

Recommendations

tips for reference letter writing

Writing a letter of recommendation is one of the most important services GC employees can provide to students who are preparing for the future. Professors and employees who supervise student workers are most likely to receive recommendation requests.

First and foremost, if you cannot honestly write a strong recommendation letter, whether as a result of poor performance or simply a lack of knowledge about the student, be candid and tell her/him. While this may lead to awkwardness, it's much better than submitting a mediocre letter on his/her behalf.

Before writing the letter, have a conversation with the student and ask which experiences, strengths, and/or personal characteristics s/he would like you to emphasize. Ask the student to provide you with as much information as desired. This may include a resume, personal statement, application form, copies of previous course work or evaluations, job description, or other documents. Write your letter of recommendation so that it complements—not conflicts with or duplicates—the rest of the application material submitted by the student.

Obtain written permission from the student before providing any written or verbal reference. (Or, request a copy of such permission from the employer/school—for example, the application where the student listed your name as a reference.) Before disclosing educational information covered by FERPA (e.g. student's transcripts, GPA, grades, etc.), obtain written consent from the student. Failure to obtain such consent may constitute a violation of FERPA.

- Use letterhead; format your letter in business style with a length of one or two pages.
- The tone of your letter should sound formal and professional, but also personal. It's appropriate to use first-person (I, me, my) throughout the letter.
- Provide information about the student that *the recipient* cares about; try to imagine yourself as the reader. Focus on experiences, strengths, and personal characteristics that will be of interest to the reader.
- Avoid discussing personal matters in the letter. Do not include information that might indicate the student's race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, age, disability, citizenship status, marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity. (Exceptions: when preference will be given to diverse candidates and the student requested that you include the information; religiously-affiliated programs or organizations who may ask about the student's spiritual life.)
- Don't guess or make speculations. If a reference form asks you to evaluate an aspect or personal characteristic of which you have no knowledge, simply state that you have no knowledge.
- Edit and proofread the letter. Poor quality letters reflect negatively on the student, the college, and the writer.

Keep a copy of each letter and record the date when it was mailed or returned to the student. This serves two purposes: 1) It provides documentation of the information you released, and 2) It gives you something to work from if the student asks you to write another recommendation. It's efficient to use the same general outline for multiple letters, but also take time to tailor the content of each letter for the particular audience.

If you cannot
honestly write
a glowing letter,
just say no.

Recommendations

reference letter template

Letterhead

Date

Recipient's Name
Recipient's Title
Organization Name
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. Last name:

Begin the letter by stating its purpose: a recommendation for a specific person. Identify your relationship (supervisor, professor, coach, etc) with the student/alumnus for whom you are writing the letter. How long have you known her/him? How well? Briefly share why you are qualified to provide the recommendation.

Provide an evaluation of the student/alumnus. As you decide what to write, consider the strengths and experiences that will most interest the recipient. For example, will the reader be interested in learning about the applicant's research/writing abilities or will they be more interested in his/her initiative and follow-through? Address aspects of his/her performance that you know first-hand—eye-witness accounts result in stronger recommendations. Be as concrete and detailed as possible. Choose two or three exceptionally strong qualities to discuss in detail.

Offer your opinion, but always support your statements with evidence—specific examples when s/he demonstrated the attributes—in order to illustrate your point. Choose your discourse carefully; avoid using vague, nondescriptive words like “good” or “nice.” If possible, quantify her/his experience and abilities. You may also discuss the applicant's future potential in his/her chosen field.

End the letter with a brief summary paragraph reiterating your main points. If possible, compare the student/alumnus with others you have known. Is there a way you can distinguish this candidate from others? Indicate the degree to which you recommend the applicant. End the letter by offering to provide more information if the recipient desires. Include your contact information.

Sincerely,

[signature]

Your full name
Your title