



WRITING & EVALUATING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR NATIONAL COMPETITIONS

Dr. Marsha Hamilton, History

Dr. Susan McCready, French Language & Literature

Dr. Stephanie Smallegan, Civil Engineering

Dr. Sally Steadman, Honors

Identifying eligible students

- GPA > 3.75
- Unique qualifications, e.g. research, study abroad
- Encourage students to develop relationships with faculty

Mentoring Exceptional Students

- Substantive experiences
- Graduate level courses
- Publications
- Conference / Presentations
 - First author
 - Co-author
- Leadership in student organizations
 - (NSF) Broader Impacts

Decline writing recommendation

- Can't write positive rec
- Don't know student well

Preparation

- Request the following
 - Application
 - Resume
 - Deadline
 - Essays
 - Interview / long term goals

Format

- 1-2 pages
- Letterhead vs Form
- Consistency
- Confidentiality
- Balanced “team” of letter writers

Details

- How long / what capacity do you know the student
- Comparison to other students
 - Best among xx students / Top xx %
- Verify applicant information
 - Awards, publications
- Expand on information in resume
 - Document activities / GPA

Details

- Provide examples and evidence
 - Qualitative and Quantitative
 - Concrete and Specific
 - Validate personal statement
 - Colleagues' attitudes
 - Awards

Striking the “Right Tone”

- After formal introduction, refer to student by first name
- Narrate a personal interaction
- Recall first impression of student, then contrast with later impression
- Present intriguing asides – spontaneous discussions or shared interests
- Describe student’s specific contribution to relationship
- Include information about career plans

Specific Attributes

Depend on purpose; may be specified in application

- Medical school

- work independently, organize a complex project, perseverance, flexibility, energetic, integrity, maturity, personality, promise

- Graduate school

- motivated, self-directed, ability to complete projects, potential, interpersonal skills

- Employment

- motivated, self-directed, confident, thorough, conflict management

Strategies

- Word processing
 - Proofread
- Use common paragraphs for same/similar activities
 - Be sure to proof for gender, name, other details
- Use active verbs

High-stakes awards

- Require excellent letters of recommendation
- Exceptionally strong, written from an informed perspective, exude a sincere tone
- Accurate, favorable comparison
 - Best student in xx years
 - Compared to xx students who have accomplished yy



High-stakes awards

Uniqueness: what sets student apart

- Undergraduate research
- Course loads
- Double major
- Study abroad
- Internships
- Community Service

High-stakes awards

- Help reviewers know and admire the candidate
- Avoid hyperbole
- “For more information, please call...” can be interpreted as negative

Common Mistakes

- Not knowing what the student is applying for.
 - “... will be an excellent candidate for your scholarship program.”
 - “I am writing to recommend ... for this scholarship to which she is applying.”
- Focusing on the student’s classroom performance.
 - “... is enrolled in my Introduction to Environmental Studies; her performance in homework assignments, exams and lab reports is consistent and well above the class average.”

Common Mistakes

- Focusing on student's ability to show up on time and perform required tasks.
 - Frequently occurs in letters from job supervisors, internship coordinators, and athletic coaches.
- Going on at length about recommender's accomplishments.

Common Mistakes

- Creating a mountain of praise out of a molehill of insignificance.
 - “The environment has been a primary interest to ... since her early years. A few months ago, watching a documentary on penguins with ..., I could see that she was concentrating on every word. It is thus that I can say that ... truly wants to make the world a better place. As an example of her effect on those around her, we are very careful not to run the water when brushing our teeth.”



Writing Recommendation Letters online by Joe Schall

<https://www.education.psu.edu/writingrecommendationlettersonline/>

Marsha Hamilton, mhamilton@southalabama.edu

Sally Steadman, ssteadman@southalabama.edu

www.southalabama.edu/nationalawards