

Writing Academic Reference Letters
Student Success Centre

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **1**

MAKE

INTRODUCTION

While writing reference letters is a large part of the job of faculty and other professions, few individuals have training in letter writing. Skilled letter writing is typically learned through experience and exposure. One of the most enlightening experiences is serving on a faculty committee that evaluates these letters. Reading several samples, the strengths and weaknesses of letters become evident. Consequently, the best letter writers are often the most experienced letter readers.

Ideally the reference letter a

SHOULD I WRITE A REFERENCE LETTER?

Referees should have a candid conversation when they are unable to write a strong letter of support. Ask yourself:

KEY FEATURES OF A REFERENCE LETTER

Most letters follow a common structure. They tend to start by asserting the credibility of the letter writer, followed by the evaluation of the student, which is reaffirmed in the last paragraph. It is important that letter writers follow the guidelines of the application. However the length of the letter is typically one to one and a half pages maximum.

First Paragraph: Your relationship with student and your expertise

In the first lines of the letter, offer information that supports your ability to evaluate the applicant:

Outline the purpose of the document: Who is writing the document and for what purpose

Include how long you have known the student and in what context

Describe your position briefly; stress the context and frequency

The following illustration demonstrates weak and strong first introductory paragraphs of a reference letter. A strong example is when the candidate explains in what first met, and the length of the relationship.



Body Paragraphs: Prompting Questions:

Academic-Oriented Skills:

them demonstrate creativity, analysis, or logic? How does the applicant deal with complex or abstract material?

How has the student demonstrated their preparedness for this new experience? What experiences does the student have with research, methods, or other skills needed?

s ability to communicate their knowledge? What situations or examples demonstrate this ability? Have they been to conferences, presented posters, or submitted publications? If they have participated in prestigious events, please note this.

Behavioural Skills

What situations where they presented in? How did these skills result in their success? What growth or improvements have you noticed?

How would you rate the students industry or self-discipline? What example have you observed that demonstrates their motivation and diligence? Is the student aware of their strengths and weakness?

Example of adjectives to describe applicant behaviors

Category of Behaviors	Commonly Used Adjectives
Interpersonal Behaviors	Good-natured, accommodating, congenial, likeable, cooperative, generous, friendly, personable, patient, sincere, placid, respectable, earnest, engaged, tactful
Intellectual Ability	Imaginative, insightful, knowledgeable, intelligent, quick to comprehend, inquisitive, discerning, perceptive, original, analytical, farsighted, intellectual, bright, astute, informed, logical skills, wise, adaptable, well-rounded, resourceful, self-reliant, thoughtful, judicious, astute, adaptive, innovative
Communication/ Expression	Social, fastidious, adventurous, refined, expressive, open, assured, precise, clear, concise, articulate, poised
Motivation	Hustling, active, energetic, self-driving, rigorous, self-stating, speedy, quick, enthusiastic, diligent, productive, independent, enterprising, ambitious, industrious, persistent, determined, eager, proficient
Ethics/ responsibility	Methodical, determined, resolute, serious, detailed-minded, orderly, prompt, efficient, critical, calm under pressure, compassionate, independent, involved, reliable, committed, accurate
Level of experience/skills	Accomplished, concreted, completed, completed, conceptualized, discovered, developed, delivered, designed, directed, enhanced, exceeded, established, generated, implemented, instituted

Final Paragraph:

The last paragraph is typically the shortest of the letter and features a restatement of your support for the applicant.

Reaffirm your support for the applicant. Consider using language such as whole-heartedly, without reservation etc.

Invite the committee to contact you if they have further questions or concerns.

The following are three common closing statements for inclusion in reference letters:

I am therefore very pleased to be able to recommend [name] for...

Based on my time working with [name], I recommend her very highly for...

<i>Weak</i>	Charles is an individual of exceptional talents. He most certainly has a bright future ahead. There is no doubt that this young man will do well in the challenges that lie ahead. I wish him a most prosperous future. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.
<i>Better</i>	Based on Charles' commitment to helping others, his strong interpersonal skills and self-motivation, I strongly urge you to consider him for the scholarship. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require additional information.
<i>Best</i>	Charles has a great deal of leadership potential and is already on the road to success, academic and otherwise. Not only would his professional and personal growth benefit from the support and guidance of the Scholars Academy community, given his drive and enthusiasm, Charles is very likely to make positive contributions to his peers. As such, I support his application whole-heartedly. I would be happy to communicate with you directly should you require additional information or have any questions.

RED FLAGS

While most letter writers aim to help their students succeed, they may inadvertently create a negative

With Qualifiers	Without Qualifiers
The student generally performs well.	The student performs well.
The student tends to score above average	The student scores above average.
The student mostly engages with course material	The student engages with course material

Acknowledge cultural differences: There are also differences in the levels of formality used, particularly between American and British letters. For example, a British committee is likely to expect a balanced letter, where an American committee could negatively view a listing of flaws. It is therefore helpful to know whether the letter will be reviewed by a North American committee.

Co-authoring Letters of Reference: TA, RA, Instructors and Coordinators

As large class sizes continue to be the norm, it can be difficult to write letters for students with whom you have had little interaction. One solution may be to co-author a letter with a teaching assistant or other colleague, who may have had more contact with the student. Co-authorship allows for the individual with it allows the more senior faculty member to support the evaluation by adding the weight of their reputation and status. This is an ideal learning experience for future faculty members who will move into positions where they will become the sole author of letter of references.

When drafting co-authored letters, the preferred pronoun is we.

Having by now taught seven students who have been admitted to the program, and written on behalf of a handful of so far unsuccessful applicants, I am very pleased to write this year on behalf of two wonderfully strong applicants from this year's class. I would rank them in the top 15% of students for whom I have written for this award, and the top quarter of students who have made it in.

With 60% of the final grade accounted for, Student A stands second in the class, a mere one percentage point behind Student B. student A has stood out in his contributions to life of the class. He is always ready to be the first to contribute and to keep a discussion progressing fruitfully, and does so in the spirit of his palpable and exhilarating enthusiasm for life and learning.

To return to a theme sounded at the outset: I think that both Student A and Student B would be outstanding recipients of this award. If you decide that you can only pick one of them, I can't give you an overall preference of my own. The best I do is to say that intellectually, Student B is perhaps a shade further on than Student A: while Student A's social skills and leadership potential are second to none.