10 Tips for Recommenders/Letter Writers

1. Review a copy of the applicant's personal statement or application essays so that your letter of recommendation can dovetail with—not conflict with or duplicate—the rest of the application.

2. Ask the applicant to supply you with additional information like a résumé, copy of their personal statement, EC sheet, and especially—a “brag” sheet with information on at least 2-4 key points the applicant would like for you to know about them—their strengths.

3. State your relationship to the applicant—including the capacity and how long you have known them—Describe your qualifications for comparing the applicant to other applicants—be concise—to the point, talk about standing in class, attendance, attitude, interest, etc—if you taught the student—state the course title, the student’s academic performance (letter grade and/or rank)—comment on applicant’s intellectual abilities and level of difficulty of the course.

   I have been teaching for twenty years and have advised approximately 450 students on independent research projects over the last five years.

   I have personally supervised ten interns every summer for the last five years plus worked with over two hundred college graduates in my capacity as trainer for Big Bank Corp.

4. Discuss how well you know the applicant.

   I was able to get to know Mr. Doe because he made it a point to attend two of my sections every week when only one was required.

   Ms. Smith reported directly to me for two years prior to her well-deserved promotion to the position of Senior in our Big Six Accounting Firm.

5. Choose two to three qualities that you observed in the applicant.

   Jane has a rare blend of top writing and interpersonal skills.

   The combination of tenacity, analytical abilities, and good communications skills found in Mr. Doe is truly unique.

6. In discussing those qualities, support your statements with specific instances in which he or she demonstrated those attributes. Be as concrete and detailed as possible. Relate applicant’s experience and characteristics to their chosen area of study—mention student’s potential to succeed in program, fitness for career objective and promise in chosen field.
He is the only student I ever had who came to all my office hours as part of a relentless, and ultimately successful, drive to master financial theory. He was one of just ten percent in the class to receive an A.

Because of Jane's writing skills, I didn't hesitate to ask her to write a report which was used by our PAC as the basis for a major policy statement. Congressman X eventually used the statement, based on Jane's sophisticated 20-page analysis of Middle East politics, in lobbying for increased funding.

7. Try to quantify the student's strengths or rank him or her vis a vis other applicants that you have observed. Comment on applicant’s academic and personal strengths. Include if possible evaluation of particular skills and characteristics and examples when possible – strengths could include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-discipline</th>
<th>Maturity</th>
<th>Teamwork</th>
<th>Teaching/presentation skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Critical/analytical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Research Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Writing ability</td>
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He was in the top 10% of his class.

She has the best analytical skills of any person her age that I have ever supervised.

8. Avoid generalities and platitudes.

9. Include some mild criticism, typically the flip-side of a strength – not required but if there is a point that you need to address – this is where to do it

The only fault I have encountered in him is his retiring nature. His modesty sometimes hides a young man of remarkable strength and broad interests.

Occasionally, her fortitude and persistence can turn into stubbornness, but usually her good nature and level-headedness prevail.

10. Discuss the applicant's potential in his or her chosen field. Compare applicant’s academic performance and potential to that of his/her peers and students pursuing graduate study.

I enthusiastically recommend Mr. Doe to your business school. This well-rounded student will be a fine businessperson.
With her exceptional leadership, writing, and quantitative skills, Ms. Smith will be an outstanding strategic consultant and a credit to the business school she attends.

Please keep your recommendations to 1 page or less – avoid “flowery” words and long complicated discussions. Be clear and to the point. Conclude with an overall recommendation statement – such as recommend without reservation, highest recommendation, recommend with reservation, etc. – if willing, offer to provide further information over the phone.

FYI – It has been noted by legal counsel, that if the writer is aware of an aspect of an individual’s behavior that could harm third persons, such as sexual misconduct or violence and fails to disclose it in a reference letter, he or she may be subject to a liability claim.