

Guidelines for Writing an Academic Letter of Evaluation¹

Many selection committees depend heavily on evaluation letters to gain insight on personal strengths and weaknesses of applicants, information that cannot be gleaned from the student's transcript, and biographical data. If you don't feel you know a student well enough to write an evaluation, tell them so. This is a better decision for you and the student than the submission of an uninformative or equivocal letter. As an evaluator, you're in a position to help an applicant assess his or her chances for admission, realistically and critically. Should you feel prepared to write a positive evaluation, but one in which it would be appropriate to cite some qualifiers or weaknesses, discuss this first with the applicant. Explain that, taken in the context of an entire letter, such comments form a more honest, credible, and even more interesting picture of the student.

Many faculty members prefer to write letters in conjunction with their graduate assistants who may know the student being evaluated on a more personal level. Most graduate and professional schools find this type of "joint" recommendation acceptable and helpful. The faculty member will often discuss the nature of the course and the student's performance compared with other students who have taken the course, while the graduate assistant will discuss any personal or intellectual qualities observed in the student, such as creativity, insight or dedication. The evaluation will then be cosigned by the graduate assistant and the professor. In some cases, the professor might indicate that the graduate assistant is experienced and their assessment of students is reliable and accurate.

A good letter of evaluation will discuss how long and in what capacity you've known the applicant, his or her strengths and weaknesses, any unusual aspects of the applicant's background that might contribute to or hinder academic work, and knowledge of any extracurricular activities the applicant has pursued during his or her college years. Discuss the student's academic background in greater detail than a listing of course numbers. If you know that the student has taken the most rigorous academic series or chosen to complete a very demanding individual project, or has "padded" his/her course schedule with buffer courses, relate these matters to a selection committee. It's crucial information that they will want to know. A student's grade point average will become more meaningful if selection committees are aware of the nature of courses completed.

Compare the student to other students you know, especially if he or she was in your class. Indicate how many students enroll in the course, how long it has been taught, etc. Medical schools are particularly interested in the applicant's intellectual abilities, motivation for medicine, stamina, dedication, dependability, and ability to relate well and communicate with people of all backgrounds. Law schools are particularly interested in law, and your knowledge of the student's outside activities. Business schools are interested in leadership/managerial skills or potential, as well as academic ability. Maturity and ability to communicate ideas effectively (orally and in writing) are also key factors, as are outside activities and work experiences.

If you don't have the secretarial services or time to write a letter of evaluation, please don't consent to write one. An application will be delayed and sometimes discounted if the file is not complete because of a missing letter. If you have questions about an evaluation you are preparing, you are welcome to contact an advisor at the University Health Professions Office at (210) 458-5185 or hpoffice@utsa.edu. They are also available to discuss questions regarding procedures for filing evaluation letters at the UHPO.

¹ This document is from the Undergraduate Advising Center at Stanford University, Stanford, CA (October 1998). It has been modified for UTSA students by the University Health Professions Office, San Antonio, Texas, March 2007.