

how to write letter of recommendation

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How to Write a Letter of Recommendation: A Complete Guide

Whether you're a professor, a manager, or a colleague, writing a letter of recommendation is a powerful way to help someone advance their career, pursue higher education, or secure a volunteer position. A well-crafted recommendation can make the difference between a candidate's success and an overlooked opportunity. In this guide we'll walk you through every step of **how to write a letter of recommendation**—from understanding the purpose to polishing the final draft. By the end, you'll feel confident in producing a compelling, professional letter that stands out.

Understanding the Purpose of a Letter of Recommendation

A recommendation letter is more than a formality; it is a testimonial that provides context about a person's skills, character, and achievements. It serves three main purposes:

- **Verification:** Confirms that the candidate possesses the qualities the author claims.
- **Insight:** Offers perspective beyond what a résumé or transcript can reveal.
- **Advocacy:** Persuades the reader to view the candidate favorably.

Recognizing these roles helps you tailor your content and tone to meet the recipient's needs.

When and Who Should Write a Letter of Recommendation

Not everyone can provide an effective recommendation. The best letters come from individuals who have:

- Worked closely with the candidate for at least six months.
- Observed the candidate's performance in relevant settings.
- Understood the candidate's goals and the context of the application.

Common recommenders include professors, supervisors, mentors, and senior colleagues. If you're unsure whether you can write a strong letter, it's better to decline than to provide a weak endorsement.

Key Elements of an Effective Letter of Recommendation

Header and Contact Information

Start with your name, title, organization, and contact details. This gives the reader a clear reference point and ensures the letter is easy to verify.

Salutation

Use a formal greeting such as "Dear Admissions Committee," "To Whom It May Concern," or address the specific person if you know their name.

Opening Paragraph

Introduce yourself and your relationship to the candidate. Mention how long you've known them and in what capacity.

Body Paragraphs

These should cover:

1. Skills and Achievements: Highlight specific accomplishments.
2. Character Traits: Discuss reliability, integrity, teamwork, etc.
3. Contextual Examples: Provide anecdotes that illustrate the candidate's strengths.

Closing Paragraph

Reaffirm your recommendation, offer to provide further information, and sign off with a professional closing.

Signature

Include your typed name, title, and contact details again if not already in the header.

Step by Step Guide: How to Write Letter of Recommendation

Step 1: Gather Information

Before you begin, collect:

- The candidate's résumé and cover letter.
- Details about the program or job they're applying for.
- Specific achievements or projects the candidate completed under your supervision.

Having this data ensures your letter is tailored and relevant.

Step 2: Choose the Right Tone

A recommendation should be respectful, sincere, and professional. Avoid overly casual language unless the context specifically calls for it. Maintain a balance between enthusiasm and objectivity.

Step 3: Structure the Letter

Follow the classic structure: header, salutation, introduction, body, closing, signature. Keep the letter between 250 and 400 words for most applications, but longer letters are acceptable for academic or high level positions.

Step 4: Provide Specific Examples

General praise ("excellent communicator") is less persuasive than concrete evidence ("led a team of five to complete a project 20% under budget"). Use measurable outcomes whenever possible.

Step 5: Highlight Key Qualities

Identify the qualities that align with the position or program. For a research role, emphasize analytical thinking and perseverance. For a teaching position, stress patience and curriculum design.

Step 6: Proofread and Edit

Check for:

- Spelling and grammar errors.
- Clarity and flow.
- Consistent formatting.

Ask a trusted colleague to review it before sending.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Being Vague: Avoid generic statements; specificity adds credibility.
- Excessive Flattery: Genuine endorsement is more effective than hyperbole.
- Ignoring Formatting: A messy layout can distract from content.
- Failing to Address the Recipient: Personalizing the salutation shows attention to detail.
- Using Passive Voice: Active voice makes the letter more engaging.

Sample Letters for Different Situations

Academic Recommendation

For a student applying to graduate school, focus on research experience, critical thinking, and academic achievements. Include any publications or conference presentations.

Employment Recommendation

Highlight job performance, leadership, and relevant skills. Provide metrics such as sales growth or project completion times.

Volunteer Recommendation

Emphasize empathy, community impact, and dedication. Include stories of how the candidate went above and beyond.

Tips for Customizing Your Letter

- Use the job description or program outline to identify desired attributes.
- Incorporate keywords from the application to align with search algorithms.
- Adjust the level of formality based on the industry.

Formatting Tips for Professional Appearance

1. Use a standard font like Times New Roman or Arial, size 12.
2. Set margins to 1 inch on all sides.
3. Include a clear header with your contact information.
4. Use single spacing with a blank line between paragraphs.
5. Save the file as a PDF to preserve formatting.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I write a recommendation if I only met the candidate once?

It's best to decline or request more time to observe their work. Authentic endorsements rely on firsthand experience.

What if I don't know the recipient's name?

Use a general salutation like "To Whom It May Concern" or "Dear Hiring Manager." If possible, research the organization's contact details.

How long should a recommendation letter be?

Typically 250–400 words for most job applications. For academic or high level roles, up to 600 words is acceptable.

Should I include a reference number or application ID?

If the application instructions mention it, include it in the header or opening paragraph for easy identification.

Conclusion

Writing a letter of recommendation is both an art and a responsibility. By following the steps outlined above—understanding the purpose, gathering relevant information, structuring your content, and avoiding common pitfalls—you can create a persuasive endorsement that genuinely supports the candidate's aspirations. Remember, a well written recommendation not only benefits the applicant but also reflects positively on you as a professional. Take the time to personalize each letter, provide concrete examples, and proofread meticulously, and you'll produce a document that stands out in any admissions or hiring process.

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