

WRITING STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Can You Do It?

The first thing to remember about writing for people is that you can refuse if you really can't bring yourself to do it. NB – not knowing a student well is no reason to decline to recommend them. They can supply plenty of supplementary information to you, and writing letters for people is a great way to get to know them. This proviso simply applies to the rare student whom you just cannot praise.

If you cannot honestly recommend the student, then there are a variety of tactful ways to tell them that you're not the best person for this task. Something about how you don't feel you can write them a great letter (or even that you really don't have time) will be inoffensive, and will spare you the morally damnable position of writing them a lukewarm letter that will lose them the job anyway. Employers or fellowship committees can see right through faint praise, and it's a waste of your time and the student's two/three chances for strong letters if you write a flabby one because you've nothing much to say about this person.

If you are in doubt, consider whether you can recommend the student sincerely. Occasionally you will find yourself in a position where a student you just can't like asks you for a letter. Bear in mind that, if they're desperate enough to have to ask you (their random TF), it may be that no one else who has lived or worked with them wants to commit the perjury of praising this person. There are actually a lot of different lines of defense between the average TF and the letter of recommendation – the student's house entryway tutor, their house Senior Tutor, their sophomore/ junior / senior tutorial supervisor, etc. If you do not feel comfortable writing in their support, it's reasonable to ask them if there's someone who knows them better, who could write the letter they want.

2) Is There Time?

You will need at least a week's notice, absolute minimum. Two weeks is the practical minimum for comfort. Since what they are asking you for is a professional service, this is quite reasonable. Bear in mind that you will very likely need to obtain a signed waiver form from the student (on which they waive their legal right to see your letter) – often this has to be enclosed in the sealed envelope you put your letter into, so be sure you have been given that. [NB – of course I've written an occasional brief thing for people who need it at the last minute, anything up to 10pm the night before it was due, but this is totally down to what mood you're in, whether there's physically time to do what they ask, whether you have other plans, etc – it is therefore entirely at your discretion. This is much more of an issue for the live-in tutor (whose students are also her neighbors) than for the TF, but I've never felt taken-advantage-of in either capacity. Students here can feel enormously entitled, but nobody can despise you for having to refuse to write at 24 hours notice - nor do they despise you if you are available to do them this massive favor.]

3) How to Pitch It

First of all, as you sit down to this job, here's a basic formatting tip. Make sure that the student's name is right near the start of the letter in bold, or put it as a "Re: Angela Thing" on a separate line below the "Dear Sirs". Do something to make it clear for whom you are writing, and also for what purpose (you can also mention that you're writing "in support of her Fulbright application" or such). As a rule, employers etc will not waste time trying to extract or intuit embedded information from a fuzzy letter.

Beyond that, the best advice is to know your task. It is often useful to ask the student who else will be writing in their support, so that your letter will not overlap with the others and you can provide fresh evidence of the student's strengths. This is the strongest application package. No committee or employer wants three similar letters about a person. So, it could be useful to find out if the student would like a purely academic letter from you, or one tailored more to showcase their efficiency and other abstract business qualities.

Once you've been asked in good time, have decided to do it (and have mapped the boundaries of your task), you can find out more details about what the letter is for. You should have no qualms about asking the student to write you a brief explanation of the fellowship/ job/ funding they're applying for, or to Xerox their own application materials for your information. All of this is great fodder for you to write the strongest letter possible, so it's very much in their best interest.

It is also fine to ask the student how they would like to look, in this portrait you are writing – you don't have to stick to their self-image if it doesn't fit how you see them, but the student will know more about their hopes for the application than you do, and if they want their independent research to be emphasized in the letter, then it will be very useful for you to know that. It's much easier to proceed according to your conscience (and your personal perjury-radar) once you know what spin they want. You can decide what you are (or are not) willing or able to say about them, once you know what they want.

The strongest letters I have seen (or written) have been ones where the author has written both generally and specifically about the student, giving (brief) anecdotes that illustrate their outstanding qualities. This is where the all the details you have been amassing above will really make a difference. For instance – you know that the student is always punctual for your tutorial, and always hands in their neatly proofread work on time. In itself this isn't make-or-break material. However, you can then go on to qualify and enhance this as you explain their demanding extracurricular public-service career; where they also give their all but still get everything done, efficiently, thoroughly, and on time. Another instance - a management consultancy firm is going to care very little about essays per se, but will be pleased to hear about the strength and cogency of the student's verbal expression. Pitch it for the audience.

The context or ramifications of an activity or achievement can be vitally important, and furnish a great space in which to create a portrait of your student's abilities. Being a great footballer is not (mostly) an employable skill. Being a great footballer, at the same time

as improving from a C- to a B+ in your class – through lots of hard work – is much more interesting to an employer or fellowship committee. (With regard to grades, it never hurts to point out that Mr. Linebacker’s final B+ grade and all that hard work meant that he rose to be 6th out of a class of 24. There’s no need to give a ranking if you do not want to, but sometimes it looks good).

The letter of recommendation is therefore a collaborative effort, something where you use information supplied to you by the student (or by your colleagues too) in order to really stand behind their application. Your letter will make a huge difference to their chances.

4) Ordering Your Information into a Killer Letter:

Be careful not to repeat parts of the student’s own application. The student may have given you her own application letter and CV for your information, but you should write as a complement and support to this, not to reiterate any part of it, but to flesh it out and back her up with your professional opinion.

The letter can then be written as best pleases you. My preferred model is to introduce myself very briefly, so that the reader is not left to wonder if I am a janitor, or a blood relative of the candidate. It is a good idea to explain quickly that you have “been their Teaching Fellow for XYZ class, and have worked closely with Miss Thing all semester.” If you have been her junior or senior tutorial supervisor, even better, because your letter becomes more plausible the more time you have spent professionally with the student. This all strengthens the reader’s interest in your support for the applicant’s magnificent qualities. Keep your personal introduction very brief though – the letter is about the student, and you only realistically have a page and a half in which to show them off.

You can then go on, in the body of the letter, to list their very high level of commitment, the quality and maturity of their work, the strength of their independent study, or whatever attributes seem tailor-made in relevance to the purpose of the letter. Most of this is common sense... but make sure you keep it nicely focused. You don’t want to make a huge list of personal excellences and give equal weight to all of them, with an example for everything. This is (again) where it really helps to know what the letter is for. Mention as many great qualities as seem relevant to the student’s application, but limit yourself to a couple of stunning examples which really get your major points across.

5) Time and length

The average 1.5 page letter will probably require 2 drafts, and will take around 3-4 hours total. This represents a serious time investment if you have several letters due at the same time, and requires some planning.

The ideal length for a letter is 1 to 1.5 pages (usually single spaced, because the letterhead takes up a large top margin anyway) - one page is often a little short to get all

the good bits in. Be succinct, but get a spread of great details in. If in doubt, use a slightly narrower font, but stay with 12pt as your default size.

6) Troubleshooter: What If There's Something Bad?

Plenty of students are depressed for a semester or more, or have personal or family crises that cause their grades to suffer, or even make them drop out of school. Luckily, the average employer / funding committee is generally interested in potential, in the person not the simple transcript, and here your letter really has the power to make a difference.

Contextualize and explain an underachievement in the body of your letter, not near the beginning. Pay attention first to the sketch of the student's achievements or solid progress in the area where you have worked with them. You can then go on, against this background, to explain that the loss of a parent, or their episode of serious depression, or their bout of mono etc, resulted in a loss of grades but was handled bravely and with maturity (for example). The student never made excuses for himself, but still tried to maintain a high standard – or perhaps they sensibly and maturely decided to get help. You can find some way to turn a student's darker moment to their advantage, simply by explaining an admirable quality that you would not otherwise have had chance to see in them.

Admittedly, as a TF, you are unlikely to need to do this – usually their house Resident Dean will write the detailed and sometimes difficult explanatory letter for the under-performing or prematurely departing student, but in case you ever need to, it's pretty common-sensical. Give information in a format that is best calculated to serve the student's interest.

7) The Dismount

A great way to end a strong letter is with a phrase like – “In short, I wholeheartedly support Miss Thing's application to this program. It will provide exactly the environment which, in my opinion, will maximize her skills, as well as enhancing her contribution to the [company / community / whatever]. Many thanks for your time and attention....” Feel free to use your official titles (Teaching Fellow etc) under your name if you want to, or if you had not previously used them. Don't forget to sign it properly, too (above your printed name at the end).

Other similarly strong notes to finish on are things like “I believe this funding would be the key to maximizing the great potential that Mr. Such has already demonstrated in his field.” The key to these being realistic endings, not just a quantity of puff, is that the body of your letter should already have shown, in lovely detail and beautifully set out for the ease of the reader, all the ways in which the student has already demonstrated his or her ability, resourcefulness, great potential, and so on. Your ending just sums this up with an explicit statement of support. Letters will not look “inflated” or overly enthusiastic when they contain a good density of supporting evidence, specific instances, etc.

8) Save it! File It So You Can Find It.

Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, someone's inevitably going to ask you for more copies of their previous letter for later applications... file them on your hard drive, and be prepared to do a little updating. You can just ask for more information from the student in order to update it convincingly (don't just change the date). This is especially important if you are writing a generic letter to be held over until the student is really applying for things – be prepared to bring it up to date.

9) Print It On Letterhead, And Other Points of Etiquette

As you tidy it up to print and mail: make sure you address the letter to the specific Committee or group for whom it is written. "To whom it may concern" is not a pleasant or particularly professional way to begin, especially since you should have a clue about the audience for your letter. Even if it's "Dear Admissions Tutor", that's better than "whom it may concern."

Also ascertain, if you're revising the letter for a different audience, that you have re-tailored it. You don't want to be writing to a law-firm and telling them that Miss Thing will be super as their swimming coach because she is great with kids, unless this is entirely the case (I'd be surprised).

10) An Aside About Harvard 'Financial Aid' Recommendations:

If you are asked to write a "letter" for a financial aid student's application for further years of Harvard financial aid funding, be aware that these are extraordinarily easy, very quick, and are submitted online.

You will need to fill in and sign off on four paragraphs of information: 1) In what connection have you known this applicant? (125 words). 2. What can you tell us about this student's intellectual interest and abilities, and academic achievements? (125 words). 3. What can you tell us about the applicant's personal qualities? (125 words), and 4. We welcome any further statement you may wish to make about the applicant (an unlimited amount of text).

It is not considered unprofessional to have the student draft the latter three sections themselves, if they're not too shy to puff themselves a bit. If they are very modest, they can give you a bare list of their extracurricular activities, awards, overall or concentration GPAs etc. These little online financial aid recommendations are basically arbitrary paperwork to make sure that the student is not goofing off in their time here, so although you should make them strong and positive like a full-length letter of recommendation, they are much shorter and can be done with more student collaboration. Bear in mind that you need the student's Harvard ID number in order to submit it, and keep the confirmation code you receive, in order to update or edit the record if need arises. There is also an accompanying waiver for these mini-recommendations, but you can use your discretion as to whether you take it or not.