

**Purdue University Calumet Counseling Center**  
**Letter of Recommendation**  
**Writing Guide**

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# Writing Letters of Recommendation

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Writing letters of recommendation is an unwritten expectation, responsibility and honor in a university setting. Many students that you have professional mentorship relationships with, and students in your classes, will ask you to write letters of recommendation as they pursue graduate school, look for employment, or pursue internship opportunities. It is an opportunity to assist students use their Purdue University Calumet experience and credentials beyond Purdue University Calumet.

The following provides an array of areas for you to consider in developing a letter of recommendation. Select areas that are applicable to the student and the position; this document is not intended to suggest that all areas be included in any letter of recommendation.

## Preparation

### Read Sample Letters

If you have never written a letter of recommendation before, consider asking your more experienced colleagues to share “sample” letters they have written or have received from students (blocking out names and other personal identifying information).

### Collect Information

Find out as much information about the student for whom you are writing a letter. One of the worst things you can do is to write a letter that is too generic.

Request the following information from the student you are writing a letter for:

- Determine whether the student waives the right to view the letter you are writing
- Résumé, CV, college transcripts
- Complete description of the position or program for which she or he is applying for.
- Personal statement if possible
- Position/Job # if applicable

Meet with the student you’ll be writing the letter for. Inquire about the following:

- Long-term goals career goals
- Current Research and other activities related to these goals
- What/why does the student feel she or he is a good fit with the position or program
- Strengths and weaknesses

Special considerations for requests from former students (i.e., those who graduated years earlier or those seeking to make a career change):

- Gather information listed above
- Arrange for phone conversation should you not recall the student
- Secure a ROI (Release of Information) from the student that allows you access to view their academic record
- Create a folder and maintain all written communication in the folder: including the ROI and original request for a letter of recommendation

### **Allot Sufficient Time to Write and Send the Letter**

- It can take one to two hours, sometimes longer, to craft a well-written letter.
- The student should give you clear instructions on how and where to send the letter of recommendation. Some programs or jobs require you to submit them via mail, email, or submit them online. Others may require the student to submit all application materials in one packet.
  - If you need to provide a letter of recommendation directly to the student, you can give it to the student in a sealed envelope. Consider signing the back of the envelope over the flap-fold. You may also use a CONFIDENTIAL stamp over the flap-fold.
  - This may not apply if you need to submit an electronic letter. Be sure to sign the letter, and submit as a PDF.
  - Be certain that you can write a strong letter for the student and if you cannot provide a positive letter of recommendation, feel free to communicate that to the student and decline writing the letter.

### **Starting to Write**

#### **Use Departmental or University Letterhead**

- Be sure to include your Name, title, address and other contact information in the Header of the letter.

#### **Target the recommendation**

- a. Write your letter so that it focuses on that purpose (Is it for an academic post, a job, a volunteer position, a background check, or a personal reference?)

## Familiarize yourself with the description of recommendation

### Letters for Graduate School:

- a. Usually schools will have recommendation questions that they prefer be addressed in the letter. Ask students to provide you with a copy of this, if available.
- b. Ask the student what he or she would like you to address specifically in the letter.

### Letters for a Job:

- c. If for a job, obtain a copy of the job description and talk with the student.
- d. The more you know about the position, the better you will be able to tailor your letter to suit the needs of both parties.

## What the Letter Should Say

### Introduce Yourself and the Student

- State your qualifications (department head, number of years as professor, etc.)
- Reference the person you are writing the letter of recommendation for.
- Position you are recommending the individual for.
- How do you know the individual? How long have you known the individual?
- Example taken of wikihow:
  - For example, "I am pleased to recommend Michael for the position of Director of Development at XYX Corporation. As VP of Application Development, I was Michael's direct supervisor from 2009 through 2012. We worked closely together on several key projects, and I got to know him very well during this time."

## Present the Student Truthfully but Positively

### **Be Specific. Describe what the person has done using specific instances and examples, rather than generalities.**

Give meaningful examples of achievement and provide stories or anecdotes that illustrate the student's strengths. Don't just praise by using generalities (such as "quick learner"), but say what the student did to give you that impression. These details will show that you have a strong relationship with the student.

- a. Example from wikihow: For example, don't say "Michael did a great job, and made life easier for everybody." Say instead, "Michael's sophisticated grasp of database architecture, combined with an innate feel for UX design and a warm, personal approach to his in-company client base dramatically improved the productivity of our company's merchandizing, creative, and editorial departments. His approach to managing application support,

maintenance, and training was highly professional and greatly respected both by end users and by the executive team."

- Describe activities the student has been involved in, if applicable to the position the student is applying for.
- Describe the difficulty of the class and the course requirements that the individual completed.
- Describe the student's personality and how that has been displayed i.e., work/tasks/projects, teamwork or independent work, creative or analytical, global or detail oriented.

### Quantify and Compare

Find a way to quantify the student's abilities, especially with respect to other students in the class or program.

### Talk about personal attributes

Does the student work well with others? Has the student shown commitment in his or her work? Often these descriptions are what distinguish a good letter recommendation from a great one.

## Common Areas to Address in the letter of recommendation for Graduate School

- **Intellectual characteristics:** How do you rate the student in overall intelligence (generalize)? How well does the student learn and retain information? What is your assessment of the student's skill in analysis and logic? What is the student's ability to deal with complex or abstract matters? Does the student show evidence of creativity? Were there any special circumstances such as work, or social factors that contributed to the student's successful academic record.
- **Knowledge of field of study:** What is the student's depth and breadth of knowledge in the field? Does he/she know how to use the methods in the field of study or have the experience in research? Where applicable, does the student have the requisite laboratory techniques, clinical skills or research skills?
- **Ability to communicate:** Is the student an effective writer? Are written materials clear, well-organized and assertive? Is the student articulate in oral expression?
- **Industry and self-discipline:** To what extent is the student persistent, efficient and motivated? Is the student able to work independently? Is there any reason to doubt the student's commitment to graduate study?
- **Personal effectiveness:** Does the student possess the qualities of maturity and personal adjustment requisite for graduate study? Does the student enjoy the trust and respect of fellow students and peers?
- **Potential for graduate study:** What is your prediction of the student's probable performance in graduate school? Does he/she have any specialized skill or studies in the field? Does the student have an aptitude for the chosen field? How does this student rate with other students who have been evaluated?
- **Publications:** Has the student published research as a team member or independently.
- **Doctoral Study:** For those students who are completing or have a completed Master's degree; can you discuss their thesis topic and the benefit to the field of study.

## Closing

- Reiterate your recommendation for the student and, if appropriate, invite the recipient to contact you.
  - Example from wikihow: For example, say, "For all of these reasons, I think Michael will make a fine addition to your team. Should you have any questions, I invite you to contact me at the number or address, above."
  
  - Example: I recommend Jane Doe without reservation for the position of Clinical Nurse Community Medical Center. If you have any questions or wish to speak further about Jane Doe, please feel free to call me.
- Use business closing and sign your name (Sincerely, best regards, etc.)

## Proofread and feedback

- If you are not sure of your letter-writing skills, or if your letter will carry a great deal of weight for the student's application, ask for feedback from a trusted colleague who may also know the student.
- Make sure to print or finalize the letter on Purdue University Calumet letterhead.

## Warnings

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- Decide carefully whether to give a copy of the letter to the student, particularly if you express reservations. A recommendation may hold more sway if the recipient knows that the views in it are candid, and not written for the gratification or flattery of the student. As indicated above, inquire whether the student has waived his/her right to view contents of the letters of recommendation.
- A letter of recommendation should focus on the key knowledge, skills, and abilities of a student. Don't spend your time inflating your letter of recommendation with excessive positive tones, as this is generally overlooked.
- You put your own reputation on the line when you write a letter of recommendation. If you feel you do not know the student well enough, or he or she is someone you cannot in good conscience recommend, decline the student's request.

## Writing Tips

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### Don't exaggerate.

- Don't put the student on a pedestal. Not only does it not look plausible, it will also set expectations for the student that will set a standard that is next to impossible to meet.

## **Don't be vague about your recommendation.**

- Being clear and direct will show the recipient the authenticity of your recommendation, and make your letter much more effective.
  - a. Example from wikihow: for example, don't say, "Michael is definitely qualified for your company or position, and will make a fine addition to your staff." This comes across like a form letter, which will actually work against the student.  
Say instead, "Michael has the skill set, accomplishments, and drive that will help XYZ Corporation exceed its goals."

## **Don't be too brief**

- If recipients see a one or two short paragraphs; they may think you do not know the student very well or that you do not have much to say about the student.

## **Keep it active**

- Begin each paragraph with a punchy, active affirmation of the student's qualities or character.
  - Example from wikihow: don't say "Over the course of the last couple years, I have been pleased to watch the ongoing development of Michael's talents." Say instead, "Michael's skills have grown rapidly in the last couple years."

## **Keep the tone and content factual, businesslike, and specific.**

# Sample Letters

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September 21, 2012

Dear Mr. Smith,

I am pleased to recommend May Williams for the Master's program at State University. May has been a student in many of my classes during the past four years, so I have learned a great deal about her and her abilities, and I know she would do well if given the opportunity to continue her education.

May's determination to succeed has led her to excel in my classes. She consistently gets excellent marks on her homework and tests, and she participates in class regularly. Her knowledge of the Spanish language convinced me to ask her to become a tutor for other students who were struggling with the language—a challenge that she met with great success. The students she tutored significantly improved their grades, and some have even chosen Spanish as their majors.

Compared to the other students in class, May's grades have always been at the top. This has led other students in her classes to ask her for help if they do not understand a lesson. Despite her busy schedule, May always balances her time, so she can help anyone who needs assistance with the language.

During the years I've known her, May has worked to greatly improve her own confidence in her abilities. This improvement is what made her agree to help tutor other individuals. When students in her own classes began asking her for assistance, her confidence truly began to soar, and it only continues to improve.

Due to her knowledge and great aptitude for learning, May would be an excellent student for the Master's of Spanish program. She will make a great student at State University, and I have no doubts that her abilities and determination will continue to grow.

Sincerely,

Aaron Jones

Downloaded from <http://www.wikihow.com>

## Resources

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-Clemson University: “Guidelines for writing letters of recommendation”.

[http://career.clemson.edu/faculty/writing\\_guidelines.pdf](http://career.clemson.edu/faculty/writing_guidelines.pdf)

-Berkeley University of California: ““Guidelines for writing letters of recommendation for graduate school programs, business schools, law schools, health professions schools, and medical schools”.

<https://career.berkeley.edu/letter/letterguidelines.stm>

Writing articles for teaching fellows (or tutors) writing letters of recommendation for their students: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Verba-recs.html>.

MITT’s writing letters of recommendation:

<http://people.csail.mit.edu/mernst/advice/write-recommendation.html>.

*American Society of Cell Biology Newsletter*: “How to write an effective letter of recommendation” <http://www.ascb.org/files/0505wicb.pdf>

“How to read a letter of recommendation” <http://www.ascb.org/files/0507wicb.pdf>.

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<http://www.hhmi.org/sites/default/files/Educational%20Materials/Lab%20Management/letter.pdf>

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