



Writing Letters of Recommendation

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Writing letters of recommendation is a skill that will be of great importance throughout your teaching career, and perhaps should be viewed as an almost integral part of your teaching experience. Students in your sections or tutorials who have had a positive experience—in terms of what they have learned, or the work they have produced—are likely to come to you for a letter of recommendation. Indeed, an abundance of requests can be taken as an indication that you are a good teacher and have an ability to establish a rapport with your students. In our view, good letter writers deserve considerable recognition for the contribution that they make. (If you have written a large number of letters, you might even consider making a note of that when asked by a potential hiring department about your teaching skills and responsibilities.)

The Contents of a Letter of Recommendation

1. In simplest terms, a letter of recommendation is a letter that makes a statement of support for a candidate. If, after doing a careful review of a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, you cannot write a supportive letter, it is important to have a candid discussion with the student.
2. Beyond that simple definition, a letter of recommendation should also present a well-documented evaluation, providing sufficient evidence and information to help a selection committee in making its decision.
3. A letter of recommendation should also address the specific purpose for which it is written—although you will also receive requests from many students for a general letter for their House file, in anticipation of eventual applications. For most applications, a letter of recommendation will need to discuss both scholarly capabilities and personal character—although the balance between the two will vary, depending upon the nature of the application. For example, at one end of the scale, a letter for an applicant for graduate study in the arts and sciences should focus primarily on the scholarly, while at the other end, a letter for an applicant for a non-academic position should discuss a broader range of qualities and experiences—including extracurricular or work experience as well. As a further example of matching a letter with its purpose, a letter for an applicant for a fellowship with a specific project should discuss the validity and feasibility of the project, as well as the candidate's qualifications for fulfilling the project. The letter should pay close attention to the language of the fellowship announcement. If you have any questions about the criteria for a specific application, consult the appropriate

specialists—for example, those who do pre-law, medical, business or fellowship advising at the Office of Career Services or in the Harvard Houses.

4. A letter of recommendation can also be used to explain some weakness or ambiguity in a student's record. If appropriate—and after consulting the student—you might wish to mention a family illness, financial hardship, or other factor.
5. For the content of a well-documented letter, the following are further suggestions (see also the samples in the final section):
 - a. You should promptly identify yourself and the basis of your knowledge of the student: Were you a Teaching Fellow in a tutorial or small seminar for department concentrators? How often did it meet, how many students? how many papers? Do you also know the student through exposure as a House Tutor, or some other capacity? Has your acquaintance been sustained over a number of years? Writing the letter on department letterhead is a further form of identification.
 - b. In evaluating a student's intellectual capabilities, try to describe the student in terms that reflect that student's distinctive or individual strengths. Whatever strengths strike you as particularly salient, be prepared to back up your judgment with concrete examples—papers, exams, class presentations, or performance in a laboratory. Above all, avoid the misconception that the more superlatives that you use, the stronger the letter. Heavy use of stock phrases or clichés in general is unhelpful. Your letter can only be effective if it contains substantive information about the student's qualifications.
 - c. Ranking the student may be requested or desired by selection committees. Having concentrated on the student's individual or unique strengths, you might find it difficult to do so. Ranking is of course less of a problem if a student is unambiguously among the top five or ten percent that you have taught, or so outstanding that he or she would safely rank high in any group. Many of the students who come to you for a letter, however, will not fall within that small unambiguous group. If you wish to offer some comparative perspective, you might be more readily able to do so in more specific areas: Is the student one of the most articulate? original? clear-thinking? motivated? intellectually curious? Some schools or fellowships have forms which ask for rankings broken down into specific areas. If you lack sufficient information to answer some questions posed or suggested in an application, it is best to maintain the integrity and credibility of your letter, and say only what you are in a position to say.
 - d. In discussing a student's character, proceed in a similar fashion to the intellectual evaluation, highlighting individual traits and providing concrete illustrations.
 - e. After discussing each of the above points, your letter should have some brief summation, giving the main thrust of your recommendation for the candidate.

How to Acquire Sufficient Information to Write an Effective Letter

Meeting with the Student. Even if you know a student very well, the process of writing an effective letter can be greatly facilitated if you arrange to have an interview with the student, using this as an opportunity to discuss the student's goals—short-term and long—and to acquire more precise information in any area where it is needed.

Obtaining Written Materials. As you arrange a meeting with a student, you should also ask the student to bring the following items:

1. a resume or curriculum vitae;
2. a paper or an exam written for your course;
3. a copy of the application essay or fellowship statement of purpose;
4. a transcript;
5. any literature that describes the fellowship or program for which the student is applying (including specific recommendation forms or questionnaires if they are provided for the letter writer to complete);
6. the date on which the recommendation is due, as well as the method of submission (usually through an online portal);
7. a waiver form (obtained by the student from the House Senior Tutor), indicating whether or not the student waives his or her right to see the letter of recommendation. If the student has any questions about this decision, you might point out that there are important benefits in maintaining the confidentiality of letters. Selection committees, for example, tend to view confidential letters as having greater credibility and assign them greater weight; also, some letter writers actually feel less inhibited in their praise of students in confidential letters. While making these points, be sure to make it clear that it is up to the student to decide.

One other factor that greatly facilitates letter writing is if you can write a letter as soon as possible after you have taught a student, while your impressions are still vivid and fresh. You might consider encouraging students to make their requests early, rather than waiting until senior year or beyond. These early letters can be placed in the students' House files, as well as maintained in your own files for future reference.

Further Refinements: Handling the Easiest Case, the In-Between Case, and the Most Difficult Case

The written materials listed above and a discussion with the student will greatly benefit the letter writing process—and indeed, the application process—although in each case it will benefit in a different way. The following are possible scenarios:

The easiest case. A request is made by a student you know very well, have seen in different settings—classroom and House—and whose performance and conduct you find to be consistently outstanding. In this case, you can use the discussion and written materials not only to further refine your own presentation of the student, but to help the student refine the

application—and especially the application essay. Many students find it difficult to talk about themselves—even the most articulate. By drawing the student out, asking for further elaboration or more specific details, you can help bring into sharper focus such items as past accomplishments, future plans, or why the student is making this particular application.

The in-between case. A request is made by a student who has made some favorable impression, but you lack considerable information to write a well-documented letter. The benefits of the interview and acquiring written materials are most obvious in this instance. In addition to allowing you to do all of the above, they will allow you to fill in gaps in your knowledge and to gain a clearer view of the candidate. It is particularly helpful for students who tend to be somewhat shy or quiet in class. What you may not have learned about the student in the classroom, you may be able to learn through a discussion that specifically addresses matters that you need to know.

The most difficult case. A request is made by a student who has made no impression, or only a negative impression. In this case, it is extremely important to be both candid and helpful at the same time. One of the things a discussion can accomplish is to give the student a thorough hearing before you decide whether or not you can provide support. If you still find that there is little that you can say in support, you might help the student to identify a more appropriate letter writer, and also explore whether the student is making an appropriate application.

Such a discussion offers an important teaching and advising opportunity—one that may be sorely needed. The student who comes to you for a letter that you cannot write may have a similar problem with other instructors. It is important to discuss with the student how he or she might improve prospects for the future. Above all, it is important to avoid allowing the student to believe that all opportunities have been permanently closed. Try to emphasize the student's potential strengths—perhaps asking the student to share with you a favorite paper or other positive experience that may have occurred outside of your class. The message to convey is that there are constructive steps to be taken, and that if the student has gained a clearer understanding of his or her strengths and weaknesses, then this marks an important first step.

Questions of Format and Style; Co-Signed Letters

In some applications, the format is determined by the application itself: the recommender is asked to answer a series of questions. If a form does not allow you to say everything that you would like to say, it is appropriate to attach additional remarks. Indeed, it is common practice to attach a full letter of recommendation to a form, in addition to responding to questions on the form. Furthermore, if a form asks for information that you cannot provide, it is best to say so. The following are further considerations:

1. The length of a letter. If you follow the above guide-lines, your letter probably will be somewhere between one and two pages. Anything longer than three pages is counter-productive, since readers normally have a quantity of letters to read. On the other

hand, anything shorter than a page may imply a lack of interest or knowledge about the student.

2. The care with which you write the letter. This will also influence the effectiveness of the letter. Writing in your best polished prose style is another way of registering your support for the student.
3. Clarification of terms peculiar to Harvard. Terms such as "Tutorial" require some explanation. It may mean that you taught the student in a small seminar, or perhaps you provided individual supervision for the student's thesis. Similarly, if your primary contact with the student is through your role as a House Tutor, it is important to explain that role. It may be useful to clarify that the Harvard Houses are more than dormitories and that they perform academic functions as well.
4. To whom to address the letter. If a student is applying to similar programs in a number of different schools, your letter can be left virtually unchanged for each application. In this case, addressing the letter "To whom it may concern" will facilitate this multiple use. This is also useful if a student is simply asking for a letter for his or her House file, in anticipation of eventual applications. For medical school applications, the letter should be addressed "To the Admissions Committee." In the case of letters for specific fellowships, each letter should address the appropriate fellowship committee, and make any other adjustments in the letter that may be necessary. [It should be noted that in some cases, letters of recommendation are submitted to a campus representative, rather than sent directly to a selection committee. The Fulbright Grant is one example; medical schools also require an intermediary, or a composite letter from a Dean. These variations are steps taken after you have produced your letter, and need not affect the process we describe in this guide for writing letters. One other possibility is that the student requests a letter of recommendation for the House file, in anticipation of future applications. The advantage of this early request is that you are asked to write while you still have the student's performance freshly in mind and can write a more vivid letter. Be sure that the student fully informs you as to the purpose and destination of your letter.]
5. The issue of gender. In the past, it was common for letter writers to make distinctions in the way they described women versus men. Descriptions often paid greater attention to the personal lives or personal characteristics of women than men, focusing on items that had little proper place or relevance in a letter of recommendation. While this problem has greatly improved, it is still important to remain sensitive to this issue.
6. Co-signing Letters with Senior Faculty. Students at Harvard at times find that all of their potential letter writers—i.e., the teachers who know them best—are graduate students, rather than professors, since graduate students are mainly the ones who teach small sections and tutorials. In most cases, it is important for applications to include at least one letter from a member of the Faculty. If a student in your section is in this situation, you can

propose to have the letter co-signed. This would probably require that you prepare a draft of the letter, share it with the course Professor, share as well written materials provided by the student, and also arrange for a meeting between the student and the Professor. (Some of these steps take place in any case as a normal part of course procedure.)