Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation

Purpose

This document provides a framework to help letter writers craft effective and impactful letters of recommendation. A well-written letter highlights the applicant's qualifications, character, and potential while addressing the needs of the scholarship/opportunity.

The Impact of a Letter

Letters of recommendation can make a real difference in scholarship and grant applications, often helping decide who gets funding and opportunities. A thoughtful, well-written letter gives a candidate a strong advantage, while a vague or generic one might not do them justice. As a recommender, your words matter—your letter reflects on the student and your perspective of their potential.

If you feel that you cannot write a strong letter of recommendation—whether due to limited interaction with the student or a lack of positive experiences—please be honest with the student and suggest they seek a recommender who can provide a more enthusiastic and substantive endorsement.

Structure and Components

1. Introduction

- Purpose: A brief paragraph that states your intent to recommend the candidate and identify the context of your relationship (i.e., how long you have known them and in what capacity).
- Key Elements:
    - Identify the candidate and the position/opportunity they are applying for.
    - Establish your credentials and relationship to the candidate (e.g., professor, advisor).

Example:
"I am delighted to recommend [Candidate's Full Name] for [specific opportunity]. As their [role, e.g., professor/advisor], I have worked closely with them for [time period] and have observed their exceptional skills and dedication."

2. Body Paragraph(s)

- Purpose: One to two paragraphs that detail the candidate's qualifications, strengths, and achievements.
- Key Elements:
  - Highlight technical skills, subject matter expertise, and relevant accomplishments.
  - Provide evidence of character trait qualities like integrity, teamwork, resilience, and leadership.
  - Include anecdotes or examples that demonstrate the candidate's abilities and achievements.
  - Tailor the content to align with the requirements of the scholarship/opportunity.
  - Use metrics or rankings, when appropriate, to contextualize achievements (e.g., "among the top 5% of students I have worked with").

Example:
"[Candidate's Name] consistently demonstrated a deep understanding of [specific subject/skill], excelling in assignments and collaborative projects. For instance, in [specific project/course], they…"

3. Conclusion

- Purpose: One brief paragraph that summarizes your recommendation and expresses confidence in the candidate's suitability.
- Key Elements:
  - Reaffirm your support for the candidate.
  - Offer to provide additional information if needed.

Example:
"In summary, I strongly recommend [Candidate's Name] for [specific opportunity]. Their [specific traits/skills] make them an excellent candidate. Please do not hesitate to contact me at [email/phone] for further details."

Writing Tips

1. Be Specific and Personalized: Avoid generic statements. Use concrete examples and tailor the letter to the scholarship/opportunity.
2. Maintain Professional Tone: Use a formal yet positive tone. Avoid overly casual language.
3. Be Honest: Highlight strengths, but do not exaggerate. If relevant, acknowledge minor weaknesses constructively and frame it in a positive light.
4. Draft in Word First: Write your letter in a word processing program before copying and pasting it into the submission portal. This allows you to check the word count, proofread effectively, and retain a copy in case of technical issues during uploading.

5. Be Concise: Keep your letter direct and to the point. Long paragraphs or multiple pages are often skimmed rather than read thoroughly.
6. Proofread: Check that names and pronouns are correct and for grammatical errors, clarity, and consistency.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Vagueness: Failing to provide specific examples or details.
2. Overuse of Superlatives: Avoid generic phrases like "best student ever" unless substantiated.
3. Irrelevance: Including unrelated information that does not support the candidate's case.
4. Lack of Personalization: Using a template without tailoring to the candidate or opportunity.

Submission Reminders

● Letters must be submitted through the online portal; emailed submissions are not accepted.
● Avoid submitting at the last minute to prevent disqualification due to technical errors.
  ○ Each year, late submissions result in otherwise qualified candidates being disqualified.