



LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION GUIDE



CAREER DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

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A. INTRODUCTION

A reference letter, or letter of recommendation,¹ is usually written to attest to a person's skills, character and/or achievements. It is a formal document, and should be typed on letterhead, and written in a professional manner. During your law school career and thereafter, it is possible that you will need letters of recommendation to accompany a job application. When a potential employer requests a recommendation letter, take the opportunity to enhance your reputation for professionalism by following some basic guidelines.

B. TIMING IS IMPORTANT

Do not procrastinate. Avoid the last minute scenario. When you ask for a letter of recommendation, keep in mind that attorneys, employers, professors and references in general are quite busy and their time is limited. Therefore, asking someone for a reference letter the night before it is due, or the same day you need it, is not appropriate. Waiting until the last minute may make you look irresponsible. A close deadline may also mean that a person will not have time to give the letter the required attention, or to even write it at all. So, a good rule of thumb is to make your request as far in advance as possible. If there is no stated deadline, let the person know when you plan to submit your completed application and ask if he or she can submit the letter at about the same time. If an application deadline is close and you are not sure whether a recommender has submitted a letter, or you are waiting for a letter to arrive so you can send your entire application packet together, then follow up with the writer. Most people will appreciate the reminder and will be happy to send you a confirmation e-mail when the letter is sent.

C. ASK THE RIGHT PEOPLE

If you want to ensure you receive the best possible recommendation, be selective about whom you ask for a reference letter. Potential employers are interested in hearing about your legal analysis, practical experience, academic success and research and writing skills. Non-legal employers will be able to speak to your general workplace skills and professionalism. Similarly, undergraduate professors know something about your work habits, personal characteristics and general intellect.

Consider asking professors² or former legal and non-legal employers to write recommendation letters for you. In fact, your references should consist of a hybrid of former employers and academicians so that the potential employer receives information regarding your overall qualifications.

Most importantly, the person making the recommendation needs to be familiar with your skills, capabilities, experience and performance, and be able to refer to specific examples whenever possible. Therefore, during law school, cultivate relationships with

¹ The terms "Reference Letters" and "Letters of Recommendation" will be used interchangeably throughout this Guide.

² If you are asking a professor for a letter, be prepared to sign a FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) waiver form. Under FERPA, professors are not permitted to disclose information about your grades or performance in the educational setting without your permission. So to write a meaningful letter that goes beyond generalities, your professor will need this permission. The FERPA form will also allow you to waive access to the letter, which may make the professor more comfortable writing it.

professors so they can get to know you in order to be in a position to comment specifically on your qualifications for a job and be comfortable accepting your request. Former or current legal and non-legal employers with whom you have a positive relationship are also good candidates for recommendation letters.

You should request a letter from a current employer only if you are on good terms with the employer, and you are sure that he or she will respond positively to news that you are leaving. If your current employer does not know you are applying for other jobs, it is fine not to ask for a letter.

Letters of recommendation from employers may contain evidence or confirmation of some or all of the following:

- Previous positions held in the company
- Summary of job responsibilities
- Strengths, skills and talents
- Grades in a particular class
- Attendance and participation in class
- Initiative, dedication, integrity, reliability, etc.
- Ability to work with a team and/or independently

D. MAKING THE REQUEST : HOW TO APPROACH PEOPLE

First, make a list of professors and/or supervisors who will be your best advocates. Then, set up an appointment, preferably in person, to discuss your request, especially if it is the first time you have asked that particular person to write a letter of recommendation for you. Requesting letters of recommendation via e-mail is permissible in certain circumstances such as if your recommender has recently written other letters for you, or is a good distance away. In your e-mail, however, you should offer to meet with the recommender to discuss your application just in case he or she would prefer an in-person (or telephonic) meeting.

When requesting a letter of recommendation, you should:

1. Articulate your reasons for the recommendation, discuss the job you are applying for, why you are interested in it and how your specific qualifications and experiences make you a good candidate. While people are generally happy to provide recommendation letters, they may not remember all the specific details about you that will enable them to write a strong letter. This is yet another reason for an initial face-to-face meeting which gives you a chance to remind them.
2. Provide your resume so that the recommender can review your experiences and comment specifically on your qualifications. Be prepared to provide a writing sample as well, in case the recommender wants to review your writing skills.
3. Let recommenders know whether they should send their letters directly to your prospective employer or to you to include as part of a complete application package. If the recommenders prefer to keep their letters confidential, but you have been asked to submit your application as a complete package, ask them to send the letters to you in sealed envelopes to ensure confidentiality.

4. While many recommenders prefer to use their own letterhead envelopes and stationery to prepare letters of recommendation, offer to provide stamped envelopes in which to send the letters as a courtesy to the recommenders.
5. Finally, remember that letters of recommendation are written on a voluntary basis. A faculty member or employer may decline to write one for you. If you sense reluctance or the answer is no, ask someone else. You want letters only from people who enthusiastically support your application.

E. MAKE IT EASY FOR THEM

Once the person commits to writing a letter, make it easy for him or her. For example, provide the name and address of where the letter needs to go, the deadline involved, the position you are applying for, any criteria sought for the position and all other relevant information. Feel free to suggest what you would like them to say—within reason. For example *“it would be helpful if you could discuss how well I did in your class.”* If you think you are asking for something unreasonable, then do not ask.

Another thing you can do is offer to write a draft of the recommendation letter for the recommender. Sometimes, people are more than willing to accommodate your request, but they find it difficult due to time constraints. Therefore, offering to write the letter for them can alleviate the situation and also makes it easier for the recommender. If he or she refuses the request, then leave it alone.

F. THE CONTENTS³

The following is a basic outline of the structure of a reference letter:

Use a business letter format with the recipient’s name and address, if known, and address them as “Dear [name].” If the recipient is unknown, then use “Dear Sir/Madam.”

The first paragraph can contain a brief introduction of the recommender, explaining his or her position and relationship to you (the candidate).

The second paragraph may confirm any facts which are known about the candidate such as your job title and role within the company, the dates of employment or the dates during which the recommender was your professor.

In the third paragraph, the recommender should aptly describe your skills and qualities. For instance, he or she may state that you were highly dedicated and committed to the job; that you possess an excellent work ethic, drive and enthusiasm; that you pay particular attention to detail or have a keen ability to lead; that you were highly valued and the recommender would gladly re-employ you; and that your contributions to your law school class were invaluable (if a professor). This is where the recommender can single out any exceptional qualities you possess which would be impressive to the potential employer.

Where possible, the fourth paragraph can give a couple of concrete examples of times when you excelled in your job or in class.

³ Obviously, if the recommender opts to write the letter and does not accept your offer to draft it for him or her, you would not make these suggestions regarding content and let them write their own letter.

Close the letter on a positive note, and if the recommender is willing to receive further correspondence about your application, be sure they make this clear. Include the recommender's contact details too. As with any business letter, end the letter appropriately; "Sincerely."

G. AND FINALLY.....

Always send a thank you note expressing your appreciation to the people who wrote recommendation letters for you. While an e-mail is acceptable, many people, especially those who did not grow up with e-mail, really appreciate a handwritten thank you note. It is also appropriate to let them know the status of your job search in the note. If you accepted the position, you should follow up with this information. Your recommenders will appreciate knowing that their efforts were instrumental in your career advancement.

SAMPLE LETTERS OF **RECOMMENDATION**

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #1 (FOR LAW STUDENT)

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL

DATE

Ms. Rose Richards, Recruiting Coordinator
United States Department of Justice
1234 J Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20000

Dear Ms. Richards:

Mr. John Doe has worked directly under my supervision for the past six months. During that time, John has been a self-starter and a productive contributor to team efforts. In addition to having a high degree of integrity and a cheerful personality, he is one of those rare individuals who can both follow instructions and take initiative, as appropriate. He is strong in time management and his competence extends beyond the skills for which he was originally hired.

For example, when asked to participate and assist in a special discovery project for a particular client, John was ready for the task. In fact, John was ultimately instrumental in successfully completing the project in a timely and efficient manner.

I will indeed be sorry to lose John as a law clerk when he moves to Washington, DC for the summer. Seldom have I been able to make such an enthusiastic recommendation regarding an employee. I have no hesitation in advising you to hire John for this internship.

Sincerely,

Mary Sue Smith

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #2 (FOR LAW STUDENT)

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL

DATE

Dear Sir or Madam:

It gives me great satisfaction to recommend Mary Jones for the Northern Fellowship in Human Rights. I was Mary's professor in two law school courses and also worked closely with her when she was my Research Assistant last summer.

It came as a wonderful surprise when Mary announced her intention to apply for the Northern Fellowship in Human Rights. Knowing her as I do, I am certain that Mary will exhibit the same enthusiasm during this fellowship as she did during her law school studies.

As a student, Mary was an active and conscientious member of the class. She challenged the rest of her classmates to consider issues from new perspectives and often asked relevant questions. She always proved to be a take-charge person who was able to successfully develop plans and implement them. Mary was a dedicated student and her grades were exemplary.

As my Research Assistant, Mary analyzed complex issues and drafted memoranda for my subsequent use in a future publication dealing with *The Americans with Disabilities Act*. Her assignments were well-written, well-supported, organized, neat and timely. It was evident that Mary desired to learn more.

Mary also had interests outside of academics. She has been an active member of the Student Organization for Human Rights (S.O.H.R.) at the University of Miami School of Law, a non-partisan organization dedicated to the advancement of international human rights law and advocacy. This was an on campus organization that provided opportunities for students to explore and engage in human rights work. Mary was involved in Miami Habitat for Humanity and formed part of a dedicated group of students who committed weekends to bringing affordable housing to people in the greater Miami area.

With regard to her personal characteristics, Mary is extremely charismatic, focused, determined, outgoing and friendly. I feel very confident that she will be extremely successful in all her future endeavors. I highly recommend her for the Northern Fellowship in Human Rights.

Sincerely,

Professor Samuel Stein

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #1 (FOR LAWYER)

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL

DATE

Richard Cunningham, Esquire
ABC Law Firm
123 Main Street
Miami, Florida 33333

Dear Mr. Cunningham:

I have been Linda Smith's immediate supervisor in her position as an associate with our firm since October 2012. During that time, I have found Linda to be consistently pleasant, tackling all assignments with dedication and a smile.

In addition to her demeanor and being a joy to work with, Linda has always been a take-charge person who is able to present creative ideas and articulate her thoughts and opinions regarding different cases in our office. Linda has excellent communication skills and, therefore, could articulate her thoughts and ideas in an effective manner.

During Linda's tenure, she demonstrated leadership, initiative and successfully met all her deadlines and goals with ease. In addition, she is extremely organized, reliable and can work independently on any case assigned to her. She is able to follow through to ensure that the job gets done and is flexible and willing to work on any project that is assigned to her at any given time. Linda was also quick to volunteer to assist in other areas of the firm's operations.

I sincerely believe that Linda would be a tremendous asset for your company and has my highest recommendation. If you have any further questions with regard to her background or qualifications, please do not hesitate to call me.

It is a genuine pleasure and honor for me to recommend Linda for employment. She is a team player and would make a great asset to any organization.

Sincerely,

John J. Jones

SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION #2 (FOR LAWYER)

NAME
ADDRESS
PHONE NUMBER
EMAIL

DATE

Dear Sir or Madam:

It is with great pleasure that I now recommend Leland Rogers. I am the Hiring Partner at Smith & Pyle, LLP and Leland worked with our firm from November of 2008 to August of 2011 as an associate.

Leland is a quick learner. When Leland commenced his employment with our firm, he was just out of law school. Within his first few days of employment, he had learned all the facts of the cases initially assigned to him, and started to conduct legal research for different motions and issues involved in each case. It normally takes an entry-level associate at least two months to become acclimated and familiar with his or her assignments. Leland was an exception.

Leland's drive has led him to achieve a successful legal career. He has had the honor of receiving several awards from the Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division, as well as other professional organizations, a feat that not all young attorneys achieve.

Leland has been nothing short of an exemplary employee. He is one of the brightest employees that I have ever had in my employ, and possesses a tremendous drive and passion for his work.

I believe that Leland Rogers will be an asset to any organization, and an excellent fit for your company in particular. If you have any further questions, feel free to contact me at (555) 555-555 and I will be happy to answer any questions you have.

Sincerely,

Donald Smith, Esquire

