

Tips for Writing a Letter of Reference for U.S. Graduate Study

From UC Berkeley website: <https://career.berkeley.edu/Letter/LetterGuidelines>

Indicate how long you have known the applicant and in what capacity. Graduate schools are primarily interested in recommendations that come from professors who know the applicant and his/her academic work as well as from employers. *They are primarily interested in faculty members' summary estimates of the candidate's general promise as a graduate student.* The more the recommendation reflects real knowledge of the applicant and his/her performance, the more useful the letter is to the graduate school admissions committees and thus to the applicant. The letter should address the following questions:

- **Intellectual characteristics:** How do you rate the applicant in overall intelligence? How well does the applicant learn and retain information? What is your assessment of the applicant's skill in analysis and logic? What is the applicant's ability to deal with complex or abstract matters? Does the applicant show evidence of creativity? Has the applicant's academic record been affected by special circumstances such as work, social or academic background?
- **Knowledge of field of study:** What is the applicant's depth and breadth of knowledge in the field? Does he/she know how to use the methods in the field of study or have the experience in research? Where applicable, does the applicant have the requisite laboratory techniques?
- **Ability to communicate:** Is the applicant an effective writer? Does the written work submitted demonstrate a mastery of the convention of English? Is the written material clear, well-organized and forceful? Is the applicant articulate in oral expression?
- **Industry and self-discipline:** To what extent is the applicant persistent, efficient and motivated? Is the applicant able to work independently? Is there any reason to doubt the applicant's commitment to graduate study or diligence as a student?
- **Personal effectiveness:** Does the applicant possess the qualities of maturity and personal adjustment requisite for graduate study? Would you choose the applicant for graduate study under your tutelage? Does the applicant enjoy the trust and respect of fellow students and peers?
- **Potential for graduate study:** What is your prediction of the applicant's probable performance in graduate school? Does he/she have any specialized skill or studies in the field? Does the applicant have an aptitude for the chosen field? How does this applicant rate with other candidates who have been evaluated?

Additional Tips:

- Include your affiliation/relationship with the student. Were you a supervisor? Adviser? Professor? A professor may see the academic skills, while a supervisor would be able to describe work habits.
- Give honest and factual information and make sure you substantiate your comments with specific examples. Since almost all reference letters are complimentary, it is the details that will give one letter more weight than another in the admissions deliberations.
- Have the student give you his/her transcripts, a list of accomplishments, organizations that he/she belongs to, or any other relevant information.
- Be sure to complete and submit the letter of reference promptly, because the success of the student's application may depend on the punctuality of the recommendation.