GENERAL

how to write a recommendation letter

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Introduction

When someone is applying for a job, a graduate program, a scholarship, or a professional license, a **recommendation letter** can be the deciding factor that sets them apart from the competition. Yet many people find the task daunting: they wonder what to write, how to structure the letter, and how to strike the right tone. In this guide, we'll walk you through **how to write a recommendation letter**step by step, covering everything from gathering information to polishing the final draft. By the end, you'll have the confidence to craft a compelling letter that highlights the applicant's strengths and persuades the reader.

Why a Recommendation Letter Matters

A well written recommendation letter serves several crucial functions:

- Personal endorsement – It offers a credible voice that vouches for the applicant's abilities.
- Contextual insight – It provides specific examples that illustrate skills and achievements.
- Credibility boost – It lends authority to the application, especially when written by a respected professional or faculty member.
- Differentiation – It can highlight unique qualities that a résumé or application form alone cannot convey.

Because of these benefits, institutions and employers often treat recommendation letters as a decisive component of the evaluation process.

Understanding the Audience

Before you begin, identify who will read the letter. Knowing the audience shapes the content, tone, and emphasis:

1. Academic Admissions – Focus on intellectual curiosity, research potential, and classroom performance.
2. Professional Employers – Highlight work ethic, teamwork, leadership, and specific job-related accomplishments.
3. Scholarships or Grants – Emphasize character, community service, and financial need if relevant.
4. Licensing Boards – Stress ethical conduct, competence, and adherence to professional standards.

Once you know the audience, tailor your language and examples to match their expectations.

Gathering Information

Collecting accurate data is essential for authenticity. Here's a checklist of information to obtain from the applicant:

- Full name, contact details, and the position or program they're applying for.
- Resume or CV, highlighting key achievements.
- Specific projects, papers, or tasks that showcase relevant skills.
- Any metrics or quantitative results (e.g., sales growth, test scores).
- Personal anecdotes that illustrate character traits.
- Preferred tone or style guidelines (formal vs. conversational).

Ask for a brief outline of the applicant's goals and why they chose your institution or organization. This context

helps you align the letter with their aspirations.

Structuring the Letter

A recommendation letter follows a clear, logical format that makes it easy for the reader to locate key information. The typical structure is:

1. Header and Greeting – Include your name, title, organization, and contact information. Address the recipient by name if possible.
2. Introduction – State your relationship to the applicant and the purpose of the letter.
3. Body Paragraphs – Provide evidence of the applicant's qualifications through specific examples.
4. Conclusion – Summarize your endorsement and offer to provide further information.
5. Signature – Sign off with your name, title, and contact details.

Maintaining this structure keeps the letter professional and reader friendly.

Header and Greeting

Example:

John Doe
Professor of Computer Science
University of Example
123 Academic Ave, City, State 12345
Phone: (555) 123 4567
Email: john.doe@example.edu
To Whom It May Concern,

When the recipient's name is known, use a personalized greeting such as "Dear Dr. Smith," to demonstrate attention to detail.

Introduction

Clearly state your relationship to the applicant and the context in which you've observed their abilities. For instance:

"I have had the pleasure of supervising Jane Smith as a research assistant in my laboratory for the past two years. During this time, I have witnessed her exceptional analytical skills and unwavering dedication."

Body Paragraphs

Use at least two or three paragraphs to delve into specific strengths. Each paragraph should focus on a distinct theme:

- Academic/Technical Proficiency – Discuss coursework, research, or technical projects.
- Soft Skills – Highlight communication, teamwork, and leadership.
- Personal Qualities – Illustrate integrity, resilience, and passion.

Support each claim with concrete examples, data, or anecdotes.

Conclusion

Reaffirm your endorsement, summarize the applicant's fit for the opportunity, and invite further contact:

"I wholeheartedly recommend Jane for the Master's program at XYZ University. I am confident that her blend of intellectual curiosity and collaborative spirit will make her an asset to your community. Please feel free to contact me at (555) 123 4567 or john.doe@example.edu if you require additional information."

Signature

Include a formal sign off:

Respectfully,John DoeProfessor of Computer ScienceUniversity of Example

Writing the Body

Here are detailed strategies to make each paragraph impactful:

Use the STAR Method

Structure each example using Situation, Task, Action, Result:

- Situation: Set the context.
- Task: Explain the challenge.
- Action: Detail the applicant's contribution.
- Result: Quantify the outcome.

Example: "During a semester-long capstone project (Situation), Jane was tasked with developing a machine learning algorithm (Task). She designed a novel feature selection technique, reducing computational time by 40% (Action). As a result, the team secured first place in the national competition (Result)."

Show, Don't Tell

Instead of vague statements like "Jane is a hard worker," provide evidence: "Jane consistently submitted code reviews ahead of schedule, allowing the team to meet tight deadlines."

Balance Technical and Personal Insights

Technical achievements demonstrate competence, while personal anecdotes reveal character. A balanced letter gives a holistic view of the applicant.

Providing Specific Examples

Examples should be:

- Relevant to the position or program.
- Recent (preferably within the last two years).
- Quantifiable whenever possible.
- Unique to the applicant (avoid generic praise).

When in doubt, ask the applicant for a memorable moment that best illustrates their strengths.

Tone and Style

Maintain a professional, yet warm tone. Avoid slang or overly casual language. Keep sentences concise and focused. Use active voice to convey confidence: "Jane led the team" rather than "The team was led by Jane."

Formatting Tips

- Use a standard font (Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri) in 10–12 point size.
- Set margins to 1 inch on all sides.
- Align text to the left; avoid full justification.
- Leave one line of space between paragraphs.

- Include your contact details in the header and at the bottom.
- Print on professional letterhead if available.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Generic Praise – Vague statements like “excellent student” lack credibility.
2. Over Emphasis on Personal Relationship – While context matters, focus on the applicant’s qualifications.
3. Neglecting the Audience – Tailor content to the specific institution or employer.
4. Using a “one size fits all” template without personalization.
5. Including irrelevant or outdated achievements.
6. Failing to proofread for grammar and spelling errors.

Sample Recommendation Letter

Below is a fully formatted example that you can adapt to your own situation:

Jane Doe
Director of Graduate Admissions
College of Engineering
456 College Rd, City, State 67890
Phone: (555) 987 6543
Email: jane.doe@college.edu
To Whom It May Concern,

It is with great enthusiasm that I recommend Alex Thompson for admission to the Master of Science in Data Science program at your esteemed institution. I have served as Alex’s professor and thesis advisor for the past three years, during which he consistently demonstrated exceptional analytical skills, intellectual curiosity, and a collaborative spirit.

During the “Advanced Machine Learning” course, Alex tackled a complex project involving predictive modeling for healthcare data. He identified key variables, engineered novel features, and implemented a random forest algorithm that achieved an accuracy of 92%, surpassing the class average by 15%. His meticulous approach to data cleaning and model validation showcased his deep understanding of both theory and practice.

Beyond technical prowess, Alex is a natural leader. He organized weekly study groups, facilitated peer review sessions, and mentored junior students. His communication skills were evident in his clear, concise presentations, which consistently received high praise from faculty and classmates alike.

Alex’s commitment to ethical data usage and his passion for social impact align perfectly with the values of your program. I am confident that he will thrive in a rigorous academic environment and contribute meaningfully to your community.

Thank you for considering Alex’s application. Should you need any additional information, please feel free to contact me at (555) 987 6543 or jane.doe@college.edu.

Respectfully,Jane DoeDirector of Graduate AdmissionsCollege of Engineering

Final Checklist

1. Have you identified the recipient and tailored the tone accordingly?
2. Did you include a clear header with your contact information?

3. Is the introduction concise and does it state your relationship?
4. Do the body paragraphs follow the STAR method or a similar structure?
5. Are your examples specific, quantifiable, and recent?
6. Did you proofread for spelling, grammar, and formatting consistency?
7. Have you signed off formally with your name, title, and contact details?
8. Is the letter no longer than two pages (approximately 500–600 words) to maintain readability?

Conclusion

Writing a recommendation letter that stands out requires thoughtful preparation, clear structure, and compelling evidence of the applicant's strengths. By following the steps outlined above—understanding the audience, gathering precise information, crafting a well organized narrative, and avoiding common pitfalls—you can produce a persuasive endorsement that supports the applicant's goals. Remember, a great recommendation letter is not just a formality; it's a powerful narrative that can open doors and shape futures.

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