

Below are some compiled tips for drafting an effective letter of recommendation for a student seeking admission into a graduate program. When drafting the letter, writers should consider the following points and tailor the letter for each student.

KEY POINTS

- **Determine appropriate author.** Students are not always clear on who is the best person to write letters of recommendation. If you think the student's interest might be better served with a different author, sit down with the student and discuss this.
- **Discuss how you know the student.** What is the context for your evaluation? Was the student in your class? An advisee? A research assistant? Be specific.
- **Discuss the student's potential to complete independent research.** This is one of the key factors being looked for by admissions committees. Elaborate on your experience or knowledge of the student's activities related to conducting independent research.
- **Appraise the student's academic capacity.** Describe your appraisal of the student's abilities to successfully complete the academic coursework. This will be the first hoop they must navigate in order to complete a degree. If they have shortcomings, be honest about these. Programs are often able to tailor a course of study that will help a creative individual proceed through their program.
- **Describe the student's motivation.** Graduate study entails more than academic skills. It's a long haul that takes a great deal of perseverance and grit.
- **Evaluate the student's maturity and psychological competence.** Is the student mature enough to accept the responsibility and manage the inevitable criticisms and even failures that will accompany graduate study?
- **Discusses the student's strengths.** What are their strongest attributes? Provide examples to illustrate.
- **Prepare a detailed letter.** Provide specific examples, and illustrate for the reader some of your depth of understanding of the candidate – this document is one of the most critical in providing a picture of the student that is more nuanced than course grades and scores from standardized exams.
- **Be broadly positive, detailed, and personal.** These letters focus on the student's ability to conduct research, and go beyond basic elements such as course grades to provide an inside look into details of a student's character that are unlikely to emerge from other components of a standard application package. If you can't write a letter with these qualities, or if your knowledge of the student is too casual, then often the best thing that you can do for your student is to tell him or her and decline their request to write a letter. Discussing suggestions for alternate authors would be a good way to approach this conversation.

Additional tips for writing a great letter can be found at:

- <http://admissions.vanderbilt.edu/apply/recommendation-letters.php>
- <http://www.hhmi.org/sites/default/files/Educational%20Materials/Lab%20Management/letter.pdf>
- <http://writing.mit.edu/wcc/resources/teachers/recommendation>
- <http://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/legacy/images/practicefiles/AvoidingUnintendedGenderBiasLettersRecommendation.pdf>