

Graduate Scholarship Recommendation



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To the UCD School of Film Application Committee:

Letter of Support for John Lerner's UCD Graduate Scholarship

Perhaps the most memorable discussion I've ever had with a student about his decision to switch majors was three years ago. The student was a first-year Polymer Science and Engineering major on a scholarship, taking my introductory film class as an elective, and he told me he was considering a switch to Film. Assuming that this student was simply running into typical academic problems in first-year chemistry and physics courses, I asked how those courses were going. "Oh, I'm getting As in those," he assured me with a calm wave of his hand. "But I long to study Film." That student was John Lerner.

Since that time, I've worked with John as a mentor on several of his papers for classes ranging from honors composition to film history and theory. In my seven-year career as a film instructor, no student has been more **delightful to work with** than has John. His papers are always creative, self-styled, skillful, and analytical. I quote from a creative essay he wrote during his first year of study, spoofing college philosophy and psychology classes by claiming that he got through them simply by peppering in quotations from Ingmar Bergman films: "When my philosophy professor asked me to explain human reactions to fear, I snapped, 'In our fear, we make an image, and that image we call God.' I got an A in the course." Later, John as a character in the essay discovers that he can arbitrarily quote Bergman films to advance his personal relationships as a college student as well, in that college is "a world full of fake intellectuals."

This is not to say that John's work is too quirky or sardonic to thrive in the traditional academic arena. Another paper he wrote for a film class on Francois Truffaut's *La Nuit Américaine* clearly **demonstrates his facility with formal analysis**. In this paper, John compares Truffaut's life to his art (a staple of film criticism, certainly), but he does not trot out sophomoric insights—rather he analyzes crisply and complexly, embracing principles of paradox, juxtaposition, technique. **One sees John's gift for language and analytical focus** from the first line of the paper: "The tap of his cane is heard before the first appearance of the boy on screen—almost an apparition of Antione Doinel—hustling down the sidewalk toward an imposing set of vertical bars." In this paper and others I've reviewed with John, it's clear that he has mastered the art of student paper writing, and he is just as comfortable with a formal analysis of film noir as he is with dropping in cultural references to vernacular English or Groucho Marx.

I turn to these examples of John's work so prominently not because I lack other kinds of evidence, but because as I read his work I am so impressed with the richness and diversity of his talents. More personally, I have had numerous opportunities to match my opinion of John's work with that of his character. I've been intrigued and moved by conversations with him about his three adopted siblings. I've spoken with his peers about the particular sensibility that he brings to discussions in his classes, and I've spoken with his other professors about him, one of whom reports that he consistently "raises the tenor of class discussion greatly." As a lover of film and a screenplay author, I have enjoyed many relaxed conversations with John about both film and script writing. As his writing mentor, I have discovered that he is willing to do complete retooling of a script that is off the mark, or that I need only briefly characterize a trend in his work for his jauntly mind to apply it to self-improvement.

In short, John is both scholarly and culturally entrenched, ambitious but not pretentious, self-deprecating yet confident, forthright but unassuming, delightfully irreverent yet appropriately respectful—a complex and whole human being. A recent discussion with him about his GPA crystallizes these traits: “I have a 3.99-something GPA,” he smiled. “I got an A- in a one-credit skiing class. I’m glad, really. Took the pressure off.”

Given the substantial two-year stipend of the UCD Graduate Scholarship and your express request that recommenders voice their criticisms as well as their praise, I offer a few comments in that regard. Clearly, I mean to give John Lerner the highest recommendation, but not so subjectively that my opinion of him is varnished. I have known students with more concrete long-term goals than John has, I have worked with better writers, and for all his academic accomplishment, John is still a slightly withdrawn figure and at times the best in him needs to be coaxed forth. **None of these issues, though, keep me from considering him to be among the best, most admired students** I have known in my teaching career—a student on par with the award of a prestigious university scholarship.

Because of John’s obvious writing and scholarly talent and his proven high level of interest in film, no student I have known would be more suited to thrive at the UCD School of Film, especially with a scholarship to fund his first two years. **Please do give him your considered attention.**

Sincerely,
John Teacher
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