

Writing Letters of Reference: Tips and Guidelines

These tips and guidelines are designed to assist writers in composing thorough and substantive letters for students applying to graduate/professional school, for pre-doctoral or post-doctoral fellowships, and for academic/teaching positions. Many decision-making committees depend heavily on references to gain insight into the personal strengths and weaknesses of an applicant, information that cannot be gleaned from the applicant's transcript or personal statement.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- Letters must be on official letterhead and include original signature; average length is 1-2 pages.
- According to UC Legal Counsel, if an author is aware of an aspect of an individual's behavior that could harm third persons, such as sexual misconduct or violence, and fails to disclose it in a reference letter, he or she may be subject to a liability claim.

NOTES FOR WRITERS UTILIZING THE REFERENCE FILE SERVICE

- A "[*Waiver and Routing Form*](#)" must be included with each letter; this form, completed by the student, will indicate whether the student has waived or retained his/her right to read the letter under FERPA. It is within an author's rights to decline to write a letter if a student chooses not to waive his/her access rights.
- Reference files are the property of the University of California, San Diego and are not transferable to other institutional file services.
- UCSD faculty members or administrators who have a legitimate educational interest in a file (consistent with the purpose of the file service) may review it.
- Copies of letters sent to schools do not indicate whether confidential or non-confidential.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE LETTERS

- State your relationship to the applicant. Include how long and in what capacity you have known him/her.
- If you taught the student, state the course title(s), the student's academic performance (either grade or rank) and how the class was evaluated. Comment on the applicant's intellectual abilities. If appropriate, evaluate the level of difficulty of the course. A student's GPA will become more meaningful if committees are aware of the nature of courses completed.
- Compare the applicant's academic performance and potential to that of his/her peers, and to that of other students you know who are pursuing graduate/professional study or seeking similar positions.
- Relate the applicant's experience and characteristics to his or her chosen study area, desired position, or career aspiration. Mention the student's potential to succeed in the degree program or desired career field, his or her fitness for the stated career objective, and promise in the student's chosen field.
- Comment on the applicant's academic and personal strengths. Include an evaluation of the student's particular skills and characteristics, using specific examples if you have such knowledge. Such strengths might include any of the following:

Self-discipline	Maturity	Teamwork	Teaching/presentation skill
Creativity	Motivation	Initiative	Critical/analytical thinking
Communication	Dependability	Leadership	Intellectual curiosity
Autonomy	Perseverance	Compassion	Research skills
Integrity	Enthusiasm	Respect of peers	Writing ability

- Remember you are writing an evaluative letter which can include weaknesses or qualifiers that, taken in the context of the entire letter, form a more honest, credible and interesting picture of the student.
- If you know of others who think highly of the student, make reference to those persons.
- Volunteer to provide further information over the phone.

If you have questions about a letter of reference you are preparing, please feel free to contact the Career Services Center's Professional and Graduate School Opportunities Program office at (858) 534-4939 or the Job Opportunities Program office at (858) 534-6710.