A Guideline for Writing Letters of Recommendation

As a teaching fellow or House tutor, you may be asked to write recommendation letters for students whom you have taught or advised. Before writing, it is important to know the purpose of the letter and whether the contents will be confidential. As these letters are usually for continuing education, the target institution may often supply guidelines for letter, which the student should obtain. Remember that you are advocating for your students but must also provide a truthful assessment. It is also helpful to write your letters on your department’s letter-head.

(1) Length: A strong letter of recommendation does not exceed two pages in length. One and a half to two pages is ideal as it indicates interest in and knowledge about the candidate but does not ask the reader to spend too much time.

(2) Introductory information: Letters of recommendation should clearly introduce the candidate in the opening remarks, the specific purpose of the recommendation, and your relationship to the candidate (how long you have known the student and in what capacity).

(3) Examples: The use of specific examples of the student’s work or accomplishments is critical for an effective letter of recommendation. They lend substance to your statements and allow the reader to develop a more vivid and lasting impression of the candidate.

(4) Intellectual ability: The candidate’s intellectual ability should be carefully described. Is the student truly outstanding, quite intelligent, average, or below average for Harvard and in what pool are you assessing them? How capable is the student of original and independent thinking? As precise a ranking of the student as possible is most effective in conveying exactly how strong he or she is.

(5) Intellectual curiosity and drive: The attitude of the candidate to the course material and learning process is of interest and great importance to any selection committee. Is the student interested in what he or she is studying? Is he or she an active or passive participant in discussions? Does the student follow through on assignments or pursue suggestions for additional work?

(6) Communication skills: The student’s ability to communicate both orally and in writing should be assessed.

(7) Sometimes a student may need to explain anomalies (such as poor grades due to personal difficulties) in his or her academic record. This is often more effectively addressed by the recommender than by the student.

(8) Personal characteristics: A portrait of the candidate as a person is important particularly for fellowships. How does he or she respond to criticism? How does he or she relate to instructors and to peers? In short, what kind of impact will this student have on the hosting institution and what kind of impact will it have on the student?

(9) Personal activities: Although it is not always possible, information regarding the kind of curricular and extracurricular activities the candidate is involved in should be included. What is the range and depth of involvement? Does the student display qualities of leadership and “good citizenship”?

Note: Use your discretion when writing recommendations. Although most of the elements listed above should appear in all types of recommendations, the relative emphasis of each category will vary according to the position for which the student is applying.