Writing Persuasive Letters of Recommendation
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Ethical Obligations of Writers

• How well do you know the person you’re recommending?
• Do you have time to write a strong letter?
• Are you recommending several people for the same position?
• Can you get the letter in on time?
• In this day and time—are you willing to tailor letters to specific positions?
When Should You Just Say No?

- You don’t know the person well
- You have a conflict of interests
- You have reservations about the person or their abilities
- Others are better positioned to write more effectively
- You simply don’t have or can’t make time to write a strong letter
Ethical (and other) Obligations of Candidates

• Ask WELL in advance (a month or two in advance)
• Clarify why you’re asking
• Provide All the Things—
  • DEADLINES
  • Job ad
  • Submission address and details
  • Copies of ad, CV, your letter, teaching philosophy, syllabi, research overview, plans for future projects, chapter, classes with person, titles and summary of papers/projects for classes
  • Offer to meet
  • Great UI Graduate College prep sheet http://bit.ly/UIGradRec

• Keep records of all your requests, status
• Gently nudge
Goals—To Be Achieved

• Write a 2-page single-spaced letter (academic—otherwise 1-page)
• Register you know candidate well
• Make precise connections detailing candidate’s strengths and unique fit with required and desired criteria in ad
• Show how candidate will contribute to X; how X will benefit candidate
• Clarify you view candidate as an impressive professional (vs friend)
• Provide specific, concrete, visceral evidence of strengths
• Write an evaluation, NOT summary
Goals—To Be Avoided

- Vague letter that could be describing anyone
- Empty letter—gushing language, oozing adverbs
- Self-promotion
- Damnation with faint praise
- Condescension—always a student, never a colleague
- Inappropriate personal details
- “Coded” language—“lovely young woman,” “well-spoken” student of color
Know Yourself as a (Letter) Writer

• Imagine YOUR audience—Who will be reading the letter? In what context? With what hopes, fears, expectations, and biases?

• Consider your writing style—you’re a colleague and professional but not a robot

• Remember the power of efficient stories—showing vs telling

• Use action verbs rather than learning on adjectives and adverbs

• Reflect on your relationship and your own power—
  • Is the candidate “Mary” or Professor Smith?
  • Are you avuncular? Collegial? Professional?
Preparations

• Meet with applicant to review materials and discuss strengths, weaknesses, and strategy
• Ask for CV, application letter, and a list of candidate’s self-assessment of strengths or changes since you last wrote
• Read the job description
• Identify key skills, training, characteristics
Know the Genre

• **PARAGRAPH 1**

  • Who am I to this person?
  • How have we worked together?
  • How long have we known each other?
  • How am I qualified to judge without bias?
  • Who is this person—student? Colleague? Discipline? Workplace?
Know the Genre  

• PARAGRAPH 2-3
• Offer most relevant experiences re job ad
• Explain research, work experience
• Describe topic
• Situate in field
• Elaborate on scope, importance
• Trumpet uniqueness
• Connect with employer/foundation
Know the Genre

• PARAGRAPH 3-4

• Definition of success

• Clear evidence of success
  • Grants
  • Awards
  • Publications or other accomplishments
  • Exciting projects
  • Future plans
  • Special talents or skills
Know the Genre

- **PARAGRAPH 4-5**
  - Teaching (for academic positions)
  - Emphasize breadth & flexibility
  - Identify teaching “philosophy”
  - Offer concrete examples—ideally that you’ve observed
  - Note awards or other evidence of success
Know the Genre

• LAST PARAGRAPHS
  • Sum up strengths
  • Emphasize value as colleague
Special Circumstances

• **Phone calls**
  • Do NOT be lured into informality
  • Speak as though the call is being recorded and publicized

• **Writing letters for two applicants** to same position/award/etc.
  • Treat each as unique
  • Make no cross-references between the two
  • Avoid using the same language in both (hello Power Thesaurus)
Special Circumstances—
“Character References”

• Fellowships often require comments on SPECIFIC topics—
  • Use paragraph shifts, bold face type, bullets, etc. to respond

• Fellowships also ask for evidence of particular qualities—
  • Fulbright: “emotional stability, maturity, motivation & seriousness of purpose”
  • Marshall: “distinction of intellect and character”
  • Rhodes: “integrity character, and demonstrated interest in and respect for their fellow beings” and “ability to lead”
  • Truman: “leadership abilities and potential, student’s leadership abilities and potential, student’s commitment to a career in public service"
Gender (and Other[ing]) Troubles

• Length matters

• “Grindstone” adjectives vs talent/ability adjectives (Trix and Psenka, 2003)
  • Tireless, committed vs genius, analytical, rigorous

• “Standout” adjectives (Schmader, Whitehead, Wysocki, 2007)
  • Superb, wonderful, magnificent

• Communal vs “agentic” adjectives (Madera, Hebl, Martin, 2009)
  • Agreeable, sensitive, helpful vs directive, competent, independent

• Positive stereotypes
  • Women are creative and verbal/men are analytical and quantitively skilled
  • (Cejka, Eagly, 1999)
Gender, Race, and the Power of Implicit Bias

• Knowledge of stereotypes does not eliminate bias (Devine, Elliot, 1995)

• Gender of letter writer has unexpected impact
  • Women more likely to use “grindstone” adjectives
  • Men use more superlatives

• Candidates from underrepresented groups
  • 10% decrease in “achievement-related words” and 11% increase in “communal” adjectives

• Power of intersectionality
  • Gender + race = slight decrease in achievement words for male candidates
• Good news—letters of rec for men/women and majority/minority groups more similar than different

• However—work to be done
  • Length of letters (men’s letters for men are longer) than letters for women
  • Longer letters often include stronger favorable language
  • Variation in grindstone versus ability words (work ethic vs talent and ability)
  • Emphasis on ability over work ethic for members of underrepresented groups
  • Effusive praise unsubstantiated by concrete examples helped no one

• Naming

• Consider when it’s appropriate to use first names versus last names—probably good to err on the side of formality

• Respect the candidate’s preference re use of pronouns and note that equity trumps grammatical correctness so that using a plural pronoun (they, them) can work fine in any case
Advice from the UI Graduate College
(with thanks to Brady Krien)

Powerful words include—

• **Standouts**: excellent, superb, outstanding, unique, exceptional, remarkable
• **Ability**: talent, intelligence, bright, flair, knack, expert, adept, adroit, creative
• **Grindstone**: hardworking, conscientious, diligent, reliable, methodical, persist
• **Teaching**: train, mentor, advise, rapport, instruct, colleague, citizen, engage
• **Research**: scholarship, result, finding, publish, method, discover, contribute
What About Negative Comments?

• Relative progress
• Disadvantaged background
• Explicitly negative
• Re-mediative
• Inconspicuously ambiguous
• Hedges, odd asides, irrelevant comments
• Omissions and gaps
• “As far as I can tell...” or “I assume...”
• “If I can provide any additional information...”

“... it is notable that recommenders used significantly more standout adjectives to describe male candidates as compared to female candidates, even though objective criteria showed no gender differences in qualifications”

Examples: most gifted, best qualified

Outside Academe

• Letters are FAR shorter—almost never more than a page
• One goal is simply to VERIFY employment details and qualifications
  • When did person work with you?
  • Job duties?
• Expectation that you’ll comment on performance AND subjective issues like character, “attitude,” ability to work well with others, etc.
• Strengths and skills
• Willingness to work with this person again
• Do NOT assume privacy and DO clarify your own career, working relationship
Don’t Overlook the Obvious

• Include your name and contact info
• Clarify who you are and what your relationship to the candidate is
• Make clear you have actually read the ad
• Use letterhead
• Send e-letters as PDFs
• Indicate that you yourself would love to work with this person again
• Assume your letter could appear on the front page of the NYT
Final, Crucial Steps—PROOFREAD, PEOPLE

• Is letter addressed to correct person & institution?
• Are all references to earlier letters/purposes corrected?
• Update earlier letters (date of graduation, publication, etc.)?
• Include recent details to indicate you’re still in touch
• Get the letter in a week in advance and inform the candidate
• Send a little good luck note—applying for jobs is hard work
Thanks to Brady Krien and Diane Finnerty for suggestions

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