Getting the Most out of Your Advisor’s Recommendation

Bobbi Low (September 2012)

Diana Woodworth asked me for the guidelines I use in trying to write good recommendations for graduate students (I have to teach during the time you’re meeting). I have no doubt I have forgotten something; you might discuss what else you (and other students) might want to consider. I will also give Diana some examples of letters I have written (but, like CIA documents and improper pictures, stuff will be “blacked” out!).

Overview Tips

Do not wait until the last minute! It looks like you’re not concerned. (On the other hand, if you are highly organized and give more than a month’s lead time, be sure to follow up with “How’s it going? Do you need anything else from me?” e-mails/visits.)

What You Should Provide

1. A résumé (I like it when you highlight the things you think are important, but not everyone does).
2. Transcripts, if appropriate (informal transcripts are usually OK).
3. A description of the position/fellowship and a url, if appropriate.
4. The deadline.

What I Do

With my own grad students, I ask them to write a first draft of what they wish I would say. I want to know what they think is important, and I may well have forgotten something important! However, not all professors like this; you should ask.

What Makes a Really Strong Recommendation Letter

To the extent that you can, ask professors who know you well, and who have known you a (comparatively) long time. Many donors and fellowships ask for details and examples; they know how easily professors can bloat and do boilerplate!

Indeed, when I serve on review boards of various kinds, good cogent examples make a difference. You want to give the professor enough detail so that s/he can write at least a solid one-page reference. I tend to be terse; Diana W (who is a marvel at this!) is always sending back my draft letters for things for which she is the conduit with “say more here” and so forth! So, give the professor good, well-organized information, ask professors you know relatively well, and provide them with examples. You can do this in your “cover letter” to the professor: “I hope you can comment on XX; in your course XX.”

When I write for students who are applying to med school or vet school, for example, I really appreciate it when they print out a website that is something like “what medical schools look for: how to make a strong recommendation.” (Browse the web!)
If you are a Master’s student here and apply elsewhere for a PhD program, try to arrange a visit with your potential future faculty advisor. Two reasons: 1) you may find that s/he is not a good fit and you’ll know you don’t want to apply; and 2) this is your chance to impress. (A colleague of mine, with a mediocre UM undergrad record, applied to grad school. On paper, he would never have gotten in anywhere he wanted to go. But he visited—everyone accepted him; he got a prestigious post-doc, and became one of the youngest full professors ever!)

**Recommendation Letters for GSI Applications**

Consider the worst case: you are applying for a GSI position, and you have never taught before. Think about this: what else have you done? Been a docent? Taught Sunday school, cooking classes? What have you done that you can use to demonstrate what knowledge you do have that especially fits the class description?

Ask to speak with the professor who teaches the course. While it’s true that these decisions are typically made by a committee, it is also typically true that the professor gets to rank the applications! The committee may overrule the professor for a variety of reasons, but you will have increased your chances!

Do a little homework if necessary, to be sure you understand the course content. I can’t tell you how I shake my head when someone applies to teach behavioral ecology with me, and then demonstrates that they have no relevant background by telling me “I have had ecology”! (They are not the same!)

**Recommendation Letters for Fellowship/Research Proposals**

These are sometimes demanding: you must provide your proposal; you also want to make it clear what the most important points are that you hope your recommender will be able to say. Here it becomes an issue of the quality of the proposal itself. For heaven’s sake, provide references! Even if you are applying to a private foundation that does not require it, provide a supplemental document (this is like having backup for your one-page executive summary). There might be someone like me on the panel!

**One Last Thing**

I know it’s easy to have one letter put in the Career Center. But it becomes a general-purpose document, likely to be trumped by a highly specific, tailored letter. When students ask me for a letter for the Center, I ask if they have a list of the places they are applying to. It’s trivial for me to modify letters to be application specific (provide, if you can, the search chair or grad coordinator’s name). If your professor is willing, this is a much better strategy!

**Examples**

I have provided Diana with three recommendation letter examples; you should know that the final versions were enormously better than my first drafts—due to Diana’s help! One is for a GSI application; one is for a Distinguished Dissertation Award, and one is for a position after a Masters’ degree. Check with Diana if you’d like to see them.