

## Letters of Recommendation

Roland Lamarine

*California State University, Chico*

### Abstract

This paper provides helpful advice to faculty writing letters of recommendations for college graduates in health education and health promotion. An example of a letter of recommendation is included.

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Maybe you are a new faculty member caught-up in the countless demands upon your time and now there is a student who would like you to write a letter of recommendation. Perhaps you have not done this before and are concerned about whether this is a part of your responsibility as a faculty member and, if it is, about the best way to go about writing a good letter.

First, let me assure you that this is a legitimate and often rewarding part of our work as teachers and also that if you have been approached by a student for a letter of recommendation, this can be construed as an indicator of your competence as a teacher. Often, when they need letters of recommendation, students approach those teachers for whom they have the most respect and with whom they are most comfortable. It is an honor to be asked but it is not obligatory that you write a letter for every student who asks for one.

One of the first questions you must ask yourself before accepting a request to write a letter of recommendation is whether you are able to write an honest letter that will be helpful in assisting the student in question to achieve the objective for which the letter is being written? If you cannot answer this question affirmatively, then there is no point in writing a letter. It is not unusual to have students you barely remember approach you for a letter of recommendation. Such circumstances do not usually lead to a productive letter.

It is useful to have a predetermined protocol regarding who you will accept as a candidate for a letter of recommendation based on some of the following criteria:

- your relationship with the student
- the student's performance in your class
- your knowledge of the student's character and personality
- your ability to assess the student's strengths and weaknesses
- the recency of your contact with them

If you decide to write a letter, it is a good idea to meet with the candidate in person to help you determine their aspirations and professional goals. You will want them to provide you with a copy of their resume, academic transcripts, a pre-addressed envelope for each letter, the specific names and details about who will be receiving the letters, forms to be submitted with the letters, deadlines for submission, and contact information for you to get back in-touch with the student.

Before you begin, depending on the student, you might want to consider whether you should discuss the student's weaknesses in your letter. This can be a risky proposition because you may bring-up a topic that could prove harmful to the student's objectives. This might be something to discuss with the student.

There is no iron clad format to which one must adhere. A good letter can be written using a three part approach which would include an opening, the main body, and a closing/summary. The opening is where you introduce yourself and your relationship with the candidate. You want to establish clearly your qualifications both academic and experiential for being able to provide a valid assessment of the candidate. How do you know the candidate? What has been your professional, and if appropriate, personal relationship with the candidate?

In the body of the letter you will want to provide your assessment of the candidate's academic strengths and weaknesses? More specifically, what are their quantitative and qualitative abilities as determined by your contact with them? How would you assess their writing and speaking skills: their knowledge of subject matter; their problem solving abilities; their leadership potential; their teaching ability? If appropriate, what is your assessment of their personal characteristics: their dependability (e.g., class attendance, turning in assignments on time); their self-confidence; their creativity? What is your assessment of their professional promise? Try to provide as many specific examples as possible to support your evaluation of the candidate's abilities. If true, it is important to note that the candidate "gets along" well with others. Interpersonal skills are highly valued in most academic and work environments.

Also, you may want to mention particular strengths that are peculiar to this specific

candidate. If you have decided to address specific weaknesses, it is helpful to counter balance the weaknesses with any unique attributes that would make the candidate particularly desirable despite the weakness described in your letter. Try to avoid hyperbole, clichés, and superlatives. If this is very best student you have ever had, you can say so but be careful about too much lavish praise because the next letter you write may be for an even better candidate.

The closing allows you to summarize and reiterate the important points you wish to emphasize. It also provides you with an opportunity to rank the candidate, which is only advisable if this particular candidate was one of your all time top students. If the student was not among the top five or ten percent of your best students, then you would be better advised to rank them in a more specific fashion.

Be sure to save a copy of your letter electronically on your hard drive or a computer disk. It is not unusual to have students request more letters at a later time. Having an electronic copy of the letter greatly facilitates providing follow-up letters. It is important for candidates to have their letters addressed to one specific person or agency and also to have the letter tailored to meet the specific requirements of the organization to which it is being sent.

Let me close with an example of a brief letter of recommendation in Appendix A.

#### Author Information

Roland Lamarine, HSD, Professor  
Department of Health and Community Services  
California State University, Chico  
Chico, CA 95929-0505  
E-Mail: [r.lamarine@csuchico.edu](mailto:r.lamarine@csuchico.edu)

## Appendix A

### Example of a Letter of Recommendation

Dear Employer:

Ms. Susan Anthony was a student in a research methods (HCSV 270) class which I taught during the spring 2005 semester. In addition, I was the faculty advisor for her internship at the American Cancer Society during the fall 2004 semester. The research class, which I have taught over the last twelve years, is generally regarded as one of the most challenging courses offered by our department. In this class students are required to write a three chapter research proposal and to take two rigorous objective examinations. The internship is a required experience for all of our undergraduate students and involves 360 hours of field experience over a 15-week period under the direct supervision of a field supervisor, generally a health practitioner, with regular consultation by the faculty advisor.

Having had Ms. Anthony both as a student in a formal on-campus class and as an advisee in a field situation has provided me with a broad range of opportunities to assess her performance both in terms of academic ability and her competence to implement classroom knowledge into a more pragmatic real-world situation.

Let me begin with her in-class performance. Ms. Anthony was a better than average student in a rigorous, quantitatively-oriented class (Research Methods). She demonstrated a high-level of comfort and a good facility for dealing with the difficult subject matter. Her class attendance was excellent and her performance on in-class, objective, examinations was well above average. In addition, Ms. Anthony demonstrated good organizational ability and strong writing skills in her research proposal. She also was a regular contributor to our class discussion.

It was, however, in the internship experience at the American Cancer Society where Ms. Anthony's true professional promise emerged. Her field supervisor at the Cancer Society rated her as the best intern she had supervised in over ten years. She described Ms. Anthony's take-charge style as particularly mature for an undergraduate student. She also informed me that if Ms. Anthony had not decided on attending graduate school next semester, she would have been a leading candidate for full-time employment at the Cancer Society.

To summarize, let me note that Ms. Anthony has been one of the better students I have taught in an academically challenging research methods class over a twelve year span which has included more than 600 students. She is one of the best writers I have evaluated during that period. She is confident, poised, intelligent, and dependable. In addition, she demonstrated, through her classroom discussions, good leadership skills and was accepted by her peers indicating excellent interpersonal skills. Perhaps even more telling, was her performance during her internship at the American Cancer Society. My observations and the insights provided by her field supervisor all suggest great promise for Susan Anthony. I highly recommend her as an excellent candidate for your Masters of Public Health program. Ms. Anthony will make a significant contribution to your program and to our profession. Please feel free to contact me for further information.

Respectfully,

Professor Kyndhart