



Writing Your First Letter of Recommendation¹

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1. Tell the student how strong a letter you feel you can honestly write for them; give them a chance to ask someone else if you cannot write a strong letter.
2. Ask for as much information from the student as possible (application form, due date, copies of work done in course, etc.)
3. Use a letterhead that matches your relationship with student: Department stationery, House stationery, etc.
4. Explain how long, how well, and under what circumstances (course, House affiliation, chance) you have come to know the student. Why are you qualified to comment on him or her?
5. Give the recipients of the letter information about the aspects of student performance THEY care about; try to put yourself in their shoes. Include those special features that will interest them.
6. Address aspects of the student's performance you know first-hand. Eye-witness accounts are more convincing than hearsay.
7. Support your generalizations with SPECIFIC details or anecdotes; help the reader to imagine the student as you describe them. A purely general description is not useful.
8. End the letter with a summary paragraph recapping your main points; if possible, compare the student with others you have known.
9. Ask the student to let you know what happens to their application (you made the effort, you deserve some feedback).
10. Keep a hard copy of every letter you send, and a soft copy (plus backup) in a "Recommendation File" on your computer hard drive. Also note WHEN you send letters. This will (a) avoid your having to write the same letter again and (b) remind you what you sent.

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Additional material on this topic and others can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.

¹ Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University, [nd] "Writing Your First Letter of Recommendation." Retrieved on June 16, 2010 from <http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/TFTrecs.html>