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WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION A GUIDE FOR FACULTY

Letters of recommendation are required to support most applications for jobs, scholarships, fellowships, graduate schools, law schools and medical schools. Due to the increasingly competitive nature of internships, recommendations are becoming necessary for them, too.

A useful resource for letter writers is "Writing Recommendation Letters" by Joe Schall, (2nd edition, ISBN 1158175-555-4). It includes sample letters for jobs, graduate schools, and major fellowships. It was recently made available on line:

<https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/>

- A letter of recommendation should be an endorsement of a student's application. Should you feel uncomfortable writing a supportive letter on a student's behalf, please consider declining his/her request for a recommendation.
- Some programs or organizations ask for a letter of evaluation, providing forms with instructions on how to rate students' strengths and weaknesses. Follow the instructions on such forms.
- Many employers ask for names of references, without requesting a written recommendation. If you have agreed to serve as a reference, you may be contacted and asked to comment on a student's personal qualities, academic accomplishments and potential as you would in a letter of recommendation or evaluation.
- Please proofread carefully. Exercise special caution when cutting and pasting. Double-check the spelling of names, especially proper names, and do not forget to sign your letter.
- Please use your department's letterhead stationery to print out your letter. Seal envelopes, and sign them across the flap.
- Many recommendation letters are submitted in electronic format. An automated message sent to you when your student enters your contact information in the application system will contain login information and instructions.

- Keep a copy of the letter on file (electronic or hard copy). You will probably be asked to send out updated versions of your letter as the student needs them.

The composition of a letter of recommendation is a matter of personal style. Many writers choose to include the following:

Beginning

- An expression of pleasure at being able to recommend the applicant
- Capacity in which they know the applicant
- Length of time they have known the applicant
- Assessment of the applicant compared to other students (quantified, if possible)

Middle

- Discussion of the work the applicant completed in the courses, including grades
- Assessment of the applicant's qualifications, supported by evidence
- Evaluation of the applicant's potential to succeed in and contribute to his or her chosen field

Depending on the nature of the application, you may wish to comment on the applicant's

- Intelligence/Intellectual ability
- Originality/ Resourcefulness
- Capacity for hard work
- Leadership skills
- Communication skills
- Writing skills
- Analytical skills
- Foreign language skills
- Technical skills (lab and other)
- Extracurricular activities or achievements
- Personality /Maturity /Integrity /Judgment
- Social skills/Ability to get along with peers
- Teaching or research potential
- Motivation/Initiative
- Knowledge of the field

End

- A reaffirmation of the recommendation and expression of confidence in the applicant
- An offer to answer additional questions as necessary

Please keep in mind:

- You should not comment on a student's appearance, family background, religion, health, or other personal circumstances, unless they are immediately relevant to the application.
- It is never appropriate to ask a student to write her/his own letter of recommendations.

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