

(Honest) Letters of Recommendation

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Letters of recommendation are “high stakes” and are important to candidates (letter-seekers), recommenders (letter-writers), and evaluators (letter-readers). For the candidate, a well-crafted, vibrant letter offering positive insight into his or her academic capabilities could be *the* factor that allows an extraordinary professional opportunity to become possible. On the other hand, a letter of scant praise, even

else. An applicant who receives several polite refusals should try to understand the pattern and speak with a trusted mentor about the issues that may be relevant.

When a letter-writer has been identified, the applicant should provide relevant information to assist the recommender—an up-to-date curriculum vitae, recent pub-

according to the criteria for the position sought, as understood by the writer. Descriptive statements as well as quantified data, such as where the applicant stands among his or her peers in relation to these criteria, will further strengthen the letter in the eyes of the reader (3). To the extent possible, the writer should offer a prediction, on the basis of the candidate

suggest that the evaluator contact the letter-writer for more detail. The writer may indicate areas where he or she is unable to judge the candidate's strengths or performance. These steps, although subtle, send a distinct signal to the reader that the applicant may have a shortcoming that is difficult to document in the letter.

Another challenge is finding the right balance in praising a candidate. Too little praise may signify a weak candidate, and it may also imply insufficient knowledge of the candidate. On the other hand, "dressing up" a letter with exaggerated laudatory comments will be obvious to an astute reader and damage the credibility of the document as an element of the application (4). Similarly, thesaurus-enhanced letters filled with overly ambitious word choice and florid prose may bury relevant information about the applicant (and raise questions about the writer!). A precise and clear writing style is best (2). Finally, although it is perhaps obvious, letters should not contain irrelevant or untrue information. Extraneous or unverified information may adversely affect the candidate, even though this was not the letter-writer's intention.

The Evaluator

Evaluators, or letter-readers, must think about the "fit" between the candidate and the role for which he or she is applying. The qualifications for successful candidates should be explicit and tied directly to the aims of the role. The expectations for knowledge and achievement will differ

understanding a candidate's professional path, what a letter does not say may be just as important as what it does address (2). If the referee invites the reader to get in touch, particularly if there are negative comments or obvious omissions in the letter's content, calling the referee may be a wise step. Contacting a reference is, under many circumstances, permissible. (If the reader is new to this role, he or she may wish to seek advice from someone knowledgeable before making personal contact with a reference.) A direct conversation with a reference may provide reassuring "good news" or lead to a discussion of issues that were too awkward to include in a formal letter of recommendation but are relevant to the selection decision (2). It is important that unsubstantiated impressions or gossip communicated in these conversations should be taken with some skepticism, however. This is the difference between professionalism and prejudice. The evaluator should inform the recommender that the conversation
