

FACULTY WORKSHOPS

Writing Letters of Recommendation

Some basics

1) **When agreeing to write – be sure to know who your audience is**

Be sure to request appropriate information from applicant:

--resume (including co-curricular activities)

--position description (description of program to which application is being made)

- a) refer to these documents for your letter and potential follow-up phone calls
- b) providing these documents reflects student's seriousness
- c) make sure you know the time-frame for our letter / Be Prompt!

2) **Boiler-plate letters are NEVER appropriate / and are seldom very strong**

- a) use official letterhead and letter format (not memo)
- b) your letter should reflect first-hand knowledge of student
 - how long have you known applicant?
 - in what capacity?
 - how does he/she rank in your experience?
 - other categories for your comments could include
 - Ability to work independently
 - Ability to express ideas orally /in writing
 - Intellectual independence
 - Range of reading
 - Knowledge of major academic field
 - Applicant's overall ability and scholarly potential
 - do not state actual GPA – if important a transcript will be requested
- c) what can you say specifically that is unique about applicant?
- d) proof-read carefully for typos +/- missing words
- e) closing – often we want to offer our availability and willingness to share even more information about applicant – how is this most effectively communicated?

This closing sentence can be misunderstood: *Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need additional information about Suzie.* (could read as *Please call me, I have more to say that I don't want to put on paper.*)

Rather you might write: ***Should you need more information, I would welcome an opportunity to provide additional detail and support to my enthusiastic (strong) recommendation for Suzie.***

- 3) **Your letter must be able to stand out from the rest!**
- a) hopefully you know the applicant WELL (is critical in some cases) -- discuss a specific incident that reveals knowledge of the candidate – in many cases, a committee is relying on your letter to bring the candidate to life!
 - b) avoid repeating what is on the resume or part of the basic application form (if you have access to this)
 - c) balanced assessments are expected – including character and interests
 - d) BUT, be careful about your critiques (there are many ways to indicate applicant is not a saint!) – you may decide it relevant to explain apparent weaknesses in the “candidacy” as part of your critique
 - e) comments about academic strength and suitability for program are usually important and especially relevant to application
 - f) know enough about the program/organization to be able to identify key pieces of the position for which the applicant is applying – make appropriate connections between the candidate’s strengths/experience and the institution’s “list”
- 4) **Recommendation forms for Global Education / Study Abroad**
- Students applying to study abroad are required to have three academic recommendations as part of their application. Because this process occurs during the sophomore year, many students often rely on their advisors/professors from the First-Year Seminar class. Consider making a few notes about each of your advisees from the class (when you teach a seminar) – these will be particularly useful down the road when you are asked for a letter.
 - Consider “requiring” a short interview with the student requesting the letter of reference. Key questions to help you re-acquaint yourself with the applicant include: 1) Why are you interested in studying abroad? 2) What do you want/expect to get from the study abroad experience? 3) Have you lived (or traveled) outside of the US? What do you expect to be able to relate from that experience to your study abroad in ____? 4) How does this experience support your broader educational goals at DC?

Remember:

- You are being asked to evaluate an applicant’s qualifications for a specific position
- Because you know the applicant, the selection committee depends on your thoughtful observations and detailed information about how well-suited the applicant might be
- Provide specific and illustrative comments, rather than a general assessment – quantifiable data is always best (e.g. *Suzie is one of the 2 best students I’ve taught since coming to DC in 1900.*)
- Discuss the applicant’s strengths and as appropriate, insight into any areas where growth may be needed – you may need to define the criteria upon which you base your judgment and how the applicant meets your criteria.
- Conciseness and timeliness are important qualities for your letter – that, in addition to a well-written letter with unique details, can help put the applicant on the top of the pile!