

My advice and policies on letters of recommendation

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One of the most important things an advisor or professor is asked to do for a student is to provide reference letters for fellowships or job applications. A student's grades, GRE scores, and resume do not paint a full picture of a person's talents, attitudes, and level of commitment and professionalism. A reference letter fleshes these out. In academia, reference letters are one of the most important parts of an application and they are taken quite seriously.

Obtaining a strong reference letter is a two-step process. The first step is to *earn* a strong recommendation through commitment, intellectual energy, productivity, and achievements. The second step is to ask for the letter and provide me with some of the information that I need to write it most effectively.

Checklist for earning a strong reference letter

Earning a strong letter is a process that can start long before a letter is needed. Set the stage for it throughout your graduate career. Ask yourself, do you:

- Show a high level of commitment and priority in your graduate work and career field by limiting the time that you are pulled away from campus by other activities? In your choice of how you spend your summers while in graduate school?
- Manage your time well on a day to day basis, for example by balancing progress in your thesis work against the need to complete class assignments, work part time, and lead a well-rounded life?
- Show a high amount of *intellectual curiosity* and self-motivation in your scholarly and research work, for example by going beyond the average in reading books and papers assigned for class or recommended by your advisor? Ask questions and show insight about what you have read?
- Show creativity and originality in your scholarly and research work?
- Show the ability to identify a scholarly and professional focus that is suited to your interests and talents and to give that focus the intellectual energy that it requires? In other words, protect against becoming spread too thin by moving in too many different directions at once?
- Seek to improve your talents and whatever skills and abilities are needed for success in your chosen area, whether computer languages, field techniques, working effectively in groups, or whatever particular talents are needed?
- Show the ability to set out a timeline of goals and milestones and stick to that timeline?
- Show strong writing ability and continually strive to improve your writing?
- Proactively seek financial support by seeking out appropriate funding opportunities and investing the time and energy needed to write effective applications and proposals?

- Exhibit professionalism and personal integrity in your interactions with faculty, staff, administrators, assistants, and other students?
- Develop the respect of your peers in your skills, abilities, or knowledge in your chosen area? Set a positive example for other students? Help to mentor students less senior than yourself?
- Show a strong ability to work fairly independently and to have a positive attitude about solving problems that arise? Communicate well about problems, successes, and research results with your advisor?
- Develop effective and productive collaborations and work relationships?
- Exhibit leadership qualities in your interactions with peers? (Not everyone needs to be a leader, but if you apply for a fellowship or job that seeks this, the reference letters should address it.)
- Engage in 'service' activities that go beyond the average either in serving the school or your chosen professional field? (For example by organizing symposia, meeting with alumni, reviewing journal articles, engaging in outreach activities.)
- Voluntarily give oral presentations of your work results, both in SNRE and at a professional conference?
- Ask your advisor to be involved in peer reviewed publications or the preparation of research proposals? Have you led the writing and submission of a peer reviewed publication?

An effective reference letter is a candid, confidential evaluation full of specifics

I prefer not to write vague, glowing letters that say a person is great but without specifics or honest assessments. Having been on the receiving end, I know that such letters serve little purpose. Instead, I try to provide assessments of a student's best strengths and how they have strived to overcome any weaknesses. I think it is important for letters to be confidential. If you are a really strong scholar or professional, then a confidential letter saying so carries more weight and credibility with the reader and serves you much better.

I like to include specifics. A vague statement that a student has "served as a positive example for other students in the program" is less effective than a statement full of details, such as "she set aside an extra month with the explicit goal of developing her thesis results into a publication, and then did so, which had a very positive effect on others. Two other students later followed her example by setting aside the last month of their programs to develop publications."

Letter writing is an opportunity for me to mentor you better

I know that jobs and careers in environmental fields are highly competitive because there are more talented people interested in the environment than there are good positions. Graduate school should be a time to work hard to develop much of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and professional approaches that can make you successful later. Whether I am your advisor, on your thesis committee, or just have you in a class, I want you to succeed in your environmental career.

Because a letter of recommendation is an evaluation letter, this provides an opportunity for me to discuss, with you, your career goals and strengths, areas where I see you as being less strong, what you

should be thinking about down the road, and where I think you can focus effort on improvement. Some students are receptive to this, while others are not. I will leave it up to you to ask me for a mentoring session or candid discussion.

If you like, before asking me for a letter of recommendation, send me your materials and ask to have a candid discussion (but give me a little advance warning). Then after the discussion you can decide whether or not you want to ask me for a reference letter. If you decide that my perspective doesn't sound strong enough to you and you don't want me to write a letter right now, then come back after 6 months or a year and we can do it again. This is an important point with me – if I am critical, it's only because I want to push you to develop your talents to your full ability. If I see you do so, I will turn the criticism to approbation in an instant.

What I need from you to write an effective letter

Advance time. For a thoughtful, effective letter, it's best to assume I need a week before it is due. If you ask for a letter that is due in one or two days, it might, just by chance be a very hectic period and I won't be able to write it.

Specific instructions about address, mailing, salutation, due date. Because I want letters to be confidential, I prefer to mail them myself. Give me specifics about how it needs to be sent (email, US mail, campus mail), to whom, and what the person's name and position is that I am writing to.

A description of the position or fellowship. You can point me to a web site, or print information for me.

Your resume.

Your transcripts or list of classes with grades received.

Anything additional that you want to tell me about things you think I need to know about your fit for the position, or you'd like to see emphasized in the letter.

The best overall approach

1. First, *earn* a strong recommendation as outlined earlier.
2. Set up a meeting to have a mentor conversation with me (this is optional), and send me (in advance) your resume and transcripts (unofficial is OK) and a recent statement of purpose, or cover letter, or something that outlines your career goals.
3. Ask me if I feel familiar enough with your work to write a positive reference letter.
4. If you decide you want me to write the letter, then at least one week in advance send me one email with all of the information listed above (under 'What I need...') as attachments.
5. One or two days before the letter is due, send me another email reminder. I won't be offended – I appreciate the reminder. I'll reply once I've mailed the letter. And good luck!
6. Finally, succeed to the best of your abilities in your career. Keep in touch and let me know where you are and what great accomplishments you are making!