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### Effective letters of evaluation: what to leave in, what to leave out and how best to prepare

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BY JOSEPH PROVOST AND PETER KENNELLY

*Preparing letters of evaluation constitutes an important professional responsibility, one that takes a considerable amount of time – especially when there can be so many requests. Here are some tips on what to include and what to leave out.*

It is the end of a long day with an even longer list of deadlines looming: grants to review, papers to write and a dissertation whose editing can no longer be put off. Just as you are about to make a clean getaway for home, you hear a timid knock on your door. You know what time of year it is, but you answer anyway. "Hey, Doc," says the bright-eyed young student in the doorway, "can you write a letter of support for my application?" Knowing that this is a good student about whom you have plenty to write, you smile, sigh a bit inside, nod yes and add the letter to your to-do list.

Preparing letters of evaluation constitutes an important professional responsibility, one that takes a considerable amount of time – especially when there can be so many requests. Since many of the applicants to graduate school, medical school or entry-level jobs will possess comparable numeric credentials, letters of evaluation often serve as the tie-breaker that determines who will be selected. Perhaps even more importantly, your letter can make the case for that good student whose grades and scores for whatever reason fail to reflect his or her accomplishments and future potential.



Although students generally will request that you write a letter of recommendation, in most instances the recipient is expecting a letter of evaluation. The former implies an expectation of unequivocal support, whereas the latter is more candid. The advantages of a letter of evaluation for those reviewing an applicant are obvious. What students often fail to appreciate is that, when dealing with an experienced reader, a balanced letter frequently yields greater benefits for the candidate than one whose unqualified praise may undermine the writer's credibility. Asking whether the recipient is expecting a letter of recommendation or a letter of evaluation is a simple and direct way to educate a student as to the difference and to insure that requestor and writer share common expectations.

In order to write an informed letter, the author needs complete and accurate information about the candidate's qualifications and goals as well as the nature of the position to which he or she is applying. Experienced letter writers often present students with a set of instructions for listing the information needed. Common items include the full, legal name of the requestor; the correct name and address of the recipient; the student's GPA, grades in key courses, or a transcript; GRE or MCAT scores; undergraduate or other research experience (including publications, abstracts and presentations); and

awards. Other potentially useful information includes a copy of the job description or a link to the program or investigator to which the candidate is applying, a statement from the candidate as to why he or she wants the position, and examples of relevant experience or skills. Often, faculty members will set up a web page where student requestors can enter this information and answer questions. The more specific and detailed the information the letter writer gathers up front, the easier it will be to write a letter of evaluation that exhibits the substance and depth that will establish the credibility of the writer and his or her overall recommendation.

## Writing the letter

Now that you've gathered your information about the candidate and sequestered yourself away from interruptions, it's time to get started on the letter. Introduce yourself and describe how you came to know the candidate. This informs the reviewer of how long you have known and how well you know the applicant, helping them to determine how much depth to expect regarding specific topics and how much weight they should place on the letter as a whole. Many evaluators, particularly when writing about a student whose candidacy they strongly support, will try to set the tone for the letter by offering a sentence or two summarizing the bottom line:

X is a highly self-motivated student who will do what it takes to succeed in graduate school.  
X is an exceptional trainee with the potential to develop into an outstanding principal investigator.

The next three or four paragraphs should discuss specifically the qualities of the candidate, starting with his or her strengths. In general, it is best to start with what you consider to be the candidate's greatest strength. If you start with "intrinsically curious and highly-self motivated," this implies a much, much higher upside than "knows the literature well." Qualities commonly addressed in a letter of evaluation include academic potential and acumen, motivation and work ethic, maturity and commitment, critical thinking and problem solving ability, communication skills, ability to deal with challenges and disappointment, and ability to work with others. When selecting the strengths to be emphasized, it may be helpful to consider the interests of the readers. Medical school admissions personnel frequently look for evidence of leadership, empathy and a patient-centered view. Graduate programs and industrial managers value independence and hands-on experience.

Where possible, animate your descriptors using anecdotes that relate specific examples of the quality in question. Lack of such supporting evidence can create doubt in the reader's mind as to the writer's depth of knowledge or objectivity regarding the candidate, particularly if the author's descriptors are stridently superlative and evidence a surfeit of emotional empathy. At the other end of the spectrum, an accurate but coldly impersonal list of strengths that lacks supporting anecdotes may leave the reader questioning whether the writer's enthusiasm is genuine.

After highlighting his or her major strengths, a few words about any significant weaknesses in the candidate generally are in order. Some writers may feel that any mention of a weakness will hurt the requestor. However, experienced readers generally perceive the overall assessment provided by a balanced letter as more objective, reliable and complete. Moreover, it is not necessary to use stark and irredeemable terms such as "weakness," "flaw" or "shortcoming." Instead, present these as areas where the candidate "would benefit from improvement," "has made recent strides" or "is a work in progress." Examples of the candidate's progress in these areas or efforts at improvement can be used to place these issues in a proper perspective. It also is important at this juncture to explain any perceived disconnects between the strength of your recommendation and the data contained in the candidate's resume.

Your letter's closing is important. Restate and, if possible, provide a final example of the candidate's best attribute. Many reviewers will take their cue from certain key phrases commonly found in a concluding sentence, such as "the highest enthusiasm," "no

### Tips for students

1. A letter of evaluation is a privilege, not a right. Never list someone as an evaluator unless they have given you permission to do so. Faculty members are not obligated to write a letter of evaluation simply because a student requests one. Moreover, students do not have the right to demand that their letters be positive. In general, faculty members will gladly write a letter on behalf of any student with whom they are reasonably familiar and for whom they hold a generally positive opinion. However, they may refuse or voice great reluctance to do so if they feel that their knowledge of the requestor is too superficial to write a substantive letter or if they feel the student is unqualified for the position in question.
2. Select qualified evaluators. Your letters of evaluation should be provided by people familiar with your potential and ability as a scientist or physician and, perhaps, your work ethic and history. Thus, in general, each of your letters should be authored by an experienced faculty member or physician, with at most one letter from a nonacademic work supervisor. Your minister may be able to provide great insight into your character and morals, but he or she will not be viewed as a credible evaluator of your potential to succeed in graduate or medical school.

hesitation” or “the candidate’s strengths far outweigh the weaknesses apparent in his or her C.V.”

## The nuts and bolts

A final few comments on the nuts and bolts of writing letters of evaluation. One of the most important issues you should be concerned with is establishing your long-term credibility with the institutions to which your students generally apply. Never forget that you will be writing for many years. During that time, you will come across many students who you wish to honestly advocate as being better than they look on paper. While writing a stronger letter than the candidate deserves may appear to be a kindness, a pattern of unrealistic letters will soon curtail your ability to influence the reader. Don’t compromise your credibility by being nice or overly emotional in your letters of evaluation.

Be alert to protect against bias. Letters of evaluation are, by nature, subjective. Even the most well-intentioned letter writer may allow implicit or unconscious cultural and gender biases to slip through. A recent study (1) screened the types of words written in support of men versus women in academic applications. Many more communal descriptors demonstrating emotive characteristics were ascribed to women than men. On the other hand, aggressive descriptors, such as “ambitious,” “daring” and “outstanding” were used more for men. A review of 886 letters of recommendation for biochemistry and chemistry faculty positions conducted by the department of psychology at the University of Arizona (2) found more similarities than differences in qualification and positive statements between genders. These letters showed no significant differences in the language used to describe ability and work ethic, however. There was, however, a slight bias for male applicants receiving more standout adjectives including “most,” “best” or “star.”

Writers must be careful to confine themselves to the candidate’s professional experience and expertise. Information about an applicant’s marital status, family situation or health – even when presented to highlight a candidate’s good character or to provide a benign explanation for some aspect of his or her record – can have a deleterious effect. For example, revealing that a job candidate is part of a dual-career partnership can lead to the application being downgraded by evaluators wishing, perhaps unconsciously, to avoid the complications of dealing with a “trailing spouse.” When in doubt, consult with the candidate about whether and what they feel comfortable revealing.

So the next time you hear that knock at the door or open the e-mail asking for a letter of evaluation, the time you invest in planning your letter will reduce the time and stress it takes to write these important communications.

## References

1. Madera, J. M., Hebl, M. R., and Martin, R.C. (2009) **Gender and letters of recommendation for academia: agentic and communal differences.** *J. Appl. Psychol.* **94**,1591 – 1599.

2. Schmader, T., Whitehead, J., and Wysocki, V. H. (2007) **A linguistic comparison of letters of**

Similarly, while you may forge an excellent relationship with a graduate student or postdoctoral trainee in the laboratory in which you performed undergraduate research, only the faculty member who leads the laboratory group will be perceived as having the experience necessary to offer an accurate assessment.

3. It is important to build relationships with faculty or supervisors to enable them to write informed, credible letters of evaluation on your behalf. This can be accomplished by simply being an active participant in your classes. Join in classroom discussions. When attending a review session, don’t sit and hope someone else asks your question(s). Put your hand up, be recognized and ask it yourself. Don’t send your partner to talk to the instructor when you have a question in your laboratory course or when doing a team project; take the initiative and ask him or her yourself. Go see the instructor if you are struggling with some concept or homework question. Meet with your faculty adviser every semester even if you can register for classes online.

4. Keep in touch with your evaluators. You likely will require letters of evaluation on many future occasions. It is therefore a good idea occasionally to contact reviewers from college as you move forward in your career to help maintain and refresh your relationship. A card around the holiday season, particularly New Year’s Day, offers a simple and unobtrusive way to maintain contact and perhaps relay something about how your career is progressing. Then, when you need to ask for a letter, the person won’t think “they only contact me when they need something.”

5. Finally, when it comes time to ask for letters of evaluation, prepare a packet for your writers. Put together a well-organized folder with due dates, descriptions of schools, GPA, transcripts, addresses and names of where the letters should go, a short autobiography of yourself, and information about why you want this position. Include more than one example of how you have prepared yourself for this position and why you would be good in that position or career choice. Even if the applications are online, remember that your professor is likely to have many other letters to write, so a well-supported request will go a long way toward that writer taking the extra time you want.

**recommendation for male and female chemistry and biochemistry job applicants.** *Sex Roles* **57**, 509 – 514.

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#### COMMENTS:

Having just finished the fall onslaught of letters for grad and medical schools I heartily applaud Joe's and Peter's recommendations. I would add an addendum though. Whereas the AMCAS letters must be one page only, for grad schools it is sometimes a temptation to be more descriptive of a students achievements and accomplishments; therefore those letters might become several pages in length. Unfortunately, some graduate institutions set word limits requiring drastic cutting of the letter. Take the time to see what the size limits (pages or characters) are prior to beginning this arduous, but important, task. James T. Hazzard, Univ. of Arizona

**0 COMMENTS**

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