

# **Letters of Recommendation**

## **Guide to Writing Letters of Recommendation for Law School (12)**

Office of Career Services and Off-Campus Learning  
Harvard University

### **Successful Letters of Recommendation**

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### **Introduction**

Writing letters of recommendation is hard work. It demands time that may otherwise be spent on teaching and research. But it can be a rewarding activity which greatly affects the lives of students by helping them gain opportunities for the study of law.

Most of us have been beneficiaries of letters of recommendation and we should look forward to repaying the favor by helping someone else, particularly since letters of recommendation are now quite important. The opportunities of today are sought by a much larger group of intelligent and well-educated applicants, most of whom seem to have excellent grades and test scores. The real choice among qualified applicants, therefore, is now often made on the basis of the content of a carefully written letter of recommendation.

If you have any doubts about the student's qualifications for the opportunity sought, or negative impressions which you would understandably want to include in any letter, you should discuss these reservations with the student. Not only will the student gain valuable knowledge about himself or herself in this process, but an opportunity is provided for the student to clear up your reservations. In one recent case a professor's strongly negative opinion turned out to be based on a confusion of student identities.

When a student understands your reservations, you can decide together whether or not you should write a letter. It may be that some other teacher has experienced a relationship with the student in which the student's more positive qualities were exhibited.

In a certain sense writing letters of recommendation is a form of teaching, providing an occasion when we can review with a student his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

Letters of recommendation do three things: 1) provide facts about the applicant 2) render a judgment as to the applicant's ability and 3) make the applicant come alive, stand out against other applicants so that he or she will be remembered in the decision process.

## Getting Ready to Write

Having agreed to write a letter, you first need to assemble information about the student and the opportunity for which application is being made. Here the student might help by providing:

- information about what is being applied for; a copy of the student's completed application form with a copy of any essay that he or she may have written;
- a copy of the his/her transcript; a copy of his/her resume;
- the deadlines by which the letter must be mailed.

The student might also write out a brief reminder recalling the courses, tutorials, or extracurricular activities in which you worked together, and the subjects of particularly important discussions, including copies of any papers on which you made extensive comments.

It might be a good idea, after deciding what information should be transmitted, to consider with the student how to divide up the labor: who should write what. Selection committees can tire of reading the same anecdote in several different letters, wondering if that is all there is to tell about the student. Extracurricular activities are often subject to this repetition.

## The Strategy of the Letter

Good letters of recommendation must take into account the character and concerns of the subjects, the writer and the reader.

What will the reader want to know? Together with the student you might jot down the criteria you think are going to be important in the selection process and decide what views of the student you have that might speak to these issues.

Applicants for law school will be judged on their ability to do academic work, their intellectual capacity and motivation, their ability to communicate. General character, social skills, and extracurricular activities will be of secondary importance, though law school admissions committees do sometimes solicit information on applicants' special talents or unusual abilities. These committees sometimes ask you to provide any insight you may have on a candidate's ability to handle the ethical problems of the legal profession; in fact, they sometimes ask that you evaluate the candidate as a potential lawyer.

In the best of all possible worlds, law school admissions committees would like to read that an applicant ranks in the top one percentile of students the recommender has taught during an extensive teaching career, or some similar stellar comparison with the applicant's peers. Of course such praise, and such a vantage point, is rare, but if you have some perspective and can compare the candidate favorably with his or her contemporaries, admissions committees will welcome that judgment.

You should feel free to respond to law schools on any or all of these issues - if you can- but you should not feel bound by such suggestions. A general rule of thumb is to be concrete, provide illustrations, answer in honesty, but do not attempt to comment on areas about which you *cannot*. If you can praise the candidate's skills, but cannot connect such abilities to lawyering, for instance, simply comment on what you know well.

## Goals of the Letter

### *Convey Facts:*

In general it is important that the letter of recommendation convey information rather than judgments alone, facts rather than adjectives alone. This is not easy. Most of us do not recall the individual experiences which led to certain attitudes about our friends and associates. But to write an effective letter of recommendation, we need to try to record the facts which formed the basis for our judgments.

A writer should be wary of using unsupported adjectives, such as:

reliable      efficient      thorough      sensitive      enthusiastic      bright  
imaginative      creative      responsible      mature      thoughtful

What is the evidence on which these adjectives were based? Better to state, for instance, "his imaginative reach is illustrated by his choice of topics for papers in my course on modern European history (titles)," than to simply call him "imaginative".

### *Make Judgments:*

You are making judgments, both explicit and implicit, as you accumulate facts and apply adjectives. Judgments in your areas of expertise and from your clearly stated vantage point are welcomed by admissions committees.

If you choose to compare a candidate with his or her peers, that clearly is also a judgment- and as emphasized above, such judgments require specific supporting data.

An estimate that Jones is "one of my best students in ten years" leaves open to question best in what? promise? performance? personality? course grades? breadth? depth? subtlety? energy? Do not leave the reader in doubt about your meaning.

### *Make the Candidate Come Alive:*

It is important to make the subject of our letters take an identity. After reading files on dozens of students a committee member will be able to remember only a few by name or by some distinguishing characteristic. Be sure your candidate is one of those who can be kept in mind.

We generally remember persons, particularly on first acquaintance, by details extraneous to their central character: "the fellow with the red beard and dashiki" "the woman in the red jumpsuit who comes from Walla Walla, Washington". It helps to provide them with just such a hook on which they can store the information and judgments provided. They are not likely to remember an applicant who was "creative, industrious, intelligent", but they will remember the student whose hobby was keeping tarantulas.

### *Clarify the Identity of the Writer:*

In weighing the information and judgments provided in the letter of recommendation, readers need to know who the author is. The letterhead and the title under the writer's signature will give some clue, but more is generally required.

This is particularly so if your ability to make judgments about the candidate depends on some previous experience of your own not related to your present job.

The relevant information about yourself can be worked in at various points in the letter. For example: "I knew George best in my capacity as a member of the Board of Directors of the neighborhood law office where George worked the summer of 1975." Or, "In the ten years I have taught creative writing I have seen only two or three students whose poetry has..."

Not only should the writer identify himself or herself, but the nature of the relationship with the applicant should be precisely described as well. Reveal any biases. Candor is certain to strengthen the letter and is also ethically required. A statement that your judgment may be biased in favor of the student because you are friends will testify to the student's friendliness as well as lend credence to your letter.

### ***Define "Local" Terms and Edit Carefully:***

Beware of words and phrases that have only local meanings; each college has its own mysterious jargon, which law school admissions committees should not have to work to translate.

Courses should not be described by title alone, but rather, explained in terms of content, degree of discussion, and paper-writing requirements.

Some writers find it a good idea to have their letters of recommendation edited by someone else, particularly when the writer knows a student well and might overlook certain obvious but important characteristics or fail to sense how the student appears to a reader who must build an impression solely on the basis of the letter. One way of finding oversights is to ask someone who does not know the student to read your letter and describe back the person who is the subject of the letter and see whether an adequate job has been done or whether some important point has been overlooked.

### **Closing Remarks**

#### **A Note on Format:**

There is no right length for a letter. What is important is that the letter be readable so that the information in it will be transmitted to the reader. There is no right style for a letter, either. Do not be afraid of a punchy style or even humor if it is not flip. If "ordinary prose" is your choice, by all means use that.

#### **After You Write:**

Do not forget to keep a copy of every letter of recommendation you write. Not only may you reasonably be asked about students for whom you have written, but if you should be asked to write again, the labor of a second letter is minimal with a copy of your first at hand.

If the college or residential unit provides a permanent file of recommendation letters for students, you might suggest to the student that he or she give you an envelope addressed to that repository, so that an extra copy of your letter can be stored there, as well.

## **Successful Letters of Recommendation**

The most misunderstood and underutilized part of a law school application is the letter of recommendation. Most people, applicants and professors alike, assume that since all of the letters say nice things, their value must be minimal. The assumption is just plain wrong. While it is true that 98% of the letters are positive, the important thing is how positive the particular letter is. Also, letters of recommendation can contain some very important information for Admissions Committees and, if written properly, can greatly affect an applicant's chances for acceptance.

It is important at this stage to draw the distinction between the two types of letters to which I will be referring. First, there is the "Dean's Letter." This is prepared by the pre-law advisor or designated official at a college or university. Second, there is the basic recommendation filled out by a professor.

### ***Dean's Letter***

When you know the applicant, these letters can be very, very helpful. Unlike most professors, you as a pre-law advisor have the advantage of an overview of the pool of law school applicants from your school. How the particular applicant ranks within that group (i.e., I would place her in the top 2% of this year's group and top 8% in the last ten years) is extremely valuable to us.

Please don't feel as though we would rather you not go out on a limb. That couldn't be further from the truth. Most recommendations while good, don't say very much because they are just too guarded and safe. If you feel someone is terrific, say so. If you feel someone is a risk, say so. The honest, open recommendations are the ones we pay attention to and that will pay off for you when you have an applicant about whom you feel strongly and whose numbers may not indicate acceptance.

Your evaluations are important, of course. Unfortunately, the other vital component of these letters - the informational component - is often overlooked. Applicants all believe that their particular major is the most difficult, or that they are the most involved person on campus. Your view on the applicant's course of study or extra-curricular involvement can be critical in our evaluation. In addition, we would weigh very heavily your comments on applicants as regards their hours working while in school, any serious problems (physical or emotional) which have had an impact on the GPA or any history of doing poorly on standardized tests. Your view of what the applicant asserts as facts are more important than you realize.

Finally, it is helpful to us to have your comments on the applicant's background, especially if there is evidence of disadvantage. I realize that commenting on ethnic status or physical handicap may be delicate, but we need this information from you because the applicant may mistakenly believe he or she should not mention it.

### ***Professor's Letter***

A great deal of what was mentioned above certainly pertains to a professor's letter of recommendation. What is different here is that the professor can provide the admissions committee with a direct academic analysis which the Dean or pre-law advisor cannot. Comments on writing ability, research skills, and oral presentation are valuable to us.

But what is more valuable is the overall academic evaluation, here, comparisons with other students, especially other law school applicants present and past, is highly valued. Again, let me emphasize the high premium admissions committees put on honesty and willingness to go out on a limb. "I recommend Jane with enthusiasm" tells us nothing. But, "in my twenty years here, I would place Jane in the top 3%" shines like a neon sign.

The informational component is important in these letters also. Very often, the professor has the perspective from which to comment on the applicant's curriculum. In addition, professors often know the student well enough to comment on other aspects besides classroom performance. These comments are welcome.

This brings us to the last point. Who should the applicant approach to write letters? First, although the law school may only request one letter (as we do at Georgetown), most schools expect to receive two or three from the applicant. That is fine. However, more than three letters approaches the point of diminishing returns. The axiom, "the thicker the file, the thicker the student" is not always true, but there is some truth in it. Every aunt or uncle telling us what a fine person his or her nephew or niece is couldn't matter less.

Secondly, in choosing professors, it is always better to ask the ones who know the applicant well rather than someone in the applicant's major, for example. As mentioned earlier, three recommendations are usually the norm. I would recommend one or two academic recommendations and one from an employer. Applicants shouldn't agonize over which people to choose. If there is any indecision, send them both. It probably will not hurt, and it could help.

### **Use of Recommendation Forms**

Often law schools will send a form questionnaire to be filled out, on which students are to be rated or specific questions answered. If you feel comfortable with the form and have time to address its idiosyncrasies, by all means fill it out. Such forms are generally used by selection committees to suggest their ideal kind of response - but they certainly will take less, and will make good use of less. If you do not use the form, but write a letter instead, you may want to write on it "see attached letter"; you can sign the otherwise blank form and staple your letter to it.

### **Individually Addressed or "To Whom it May Concern"**

Optimally, each law school that receives its recommendation in the form of a letter would like to receive a tailor-made letter addressed directly to it. It is not necessary, however, or even reasonable in cases of multiple applications for you to address letters this way. If the purpose of the letter, and hence the content, can be expected to be the same from school to school, you may write just one letter, and head it "To Whom it May Concern" or "Letter of Recommendation Written in Support of Application to Law School" or some similar heading. Such a letter can be photocopied and the copies individually signed.

**RECOMMENDATION LETTERS – University of Chicago**  
**RICHARD BADGER, ASSISTANT DEAN**

Each year we read between 8,000 and 10,000 recommendation letters in conjunction with the applications submitted to Chicago. Admittedly, this task is less onerous than writing those recommendations. Unlike a number of other law schools, Chicago puts considerable weight on recommendation letters and we find that helpful letters and the evaluative interviews which we conduct often provide the best guidance in making the final decisions among a group of applicants who appear to be equally promising on the basis of other information. I am occasionally asked what distinguishes the helpful letters from the unhelpful ones. I have pulled together below some thoughts on that question with the hope that they may assist people writing on behalf of applicants to Chicago. While I cannot state that I speak for other law schools, I do have some reason to believe that my views are generally shared by other institutions and certainly by other members of our Admissions Committee.

I read each recommendation with three questions in mind: 1) How well does the writer know the applicant and the applicant's academic record? 2) What does the writer have to say about the applicant's abilities and characteristics which are important for success in law school and the profession? 3) In the final analysis, how enthusiastic is the writer's support for the candidate's admission to this particular law school? The answers to these questions are obviously interrelated but for the purposes of this memorandum it may be helpful to deal with them individually.

Most letters of recommendation will partially describe how well the writer knows the applicant. They usually contain brief descriptions of the size and number of courses in which the writer has worked with the student. Often absent, however, is a description of the kinds of formats in which the writer has seen the student perform. For example, did the student write a short answer examination at the end of the course or were there a number of papers to complete? Did the writer see the student respond in class on a regular basis? How much informal contact was there with the student outside of class? I will generally assume that the larger the class and the larger the institution, the less familiar a reference will be with the applicant. This assumption is frequently incorrect but I will not realize it unless that is made clear. Writers will often say, "Mary's academic record speaks for itself." This, unfortunately, is not true unless I am familiar with the particular academic program. In short, all applicants with 3.8 grade point averages are not judged as being equal. Some students will have taken more challenging courses than others. Some faculty are more demanding than others. Our Admissions Committee may not be aware of which courses are graduate level courses or which are part of an honors program. All applicants to Chicago are asked to supply academic references with copies of their full transcript so that those who write may comment, to the extent they can, on the quality of the overall academic record.

There may be little to distinguish between the abilities and characteristics which law schools look for in comparison with those characteristics which other graduate academic programs seek. Legal education and the legal profession, however, do emphasize some skills over others and the following comments may help writers who are not familiar with these distinctions.

Language is the lawyer's working tool and the best law students are those who have the ability to write and speak with precision, fluency and economy. Not only must the student be able to communicate his or her own thoughts clearly, but he or she must have the ability to read and listen carefully with an eye and ear for fine points and subtle distinctions

Legal education demands well developed analytical skills and the ability to juggle multiple variables. Legal reasoning at one time or another involves deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning and reasoning

by analogy. The best students can think independently, have the ability to cut through to the essentials and can distinguish the relevant from the extraneous. Contrary to what many believe about the law, there are few clear and distinct legal rules. A tolerance for this ambiguity and the ability to recognize exceptions and qualifications which may modify general rules are characteristics of successful law students. In short, a reference should consider whether an applicant is likely to be stimulated or frustrated by questions where there are no "correct" answers.

The nature of legal education -- large classes, competitive pressure, and substantial amounts of material to be mastered -- may make some personality traits more important in law school than in other academic programs. Students will often learn as much from their classmates as from the faculty. Thus, interaction among students is an important feature of legal education and those who enjoy engaging in discussion in and outside of class are more likely to flourish in this atmosphere. The student who is intellectually alive and curious is more likely to sustain academic progress where there is little reinforcement between examinations. A student must be diligent and well organized to handle large quantities of material. A well-developed sense of humor and a mature attitude are particularly helpful in adjusting to the pressures which many students will experience in law school.

Perhaps the most difficult task in reading a recommendation is interpreting the significance of such statements as "excellent" "outstanding," "highest recommendation," and "recommended without qualification." Such terms may indicate meaningful distinctions among applicants supported by the same writer but we may not be familiar with the way in which a particular reference ranks applicants. This uncertainty can be compounded where we receive a standard letter which is submitted to a number of different law schools. Is the degree of support directed to the most selective or the least selective of the schools to which the applicant has applied? Occasionally we will know the faculty member writing a recommendation. In those situations it is generally easier to evaluate the degree of enthusiasm for a particular applicant. It is far more often the case, however, that our most significant contact with an institution will be familiarity with its graduates who have attended the Law School in recent years. Thus, a comparison of an applicant with other graduates we know from the same institution may provide us with a more accurate assessment of the applicant's potential for success at Chicago than the objective factors of the Law School Admission Test score and the undergraduate grade point average. In weighing the overall assessment made by a reference it is also helpful to know how confident the writer is of his or her own judgment about a particular applicant.

As we are occasionally reminded by those who submit recommendations, the task of ultimately selecting the most promising students for this law school is ours and not theirs. Helpful letters, however, can make this task easier.