



Georgetown University Student Employment Office

How to Write an Effective Recommendation Letter

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Should I write a recommendation letter for this student?

For many Georgetown students, their on-campus job is their first real job. It is the first time that they have worked in a professional setting, developed soft skills, and had the opportunity to form a relationship with a supervisor. As such, you may be asked to write a letter of recommendation for your student employee.

When a student asks you to write a letter of recommendation, it is important to consider your relationship with him/her. If the student has been working in your department for the past seven semesters and has consistently produced excellent work, you may want to support this student by writing a strong letter of recommendation. On the other hand, if you don't know the student well, you may want to talk to the student and see if they can ask somebody else.

Remember: you should always act in the student's best interest. If you are not the right person to write a strong letter of recommendation in support of their application, you should let the student know.

Where should I begin?

The first thing you need to do is prepare. A strong letter of recommendation will be able to speak to the student's skills. This requires knowledge of the student, exceeding your everyday interactions.

Note: Don't ever ask the student to draft their own recommendation letter. This neither saves time nor increases the quality of the letter! A genuine letter will have much more weight.

To begin, ask the student to provide you with supplementary materials:

- *Resume* – this can give you a general idea of the student's activities outside of your office. You can take details from the student's resume to supplement your statements. For example, if you are commenting on the student's leadership skills, you can also mention his/her involvement in a club on campus. Be careful, though, to not merely repeat everything on the resume. Include your own perceptions, and stay focused on the student's performance in your office!
- *Purpose of the letter* – this can help guide your letter: remember, every recommendation letter should be tailored towards the goal. A recommendation letter for an MBA program would be very different than a recommendation letter for nursing school. Try to focus on the aspects of the student that would be most relevant to the position or school.
- *History with the student* – this allows the student to highlight key events that happened during your time together, from his/her perspective. It might give you an indication of what the student is looking for in the letter, and it may remind you of important achievements that you have forgotten or overlooked!

- *Other distinguishing factors* – this allows the student to inform you about other relevant experience and skills that might not be appropriate to include on a resume. Examples include study abroad experiences, awards, and extracurricular events.

What else should I ask the student?

Be sure to know the details of submission. Here are some things that you should consider:

- Is there a specific form that needs to be filled out, or is it a free-form letter?
- Should the letter be submitted to the student, or directly to the organization?
- When is the deadline?

It is customary for students to ask their recommenders two weeks before the application is due. If that is the case, you should be able to set aside one or two hours to write the letter. Make sure that you submit the letter on time!

What should I include in my letter?

The suggested format for a recommendation letter follows a standard essay format:

- *Introduction* – introduce yourself and explain your relationship with the student. If you are a relevant authority to the field, be sure to include that information. Also include information about how long you've known the student.
- *Body* – discuss the student's experiences, and explain how those experiences demonstrate certain skills. Relate any skills to the position that the student is seeking. Compare those skills to other students with whom you have worked. Be sure to describe the student's work ethic and personality.
- *Conclusion* – recommend the student! In a summary fashion, let the reader know why the student is fit for the desired position. Also include your contact information, and indicate that you'd be willing to discuss this matter further.

Tip: If you've never written a letter of recommendation before, ask a supervisor or colleague in your department for a sample! You can also find many great samples online.

How can I make my letter stand out?

Recruiters and admissions officers have read numerous recommendation letters. Here are some tips on how you can make yours stand out:

- *Use examples* – everything you say should be backed up with evidence. Don't make a statement unless you can support it with an example!
- *Quantify* – describe the student's achievements in ways that can be quantified. This allows the recruiter to compare this student to another. Hopefully, your student will come out on top.
- *Stay relevant* – if you can, pick an example that clearly shows how the student is the best candidate for the position. If the position requires significant leadership experience, give an example of when the student was a leader.
- *Relate* – always relate the student's experiences and skills to the desired position. This makes it easier for the recruiter to see that the student is a good fit.
- *Avoid ambiguity* – whenever possible, use concrete examples. Tell a story that shows the student in the best possible light. Avoid ambiguous phrases: those imply that you don't actually know the student very well.

- *Avoid excessive praise* – a recruiter may become suspicious if a letter is too full of praise. Selectively choose which examples you want to use. In this case, quality is better than quantity.
- *Think like a recruiter* – a recruiter will be looking for certain things in your letter. If you omit something that is relevant to the position (e.g., you don't mention the student's soft skills), the recruiter may wonder why.
- *Tell the truth* – if you are making things up, the recruiter or admissions officer will be able to tell.

Are there any legal considerations to be aware of?

There are two important legal considerations to be aware of:

- *FERPA* – the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act protects students' records. Specifically, this means that employers and professors cannot write about anything from the student's academic record (courses, grades, GPA, etc.) without written consent from the student. Additionally, there are requirements for "confidential letters of recommendation" – the letter should be viewed only by the intended recipient (not even the student, if he/she has waived his right to read it).
- *Anti-discrimination laws* – many states have established laws prohibiting the inclusion of personal characteristics (e.g., gender, age, nationality) that might be discriminated against in the admissions process. As such, you must be careful when describing the student. It is best to refrain from mentioning any of these characteristics, if possible.

What are some additional resources?

There are many fantastic resources available online. Here are some recommended articles from credible sources:

The Chronicle of Higher Education

- 5 Principles for Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation for Grad School Applicants
<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/reader-response-roundup-5-principles-for-writing-effective-letters-of-recommendation-for-grad-school-applicants/29621>
- How to Write a Good Recommendation (with a section on "What the letter says vs. What the committee members think")
<http://chronicle.com/article/How-to-Write-a-Good/45944>

National Association of Colleges and Employers

- How to Write Reference Letters (with suggested guidelines and samples)
<http://www.nacweb.org/knowledge/legal/how-to-write-reference-letters.aspx?terms=recommendation%20letter>
- Legal Q & A: Writing a Reference Letter
<http://www.nacweb.org/knowledge/legal/writing-reference-letter.aspx?terms=recommendation%20letter>

Lynda.com (Access for Georgetown University provided by Lauinger Library)

- Writing Recommendations with Judy Steiner-Williams (a 10-minute video tutorial)
<http://www.lynda.com/Business-Business-Skills-tutorials/Writing-Recommendations/156089-2.html?org=georgetown.edu>