

Writing Letters for Colleagues and Nominations

WORKBOOK



**University
of Victoria**
Learning and
Teaching Support
and Innovation

Prepared by: Cynthia Korpan, PhD, Director of Teaching Excellence; Nancy Ami, Manager of Centre of Academic Communications, LTSI

Last updated: June 7, 2022

Contents

Introduction.....	4
Intended Learning Outcomes	4
Getting Started	4
Contexts for writing letters	5
What characterizes a compelling recommendation/nomination letter?	5
Process for letter writing.....	14
Recommendation/nomination letter template	15
Recommendation/Nomination Letters: Summary.....	17
Recommendation/Nomination Letters: Self-quiz	18
Letter of recommendation checklist	19
Recommendation/nomination letters: final task.....	20
Managing the hard requests	20
Conclusion	20
References.....	21



Introduction

Throughout your academic career, you will be asked to write letters for colleagues applying for academic positions and awards. Writing good recommendation and award nomination letters is a skill that abides to specific guidelines. In this workbook, you will be guided by the benchmarks that represent an effective letter of recommendation in different contexts to support colleagues and students to attain their goals.

Intended Learning Outcomes

By the end of this workbook, you will:

- Accurately identify features of effective recommendation letters
- Adeptly outline a letter-writing process
- Competently construct a rough letter mock-up

Getting Started

Before we consider contexts for writing recommendation letters, please take a few moments to review your responses to the following questions:

Have you ever written recommendation/nomination letters for colleagues? What strategies did you use?

What are elements of an effective recommendation/nomination letter?

What information do you need to have “at your fingertips” to write an effective letter of recommendation/nomination?

What characterizes a compelling recommendation/nomination letter?



Contexts for writing letters

Letters of recommendation are the most common evidence sought by employers or awards committees (Chism, 2006). Given their importance, crafting effective letters for others is a valuable skill. Knowing more about effective letters also prepares you when making requests of your own.

What characterizes a compelling recommendation/nomination letter?

Convincing letters of recommendation/nomination are written from an informed perspective on the candidate. Essentially, such letters highlight a unique perspective on the nominee, based on a professional working relationship. These letters draw on documentation and offer an “executive summary” that is readable and concise. Such letters are fashioned to offer an argument supported by evidence that the candidate is an ideal addition to a program, employee for a company, or winner of an award. While letters of recommendation are usually written by individuals, letters that are co-written and coordinated among supporters create a compelling case (Kenny et al., 2015).

Format

Recommendation letters are professionally formatted (Kenny & Berenson, 2017). They follow business letter style, use 11- or 12-point text in a readable font (Calibri or Times New Roman), and appear on department letterhead. They include the date and recipient’s address at the top and are addressed to a selection committee or panel.

The introductory paragraph provides context on the purpose of the letter (Kenny & Berenson, 2017). This paragraph introduces the nominee and focuses on the position and number of years the nominee has been in the position. The introduction also includes background on the relationship you have with the candidate: the length of time you’ve known them and in what capacity. The section ends with a clear statement, in alignment with the program, posting or award criteria, on why the candidate is a strong choice.

Several paragraphs make up the body of the letter, each of which includes a topic sentence that focuses on a specific reason for your endorsement. Each paragraph includes evidence (examples, anecdotes, data) to support this core reason. Quotations from peers or students may be helpful to include as additional support. The final sentence in each paragraph highlights the extent of the candidate’s achievement.

A brief concluding paragraph summarizing the key reasons why the candidate merits the selection, offering a personal comment or recommendation, and welcoming inquiries or clarification completes the body of the letter. The letter closes formally and includes a signature and details on the name, position, and contact information of the writer.

Practice

Let’s review a sample recommendation letter drawn from *The US Professors of the Year Awards Program*¹ using the following guiding questions:

Purpose: Does the letter

- Offer an “executive summary” of the dossier?
- Highlight a unique perspective on the nominee?
- Outline case for the nominee, based on criteria for the award?

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20190401054433/>

Your observations:

Structure/evidence: Does the writer

- Follow a letter template?
- Introduce nominee: position, number of years teaching?
 - Explain the relationship with the nominee?
 - Clearly state, in alignment with award criteria, why nominee merits the award?
- Organize the letter effectively?
 - Focus on one reason per paragraph?
 - Point to specific evidence that supports the reasons for the nomination?
 - Highlight the extent of the nominee’s achievement?

Your observations:

Grammar/sentences: does the letter

- Contain clear, readable sentences?
- Demonstrate careful self-editing?

Your observations:

Professional format: does the writer


- Format the letter professionally?
 - Use department letterhead?
 - Keep the length to 2 pages?
 - Use headings that align with award criteria?
 - Include brief quotes that connect to dossier evidence?

Your observations:



On the next page, you will find the recommendation letter written for Jane Liebschutz by Karen Lasser, Boston University School of Medicine, for the Department of Medicine Outstanding Citizenship Award. Pay careful attention to purpose, structure and evidence, grammar and sentences, and professional format.

Please feel free to record your observations here:

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for recording observations. It occupies most of the page's vertical space below the introductory text.



Boston University School of Medicine

Section of General Internal Medicine
801 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Floor
Boston, MA 02118
Tel: 617-414-7288
Fax: 617-414-4676

Dear Awards Committee,

I am writing this letter to nominate Jane Liebschutz, MD for the Department of Medicine Outstanding Citizenship Award.

I first met Jane when I was a fourth year medical student, in 1994. I was visiting Boston City Hospital (BCH) as a primary care internal medicine resident applicant, and observed her precepting residents in clinic. From this first interaction, I was impressed by Jane's deep commitment to BCH (and now BMC) patients and to the institution as a whole. For the past three years, I have had the privilege of practicing alongside Jane in Shapiro Suite 6B (and prior to that in the Yawkey building in the Latino Clinic), observing Jane in her role as interim Section Chief for General Internal Medicine, teaching General Medicine fellows, and collaborating with her on a project to improve opioid prescribing in the Community Health Centers.

The past two years have been difficult ones for the Section of General Internal Medicine; at the time I write this letter, 24 individuals have left the Section. Jane has distinguished herself as a person who is deeply committed to making the Section, the Department of Medicine, and BMC as an organization, a better place to work. These efforts are guided by a desire to promote provider retention and ultimately improve patient satisfaction and outcomes. As interim section chief from November 2011-April 2012, Jane worked tirelessly to promote bottom-up engagement from her colleagues. She sought input from her colleagues, at a time when many were feeling disenfranchised. She invited honest dialogue about practice conditions, and the challenges of the BMC practice environment. In eliciting solutions from her colleagues, Jane helped to raise morale in the Section, and promoted our well-being. Her commitment to promoting her colleagues' wellness is further demonstrated by her new role as BMC Wellness Director.

I have also observed Jane in her role as Director of the GIM Fellowship and Preventive Medicine Residency. Jane has demonstrated a tireless dedication to her trainees, both on an individual level and to the program as a whole. Jane is a mentor who always makes herself available to trainees. When the fellowship was at risk of losing its funding, Jane responded by writing multiple grants. She is now serving as PI on three grants funded during the past 18 months to sustain and enhance the fellowship program. Some of these grants do not provide her with salary support; her involvement in the grant activities is pure citizenship.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines citizenship as "the quality of an individual's response to membership in a community." I can think of no individual who has had a greater response to membership in the DOM community. Jane has currently chairs two committees (the Faculty Development and Diversity Committee and the Primary Care Director search committee) and is currently (or has recently been) a member of six other committees (the Family Medicine Chair search committee, the Student Evaluation and Promotion Committee, the DOM Finance Committee, the BUMC Faculty Affairs Committee, the Managed Services Board, and the Lynn Stevens Memorial Award Committee).

I support Jane Liebschutz's nomination with great enthusiasm and no reservations.
Sincerely,

Karen E. Lasser, MD, MPH,
Associate Professor of Medicine and Public Health Health Care Disparities Research Unit
Phone: (617)-414-6688 fax: (617) 638-2736



Lasser's letter of nomination is an example of an effective letter of recommendation, as you have probably noted. The letter is written in business format on department letterhead. While the letter does not include a date/address of the recipients on the top left, it does begin by addressing the selection committee.

In contrast to the guidelines noted above, the writer begins her letter with a one-statement paragraph, which is her "thesis statement," indicating her support for the candidate. Then, the second paragraph offers background on the letter writer's relationship with the candidate, providing context and length of time she's known the candidate. In other letters, the introduction presents context first, and the final sentence in this paragraph is the statement of support.

Each additional paragraph provides a clear reason for the writer's support of the candidate. The third paragraph highlights the candidate's commitment to making the department a better place to work and includes supporting examples of what she did to foster department morale. The fourth paragraph speaks to the candidate's work with trainees and her support with arranging adequate funding. The reasons and supporting examples help to make the writer's case. The concluding paragraph draws on a definition of "citizenship" and makes a final argument, noting how the candidate personifies citizenship.

Let's look at another sample letter drawn from The US Professors of the Year Awards Program². This letter is written by Sheila Woody in support of Jerusha B. Detweiler-Bedell's candidacy for US professor of the year.

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Psychology
2136 West Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4
Tel: 604-822-2755
Fax: 604-822-6923

4 April 2008
Selection Committee
U.S. Professors of the Year Program CASE
1307 New York Ave., NW, Suite 1000 Washington, DC 20005-4701

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing in support of Jerusha B. Detweiler-Bedell, who has been nominated by Lewis and Clark College for the 2008 U.S. Professor of the Year Award. I have known Jerusha since she was a graduate student. I collaborated with her on several publications, and I have kept in touch with her over the years. I admire Jerusha tremendously for her innovative and highly successful model of undergraduate teaching. In fact, I have sent several younger colleagues to her for advice, mentoring, and guidance as they began their own undergraduate teaching in psychology. Jerusha is my role model for excellence in all-around undergraduate education.

Jerusha's general approach is to engage students to become collaborators at all levels of

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20190401054433/http://usprofessorsoftheyear.org/>

instruction. In the classroom, she uses innovative activities to help students engage with the material and learn critical thinking and communication skills. Her syllabi show a clear curricular plan in the sense that her introductory courses have a different format requiring (and promoting) more basic skills than do her advanced courses, which are clearly geared to nurturing students' intellectual independence and leadership skills. She is genuinely open to students' informed opinions and eager to grow and learn along with the students. Outside class, she is generous with her time, making herself very available to students at all levels and regularly attending student-oriented campus activities to show her support and be more involved in university life. Jerusha is equally attentive to young students enrolled in relatively large classes and to more advanced students engaged in directed research in her lab.

Lewis and Clark has recognized Jerusha for her outstanding teaching by naming her as a Finalist for Teacher of the Year every year since 2005. The mean for her teaching evaluations over more than 500 students is very close to the top of the scale. I am sure this is true for every nominee you are considering, and certainly, knowing Jerusha as I do, these ratings do not surprise me. What is remarkable is that students give her these top marks while simultaneously noting how hard they have to work in her classes and tutorials. This theme comes through consistently in her student evaluations that I read in preparation for this letter. "One of the hardest grades I have ever earned." "I have never had another class at Lewis & Clark that demanded as much of me." "She consistently demanded that I rise to meet new challenges." Clearly, these student evaluations are based on more than Jerusha being a very nice woman who is well organized and a clear communicator. She is turning these students on, motivating them to strive academically.

All of these in-class activities are certainly evidence of good undergraduate teaching. What makes Jerusha worthy of being named as a U.S. Professor of the Year is her teaching outside the classroom. Jerusha has shown a scholarly approach to teaching the science of psychology to undergraduates, modeling collaborative research and helping them get engaged with it. She and her husband have developed an innovative model that organizes undergraduate research into three-student hierarchical teams in which younger students are supported to actively learn about the research endeavor while older students learn important mentoring skills and develop scholarly independence. This aspect of Jerusha's teaching is the most inspiring to me personally, because I know firsthand the difficulties of engaging undergraduates in a psychology research lab. Jerusha and her husband have published material on their original approach and attend conferences on undergraduate research and teaching. In addition, she has sought and obtained several grants to enrich undergraduate teaching, including a curriculum revision grant to get students involved in the community, an NSF REU pilot program grant, and faculty/student collaborative research fellowships from Lewis & Clark. The Detweiler-Bedells have applied for funding from NSF to substantially enhance the laddered teams approach, although final decisions have not yet been made on their application.

The laddered team approach to research is an apt model for how research in psychology and other laboratory sciences works, and it promotes skills that will serve students well no matter what path their careers might take. Not only do students work closely with each other to design studies, collect data, statistically analyze the data, and write up the results, but also they regularly publish their work with Jerusha. She also takes her undergraduate student collaborators with her to present their collaborative efforts at major professional conferences in psychology.

Seeing undergraduates at a conference is fairly unusual in psychology. With Jerusha's mentoring,

her students have successfully competed for research and travel grants as well as admission to postgraduate education programs in psychology, business, law, and education. She helps them to participate in every aspect of research, providing them with appropriate supports to allow them to succeed in spite of their youth.

Jerusha's example of undergraduate education is both inspiring and humbling. In an era in which researchers seem to be ever more specialized and focused on their own productivity, Jerusha stands out as a very different breed. Motivated by genuine interest in students and powered by her creativity, Jerusha has found ways to educate the whole student, not just cover the relevant material. I hope you honour her with this award so she can serve as an inspiration to more university educators.

Please feel free to contact me at sheila.woody@ubc.ca or (604) 822-2719 if you have questions.

Sincerely,
Sheila Woody, Ph.D., R.Psych.
Distinguished University Scholar Associate Professor
Director of Clinical Training

What are your observations regarding the letter writer's:

1. Purpose?
2. Structure/evidence?
3. Grammar/sentences?
4. Professional format?

Woody's recommendation letter is another effective example. Her letter is written on letterhead, includes the date and recipient's address, and is addressed to the selection committee.

Her first paragraph indicates the purpose of the letter ("I am writing in support of Jerusha Detweiler-Bedell's candidacy...") and provides information about the relationship ("I have known Jerusha since she was a graduate student..."). The final sentence of the introduction provides the key reason Woody supports her candidacy: "Jerusha is my role-model for excellence in all-around undergraduate education."

Supporting paragraphs focus on reasons the writer states that Jerusha is her role-model for strong undergraduate teaching and include examples, quotations from student evaluations, and personal anecdotes as evidence. The writer's final paragraph emphasizes the uniqueness of Jerusha's approach to teaching undergraduates and highlights again why she is such an inspiration. The letter's clear sentence structures and accurate grammar contribute to its readability.



Which letter do you find more effective, the letter written by Karen Lasser or the one written by Sheila Woody? Provide justification for your choice in the space below:

Lastly, let us look at an example of a support letter for an academic position³. Theodore Corvallis, Distinguished University Professor, writes a letter of recommendation for Stephen Hoffman.

Letter for Stephen Hoffmann

Search and Screen Committee
Department of Bacteriology
University of Cambridge
Boston, MA 01237

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

It is my pleasure to recommend Dr. Stephen Hoffmann for the position of Assistant Professor in your department. Stephen completed his Ph.D. in my lab and is one of the most outstanding researchers to emerge from my lab. I recommend him to you highly.

In my lab Dr. Hoffmann cloned and characterized the *gliD* gene from *Cytophaga johnsoniae*. He made the intriguing discovery that the GliD protein is required for gliding behavior in *Cytophaga* and its human homologue is associated with a highly metastatic form of breast cancer. This observation suggests that there may be common features in bacterial gliding motility and mobility of human tumor cells. Dr. Hoffmann initiated a highly productive collaboration with Professor David Whitely that led to the crystallization and high resolution structure of the GliD protein. Dr. Hoffmann brought that work to fruition in a PNAS paper, on which he is the senior author. In addition to the PNAS paper, Dr. Hoffmann published three other papers from his thesis, which attest to his hard work, biological insight, and outstanding writing skills. Dr. Hoffmann proved himself an outstanding researcher and valued colleague.

Dr. Hoffmann continued to produce original research as a postdoc in Jim Wooley's lab working on *Bacillus subtilis* development. Once again, Dr. Hoffmann discovered a gene that is found in both prokaryotes and eukaryotes, this time in a search for sporulation genes in *B. subtilis*. He identified a new sporulation gene, designated *spoW*, which has a mammalian homologue that appears to be associated with lymphocyte differentiation and maturation. Although that work is not yet published, it has a bright future. The project was technically challenging, but Dr. Hoffmann has surmounted all of the obstacles and a genetic and biochemical analysis of the *spoW* allele and its product will be ready for publication

³ https://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/documents/equality/HHMI_WriteReference.pdf

soon. Given Dr. Hoffmann’s past record in publishing research, I have no doubt that this work will be published in a top-tier journal.

Dr. Hoffmann proved himself to be a capable mentor and teacher. He has supervised three undergraduate researchers. He is clearly able to transmit his passion and talent for research to young scientists. Similarly, his classroom teaching was met with rave reviews. Dr. Hoffmann is one of my few colleagues to whom I will entrust my class when I travel. Dr. Hoffmann was also a terrific citizen and a leader in my lab. He handled responsibility well, was resourceful, and took initiative to maintain equipment and ensure that safety standards were met. He took on many of the responsibilities of a faculty member and excelled in everything he did.

In short, I give Stephen my highest recommendation. He is one of my finest colleagues—an outstanding researcher and talented teacher. He has demonstrated an uncanny ability to unmask genes that play parallel roles in bacteria and mammals, and I expect him to be one of the leading researchers in his field. He would be a good catch for any department and I urge you to consider his candidacy seriously.

Sincerely,

Theodore Corvallis
Distinguished University Professor

Corvallis’ letter, while not on department letterhead, follows business letter format, includes the recipient’s address, and addresses the selection committee. His first paragraph begins with the “thesis statement”, includes brief context (“Stephen completed his PhD in my lab and is one of the most outstanding researchers to emerge...”), and reiterates his claim: “I recommend him to you highly”.

The supporting paragraphs depart from the structure we’ve seen in the previous letter samples. Instead of beginning with a clear topic sentence offering a reason for Corvallis’ recommendation, the next paragraphs provide detailed examples first and end with reasons for the recommendation: “Dr. Hoffman proved himself to be an outstanding researcher and valued colleague” (par. 2), “I have no doubt that this work will be published in a top-tier journal” (par. 3), and “He took on many of the responsibilities of a faculty member and excelled in everything he did” (par.4).

The final paragraph offers a restatement of Stephen’s qualities as a researcher, teacher and colleague. Corvallis adeptly emphasizes these key points, drawing on unique phrases: “demonstrated an uncanny ability”, “a good catch for any department”, and “I urge you to consider his candidacy seriously”. The letter is crafted with varied sentence structures and accurate grammar use, contributing to its clarity.

How appealing do you find this letter, in comparison to the previous samples? Please note your observations in the space below:



Process for letter writing

The process for writing an effective letter can be an exciting opportunity to build relationships with students and peers, especially as the letters may positively impact candidates' career trajectories.

Step 1

Before writing the draft, arrange to meet the individual to discuss the position or award they are applying for and to review their short- and long-term goals. The meeting will give you an opportunity to outline specifics you need to write a letter of support.

Prior to your meeting, request relevant documents, such as:

- the job posting,
- award criteria,
- program requirements,
- candidate's CV,
- teaching dossier,
- sample writing or portfolio, and
- student responses to course evaluations, if available.

During the meeting, ask the candidate why they believe they are suitable for the position or award. Ask questions about their CV and teaching dossier to get specifics about their background, research interests, and experience. As you listen, note themes that emerge based on the award or posting criteria. After the meeting, go back over the documents, noting specific evidence that supports or develops the reasons you endorse the candidate. Clarify when the letter is to be sent, to whom, and in what manner.

Step 2

After meeting with the candidate, begin outlining your letter, following the structure discussed previously. In your introduction, note context on your relationship and include your endorsement, offering reasons that clearly align with the award criteria or job posting (e.g. "Jerusha is my role-model for excellence in all-around undergraduate education"). Focus on one specific reason in each supporting paragraph, noting evidence you have gathered from the documents and examples from your personal knowledge of the candidate. Highlight the extent of the candidate's achievement. Make sure your letter addresses all job posting or award criteria clearly. Complete each paragraph with a concluding sentence that brings the threads of the paragraph together. Your final paragraph should reiterate why the candidate is worthy of the award/position and point out the best way for readers to contact you for additional information.

Once you have a draft, put it aside for a while, and return with objective eyes to revise and edit your letter. Ensure each paragraph focuses on a separate reason for your support. Check that you have sufficient and relevant evidence in each paragraph to support your reason. When editing your sentences, vary their length and use accurate grammar. Be consistent when referring to the candidate; use of their first name highlights a closer relationship.

Step 3

If you can, share your draft with colleagues. Ask them how effective the arrangement of the information is. Invite them to comment on how compelling they find the evidence. What might be added? Would they hire the candidate or give them the award, based on your case? Request their feedback on the readability and register of the letter: Is it too long? Are the sentences and grammar accurate? Are words repeated? Is the tone appropriately formal? Take time to incorporate their feedback.

Step 4

After submitting the letter, check back later with the candidate to see if they achieved their goal. Retain copies of your letters, particularly those linked with successful candidates. Replicate key features of these letters and observe strong samples written for other candidates.

Recommendation/nomination letter template

Date

Address

Address

Address

Dear _____.

Introduce nominee: position, number of years teaching. Explain relationship: length of time you've known the candidate and in what capacity. **Clearly state, in alignment with award/job criteria, why nominee merits the award/job.**

First paragraph: Align your first reason for your endorsement **with award criteria.** Point to specific evidence that supports this reason. Highlight the extent of the nominee's achievement.



Second paragraph: Align your second reason for your endorsement with award criteria. Point to specific evidence that supports this reason. Highlight the extent of the nominee's achievement.

Additional paragraph(s): Align additional reasons for your endorsement with award criteria. Point to specific evidence that supports this reason. Highlight the extent of the nominee's achievement.

Provide quotes aligning with award criteria.

Closing: Emphasize why your colleague merits your recommendation. Add your signature. End with your name and position.



Sample sentence starters

- *On behalf of ..., I am writing to nominate ... for ... because ...*
- *It is with great pleasure that I would like to recommend ... for ...*
- *In my role as ... I ... , I wish to recommend ... for ...*
- *I am pleased to nominate ... for ...*

Helpful ways to transition between paragraphs:

- *In addition to his/her ..., he/she...*
- *Not only does he/she ..., but also he/she...*
- *Having explained my first reason for recommending X, I will now offer an additional reason.*
- *Having discussed two important reasons for recommending X, I will now move on to my final reason(s).*
- *X is both ... and ...*
- *Regarding my endorsement for X, I have emphasized ... and Now, I would like to highlight ...*

Recommendation/Nomination Letters: Summary

Purpose

- Offer an “executive summary” of the dossier
- Highlight a unique perspective on the nominee
- “Outline case for the nominee, based on criteria for the award”
- Written by individuals or groups
- Co-written, coordinated letters make a strong case (Taylor Institute of Teaching and Learning, U of C)

Structure

- Address
- Date
- Salutation
- Introduction/context
 - Introduce nominee: position, number of years teaching
 - Explain relationship: length of time you’ve known him/her and in what capacity
 - Clearly state, in alignment with award criteria, why nominee merits the award
- Body paragraphs: Provide reasons for your endorsement
 - Focus on one reason per paragraph
 - Point to specific evidence that supports this reason
 - Highlight the extent of the nominee’s achievement
- Closing
- Signature
- Name/position

Tips for success

- Format professionally: Use department letterhead and 12-point font
- Keep length to 2 pages
- Use headings that align with award criteria
- Include brief quotes that connect to dossier evidence



Process

1. Carefully read **award information**; note criteria and highlight details, guiding questions, and suggested evidence
2. Carefully consider **your reasons** for nominee endorsement: What have you personally observed about your colleague that makes him/her an outstanding candidate?
3. Analyze your colleague's dossier (or meet with your colleague in person to discuss):
 - Note **evidence** that aligns with endorsement
 - Provide **detailed examples** (reference specific dossier documents/samples/student comments)
 - **Link evidence to recommendation**
4. Organize your letter
 - How will you order paragraphs?
 - How will you order evidence within each paragraph?
 - How will you link evidence back to reason?
 - How will you transition from paragraph to paragraph?
5. Revise and edit your letter (based on feedback from colleague)
 - How effective is the arrangement of information?
 - How compelling is the evidence? What might be added?
 - Are sentences concise and clear?
 - Is vocabulary accessible?
 - Is your grammar, spelling, punctuation accurate?

Recommendation/Nomination Letters: Self-quiz

What is the purpose of writing letters of recommendation?

Describe a typical structure of a recommendation letter



Outline key steps you might take to prepare to write your letter

Once you have outlined your letter, what might you do to polish it?

Letter of recommendation checklist

If you have written a letter of recommendation in the past, review its effectiveness, using this checklist:

Purpose: does the letter

- Offer an “executive summary” of the dossier?
- Highlight a unique perspective on the nominee?
- Outline case for the nominee, based on criteria for the award?

Structure/evidence: did you

- Follow a letter template?
- Introduce nominee: position, number of years teaching?
 - Explain the relationship with the nominee?
 - Clearly state, in alignment with award criteria, why nominee merits the award?
- Organize the letter effectively?
 - Focus on one reason per paragraph?
 - Point to specific evidence that supports the reasons for the nomination?
 - Highlight the extent of the nominee’s achievement?

Grammar/sentences: does the letter

- Contain clear, readable sentences?
- Demonstrate careful self-editing?

Professional format: did you

- Format the letter professionally?
 - Use department letterhead?
 - Keep the length to 2 pages?
 - Use headings that align with award criteria?
 - Include brief quotes that connect to dossier evidence?



Recommendation/nomination letters: final task

Imagine a close colleague has been nominated for the following award. They have asked you to draft the nominators' letter on their behalf.

https://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/assets/docs/instructors/for-review/scholarships-grants-and-awards/award_for_excellence_in_undergraduate_research-enriched_teaching_guidelines.pdf

Please outline your next steps:

1. What research on the award itself do you need to do?
2. What evidence do you need to collect to support the candidate's nomination?
3. How will you collect this evidence?
4. What will your next steps to drafting the letter include?

Managing the hard requests

What do you do when a candidate who you do not know very well or a candidate whose performance has been mediocre asks you for a letter of recommendation? You might start by arranging a meeting to discuss the request. You could review the award criteria or posting details and be candid about what you can and cannot say. You could offer, "I'd be happy to speak to...but I can't comment on..." You may also wish to encourage the candidate to explore whether other individuals who know them better might be willing to write a letter of recommendation (Bonetta, 2009).

If the candidate insists, write a brief letter focusing on facts: "X was a colleague from... to ... He taught... and developed..." The reader of your letter will note the brevity and understand that you are unable to give full support to the candidate. If a candidate has had a mediocre performance, strive to turn deficits into opportunities to showcase development (Bonetta, 2009): "When X first started, she... She has refined... and is now able to..."

Be transparent about your concerns about writing the letter. If the candidate insists, state the facts and, if you can, emphasize how the candidate has grown in their role.

Conclusion

Writing strong letters of recommendation/nomination assists those in your circle to compete for job opportunities and awards. Through the process, you strengthen relationships with colleagues and know that you have contributed to their success. As you hone your letter-writing skills, when you need a letter of reference, offer to draft one for your signee! They will probably be delighted to take you up on your offer.

References

- Bonetta, L. (2009). Writing a letter of recommendation. *Making the right moves: A practical guide to scientific management for postdocs and new Faculty* (2nd ed.). <https://www.hhmi.org/science-education/programs/resources>
- Chism, N. V. N. (2006). Teaching awards: What do they award? *The journal of higher education*, 77(4), 589-617.
- Kenny, N. & Berenson, C. (2017, November 8). 5 tips for writing a strong letter of support for a University of Calgary teaching awards nomination, *TI Connections*. <http://connections.ucalgaryblogs.ca/2017/11/08/5-tips-for-writing-an-strong-letter-of-support-for-a-university-of-calgary-teaching-awards-nomination/>
- Kenny, N., Miltenburg, J., & Cannon, S. (2015). Preparing a nomination letter. (handout). <https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/Award/Awards/20-TAY-Nomination-Letter-Handout.pdf9-617>.