

## Writing Letters of Recommendation

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 also becoming necessary for January and summer internships.

A useful resource for letter writers is “**Writing Recommendation Letters**” by Joe Schall, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ISBN 1-58175-555-4 available from Outernet Publishing ([www.outernetpublishing.com](http://www.outernetpublishing.com)) for under \$20.00. It includes sample letters for jobs, graduate schools, and major fellowships. A few copies are available at the CDC; we are happy to lend you one by campus mail. Please contact Marianne Taylor ([mataylor@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:mataylor@mtholyoke.edu)) or Katerina “Katya” P. King ([kpking@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:kpking@mtholyoke.edu)), (413) 538-2080. We also recommend that departments order this book for new faculty.

### General guidelines:

- 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 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 by telephone or email, and asked to comment on a student as you would in a letter of recommendation or evaluation.
- Most letters are one page long. They rarely need to be more than two pages long.
- 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.
- Use your department’s letterhead stationery to print out your letter. Seal envelopes, and sign them across the flap.
- 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
- Their assessment of the applicant compared to other students they have known (quantified, if possible)

**Middle**

- Discussion of the work the applicant completed in their courses, including grades
- A detailed assessment of the applicant's qualifications, supported by evidence
- An evaluation of the applicant's potential to succeed in and contribute to 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
- 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 her application.
- It is never appropriate to ask a student to write her own letter of recommendation.