors write convincing letters that go beyond vague pronouncements of excellence (or mediocrity, etc.). A few well-chosen, specific examples can be much more persuasive than a string of empty compliments (Knouse 1994). One’s students will thus have a greater chance of success in their applications.
- 3) Using this form can help students obtain better recommendations from their other professors, too. After interacting with a professor who uses this sort of form, students will (presumably) learn how to solicit letters *in general* and not simply from the professor who uses the form. However, students should be encouraged to seek both similarities and differences in the letters they solicit, in order to ensure that certain ideas are reinforced while preventing each letter from sounding like a clone of the others (Lang 2004).
- 4) The form provides a partial solution to the problems of “letter-inflation” and the lack of “full-disclosure” in recommendations (Schneider 2000). If professors have a wealth of positive information to draw upon, they may feel that they can honestly mention students’ limitations because those weaknesses will be far outweighed by the specific strengths the professor can document. Thus, this form can help professors write letters that are more “real”—more precise,

accurate, and informative about students' positive *and* not-so-positive characteristics.

Despite its appeal, there are some drawbacks to employing this form. A few pitfalls include the following issues.

- 1) First, some students may feel or complain that the professor is making them “work” for their letter of recommendation, and define this situation as “unfair.” To curtail this sentiment, professors could explain that it is in the students' interest to help their professors write more effective letters of recommendation. Students could also be reminded that professors teach many courses and may not recall the accomplishments and characteristics of each and every student. Professors can always decline to write a letter of recommendation for a variety of legitimate reasons, including insufficient information.
- 2) Another potential drawback is that students may be intimidated by the form and simply seek a letter from a different professor, following the path of least resistance. However, this may not be seen as a pitfall by the professor who “escaped” writing a letter for an unmotivated or weakly committed student.
- 3) A third problem is that students apply for many different kinds of opportunities and it is difficult for a single form to address all of them at once. A professor may need different kinds of information when writing a letter of recommendation for graduate school versus an internship or a study-abroad program. One way to deal with this dilemma is create separate forms for each type of opportunity, a

task many professors would probably find bothersome. A second option is to use a single form but to delete non-relevant sections electronically before emailing it to the student. A final option is to use a single form and trust that students can identify the portions that apply to their respective situations. Since my form is only one-page long, I have found the last option to be very workable.

Conclusion

I am not the first to propose that professors use a form to facilitate the process of writing letters of recommendation. Documents similar in design and intent to mine have been previously suggested (see Tompkins 1990; Zimbardo 1976). However, in my experience, such forms are still greatly underutilized in academia. When I share my handout with undergraduates they express surprise; when I offer it to colleagues they express gratitude and enthusiastically tell me “How helpful this form will be!”

It is important to emphasize that this form is malleable. Instructors are free to delete, revise, or add questions to my proposed list. Professors teach a wide range of subjects to diverse groups of students; they may need to create their own unique forms to address the kinds of recommendations they are typically asked to write.

My hope is that this short article will further encourage the use of such forms, whatever their ultimate design may be. Streamlining the recommendation process would benefit those who request letters, those who write them, and those who read them.

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Need a Letter of Recommendation from Me? How to Help Me Write an Effective Letter for You

Every semester I receive multiple requests for letters of recommendations from students who are eager to find a job, obtain an internship, get admitted to graduate school or a study-abroad program, and so on. Yet, I have found that many students weaken their own chances of achieving their goals because they do not understand how to solicit a good letter of recommendation. I have created this handout in order to help students obtain the best letter they can from me (and from their other professors).

To write you an effective letter of recommendation, I do not simply need to have a good impression of you from our interactions inside and outside the classroom. I also need a great deal of information from you. Try to give me as much of the following data as you can, and please convey it all at once (via a single envelop or email message).

The Basics

- What is your (first and last) name exactly as you want me to spell it? In other words, exactly how do you want me to refer to you in my letter?
- What exactly are you applying to do?
- What is the date by which the letter of recommendation is due? Have you given me *at least* two weeks to write your letter?
- What is the address to which I should send the letter? Give me the address even if you are planning on mailing the letter for me. I will need to type the address in my letter of recommendation, near the top of the first page of my letter.
- Can you find out the name of the person(s) I should address the letter to? (So I don't have to write "To whom it may concern" at the top of your letter.) It's OK to ignore this if you're applying to grad school. But it helps for jobs and internships.
- Is there a form I am supposed to fill out and staple to my letter? If there are parts of this form that you need to fill out, please do so *before* giving it to me.
- If you are asked whether you want to waive access to the letter I write, please do so. You want whoever reads my letter to take it seriously, and I do not want to imagine multiple audiences as I write the letter. It is complicated enough as is.

Supporting Materials about the Opportunity You Are Applying for

Please try to give me more info on what you are applying to do, such as:

- Brochures or website addresses for the job, internship, department, or program
- A photocopy of your application packet
- Any cover letters or essays you may be writing in support of your own application

Other Information about You

- What courses did you take with me? When did you take those courses, and what grades did you earn? Did you do particularly well on a certain portion of a course (e.g., by excelling on a paper you wrote for me)?
- What positive traits or abilities did you demonstrate in my classes, or in other conversations/meetings we've had outside the classroom?
- Are there certain ideas or themes you want me to emphasize in your letter? Are there certain facts or examples you want me to mention or ignore? Are there weaknesses in your record that you'd like me to help explain or minimize?
- Can you give me a copy of your resume and your college transcripts?
- Can you tell me about your educational or career goals, and how this opportunity fits into those goals?
- Can you write me a rough draft of what you think would be an ideal yet honest letter of recommendation from me? (I will selectively use and revise this, but it helps.)