

Advice to Graduate School Recommendation Letter Writers

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Some years ago I was talking to a visiting scholar who was a faculty member in a foreign country. I asked her why letters from her country seemed to be so uninformative. She pointed out that there, faculty never *read* letters: they only write them. Even graduate students are admitted purely on the basis of test scores.

The facts were hardly surprising—after all, this is the system I grew up with in India—but after hearing the way she put it, the proverbial bulb lit up. If you never evaluate letters yourself, how would you know what letters should and shouldn't contain? The feedback—admission decisions—is seemingly random, and therefore of little use. Hence this article.

Disclaimer: This is an extremely personal opinion. It doesn't represent the views of my department or my university. More importantly, many faculty may disagree with the opinions here, so use them with caution! [Feedback welcome](#).

What this document is about: Writing effective recommendation letters for PhD students applying to computer science PhD programs in the US.

Whom this is for: Letter-writers who are unsure of what makes for a good letter. This may also help students prepare better dossiers to give their letter-writers. (A brave student might even point her letter-writer to this article.)

Also read: Mor Harchol-Balter's comments, Michael Ernst's advice.

Why Letters Matter

Does anyone read the letters at all? We do, rigorously, sometimes as carefully as we read a research paper: pen in hand, circling comments, annotating margins, noting what the letter did and didn't say.

In fact, letters are so important, even a bad transcript can be offset by them. I know a student who got into a fine graduate program with just a 2.67 GPA. This is because his 2.67 was special: he aced hard classes and got bored in easy ones. His letters presumably said so, and illustrated this with several anecdotes. So, not every 2.67 is equal, and your student's may be of just the right kind; but we won't know that without your letter.

My Constraints (or, The One-Minute Rule)

When I'm on the committee, I try to read every application; when I chair it, I make sure I do, some multiple times. That's many hundreds of applications in under a month. Factor in lots and lots of late letters, classes, etc., and it's clear I have to work pretty fast.

For the first pass—deciding whether the application deserves more time or not—I can afford to spend no more than about 6-7 minutes per application. (Keep in mind I've read maybe a few thousand applications, so I've had practice.) If I decide the application is promising, I may spend over half an hour (in some cases, days!) on it. But in those first 6-7 minutes, I have to:

- eyeball the student's research record
- form a summary of the transcript
- glance at the standardized test scores
- determine whether the statement is promising
- get the gist of 2-3 letters of recommendation

In practice, that means I have about one minute to devote to the first reading of your letter. Now think about whether your letter works in this context. (For instance, some letter writers put a big, prominent paragraph of boilerplate legalese at the beginning of their letter, which I have to read before I realize it's irrelevant. Could you have buried that in a postscript? Was that the best use of my minute?)

Call this the One-Minute Rule and write, read, and re-read your letter against this rule before sending it in.

Be Concrete

If you take away just one piece of concrete advice, let it be this.

The single biggest problem with most letters is that they are filled with abstract generalities and infinitives. If we don't know you or your institution, we can't judge what any of these statements mean relative to our standards. Always consider the illustrative anecdote:

Due to deadline pressure, I asked him to grow a pumpkin in just one month. As you know it takes over 100 days to grow a pumpkin, but over the weekend he devised a new method to accelerate their growth. On Monday morning I arrived to find not just a pumpkin but a steaming, flavorful pie.

Anecdote about acts of raw coding are only so helpful in understanding research potential, but they're better than nothing (see the section on Corporate Letters, below). An extra book or paper they read, *and demonstrated understanding of* (again, be concrete about why you believe this), goes a long way.

Triangulation and Credibility

When we read a letter we're supposedly evaluating the student, but we're actually evaluating the letter-writer too. What I care about is not only what you think, but also what I think of what you think. If I don't know you, I need to calibrate you.

Of course, sometimes information can hurt. If you praise research that is no harder than what we assign our first-year undergraduate students, that tells us a lot about your program, but not a lot *positive*. I saw precisely such a letter back in about 2002; to this day, I can name the college (and the student...). Until that program becomes a whole lot stronger, I wouldn't want to admit anyone from it.

If you've been holding back praise, tell us: If you haven't written a letter this strong since 1998, and you've written two dozen letters in that time, it helps for us to know that. Of course, be honest. If we take you at your word and your student proves to be significantly weaker than your letter, we won't trust your future recommendations.

It also helps to know your track record. Especially if you are a professor at a lesser-known university, tell us where your past graduates have gone. Even better, tell us where they are now (maybe the lack of name-recognition for your school means the students didn't go to well-known places initially, but if they did well and are now placed in good positions, that's good to know). Remember to compare *this student* to that population.

Finally, tell us a little about your background. A brief para of bio-sketch never hurts. If you publish papers, tell us where. But keep it short: the letter is about the student, not you!

Ultimately, remember two things:

- Your most valuable resource is your credibility. If you are a credible letter-writer, we will take you at your word and, if one day you tell us about a stellar student, we will do everything we can to make room for her. But credibility is one-way: hard to acquire, easy to lose.
- You can't get a student in, but you can make a student not get in. That is, there is only so much you can say to get a student admitted, but if we come to distrust your letter, your *next* student is going to have a much harder time getting in. For “you”, substitute your institution also.

Reporting on Research

At a highly-competitive university like Brown, we want to know the student's research potential. The best assessment of this is what they have already done. If you are their research advisor, you have a special obligation to them (and to us) in your letter:

- describe their work in your own words

- tell us what the student's contribution was
- tell us whether it succeeded or failed
- if it's ongoing, tell us why you think it will succeed

We rarely expect the ideas to have *originated* from the student, but we would like to see signs that they took ownership of the project, improved it in some way, refined the idea, and so on. Finally:

- put any publications in context

Students don't always know how to do this. If you published a paper on the work, tell us about the quality of the venue. In particular, students are poor at telling different *kinds* of publications apart (tech report from conference poster from research paper) and may even try to hide the distinction (I've seen this happen). Help us understand what they really accomplished.

If you run a summer research center, you may get bombarded with letter requests from each of your students. I have seen such people write perfunctory one-paragraph letters. These hurt students, and are ultimately unethical. Someone gave you money to run that center; when you asked for it, you took on an obligation. Fulfill it, or else get out of the way. There are plenty of others who will gladly put that money to better use.

Reporting on Courses

Naturally, your most significant contact with the student is likely to be in courses. Yet what could be a rich source of description is often the poorest: Mor Harchol-Balter reports that at CMU, they call a certain class of these “DWIC” letters (“did well in class”), which are effectively useless.

Give us context. What textbook did you use? How much of it did you cover? Did the student take it earlier than usual?

Don't just report the grade; put it in perspective. How many students got that grade or better? If your transcript isn't nuanced (e.g., at Brown we give only letter grades with no +/- decorations), fill it in. Did they do an exceptional job at something? (Tell us what they did!) Were they biased towards some aspect of your class? (For instance, in my programming languages course, some take much better to the theoretical aspects, while others prefer the systems work. The transcript won't reveal this, but it's extremely valuable information for a professor trying to decide whether or not to recruit a student.)

Reporting on Personality

This is tricky, but it can help a potential advisor assess how good a fit the student will be. Some advisors work best with quiet, shy students, others with boisterous ones. Be as honest as necessary. For instance, I've had the pleasure of working with numerous exceptional students, but

a few have had more peculiar personalities than the norm. In such cases, I write a “care and feeding” section (this goes back to the bit about credibility). I have never yet known this to be held against the student.

Corporate Letters

An important special case is the corporate letter: when you, the letter-writer, work in industry and have no academic affiliation. Many corporate letters (like many academic letters, but more so) tend to be vapid, clearly written in a different culture and for a different audience. Unless they actually did academic research with you, here are some suggestions for improving them.

A common mistake is to focus on teamwork. This is important even in academia, but often this is the *primary* focus of the letter, which makes it less valuable. Of course we care about it, but it's secondary to their technical skills.

- Tell us if they learned something particularly quickly, mastered a complex technology, or solved a problem others were stuck on. Give us a paragraph of details.
- If you have a concrete reason to evaluate research potential, do so concretely. Otherwise, don't bother.
- Give us a brief bio-sketch, including educational qualifications.
- Put the applicant in context, and tell us the context. It's fine to relate it to your own student days, or to your experience hiring students. E.g.:

Compared to the students I studied with at Cucumber and Melon University, and the ones I now recruit from there, I would put him in the top 10%.

Don't Personalize (or, How to Personalize)

Don't waste your time personalizing the letter for each school, unless you *really* personalize it. I'm not impressed by your mail-merge program. Absolutely nobody cares that you don't list Brown's postal address at the top of the letter. Spend that extra minute or five making the letter better. Besides, invariably, you will mess up: every year we get a handful of letters stuffed in the wrong envelope. (Just because they're good enough for Harvard doesn't mean they're good enough for *us*! [I hope Greg Morrisett doesn't read this.])

Of course, you could *really* personalize a letter by writing a paragraph specific to an institution. But only do this if you really have something to say. For instance, I sometimes write,

Hey folks—Eva Echidna is more dedicated than Jonas Jackaroo and every bit as smart as Walter Wallaby, both of whom are past students of mine who appear to be thriving in your program.

You could do this with LaTeX or Word macro trickery, but you know what I do? I just write the paragraph by hand. It's quicker, easier, and even has the feel of authenticity, because everyone knows professors can't afford machines that simulate hand-writing: only alumni offices have *that* kind of money on campus.

A simpler, but also important, level of personalization is to take into account the quality of the target institution. Sometimes, students apply to schools well beyond their quality, and you may not be able to talk them out of it (nor, perhaps, should you; they're just exercising their freedom). You may consider having slightly different letters, one for each level of institution. A cheap way to achieve the same effect is to simply mark different boxes in the tables you're asked to fill in (e.g., mark them in a higher percentile for schools where you think they belong, and a lower percentile for places where they will be overmatched).

While we're at it, here's a great instance of customization gone wrong (the ellipses are mine, the rest is literal text):

It is my pleasure to recommend ... be admitted to the PhD in Computer Science program at Brown University. I am an associate professor in the Department of Computer Science, the University of ..., where I have taught for [THIS MANY] years.

Didn't even proof-read it, eh?

Ask Your Student for Help

Ah yes! Here's where I tell you to ask the student to write a draft of their own letter. Not.

Asking students to write even a draft of their own letter is one of the shabbiest practices I can imagine. Yes, I know, many otherwise respectable people do it (I've even had more than one letter-writer of mine—people I respect profoundly—ask me to). I've heard arguments about how it helps a student demonstrate professionalism, maturity, and so on. This isn't the place to explain why I'm completely unswayed.

So what do I mean?

I [tell my students](#) to give me a list of everything about them that they think is relevant. I explicitly tell them to brag (some students are shy and may not give themselves enough credit otherwise): filtering their input is my job, not theirs, and I say so. Sometimes I do get items that are over-the-top, but no harm done. Much more often a student will remind me of something they did that I had forgotten, but was well worth remembering.

In particular, for my top research students who are currently working with me, I have no shortage of information. But for the others, or ones I haven't worked with in a while, this helps immensely. Some item suddenly brings them alive after several years, helping me reconstruct forgotten details and provide an illustration or two.

Tell Us About Relevant Things That Didn't Happen

Sometimes the negative spaces also matter: a statement like

Despite my best efforts to persuade her to work with me, Eva decided to spend her second summer working for the Rocky Raccoon Corporation, a local maker of surveillance equipment. Because of this I cannot say much about her research skills, but I'm told she did good work there. Moreover, her experience in industry convinced her she would rather be in graduate school.

can, in some contexts, tell the reader a lot.

Help Your Students Form a Strategy

It's very frustrating to get three essentially identical letters. If you are the advisor (or even simply someone who thinks the student deserves to do well), take a little time to help students plan out their application strategy. Ask them who their other writers are, help them find writers who can highlight all their strengths, and identify pointless overlap. Summarize anything you think we should know about: e.g.,

I know that Eva did a superb project with Prof Dolfenfuss—I was blown away by the creativity of their work on intrusion detection for raccoons that raid pumpkin patches. She's told me she has asked Dr. D. for a letter, so I trust he will elaborate.

Just Say No

Don't write a letter because you're feeling badly for a student. We can tell from your letter, and it won't help the student one bit. Just say no. If you really care for the student, spend that time instead helping him find letter-writers who can better get across his talents. Heck, maybe he shouldn't be applying to graduate school at all, at least not right now. A few minutes of your time may save him years of his.

Practice the Fundamentals

Mail the darned thing in on time! We don't begin to read applications until they are “sufficiently complete” to be worth the time. While you're crafting your prose for the Paris Review (and fidgeting with the details of your mail merge program), your student's folder is becoming close friends with the [historic, 200+-year-old, pre-Revolutionary War](#) dust in the corner of some office building at Brown.

Graduate School Recommendation



December xx, 20xx

To the Review Committee:

I am pleased to write a letter of recommendation for Janet Lerner, an honors undergraduate student in our program. I have known Janet for more than two years. I came to know her very well when she was a student in my economic geography course. This summer, I hired her to work on an NSF-sponsored research project on Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change. And for the past six months, we have been developing a laboratory manual for my undergraduate course on the global economy. It is on the basis of this extensive experience that I write a letter of unequivocal support.

Janet is an undergraduate student in the honors program at Mythic University. The honors program is designed to provide the educational experience of a small Ivy League college within a large public university. To be accepted, a student must have high SAT scores, be an excellent writer, and have very good high school grades. Students fulfill their course requirements by taking honors courses or by selecting a combination of classes with a heavy emphasis on graduate seminars and independent reading courses. Students must maintain a GPA of 3.2 or better in all courses in order to remain in the honors program. Janet has fulfilled this requirement admirably, maintaining a GPA of 3.8 or better throughout her career. Over the last few years, Janet designed a difficult curriculum for herself and has been very successful in combining graduate seminars and advanced undergraduate reading courses to fulfill her degree requirements. She is comfortable with herself and is well-recognized by her peer group. She, along with her peers from the honors program, will enter the nation's best graduate schools next year in such varied fields as medicine, law, and other allied social sciences. She seeks to enroll in your graduate planning program.

Janet is an enthusiastic, energetic, and exceptionally well-organized student. She writes beautifully, is widely read, and demonstrates good quantitative skills. In my economic geography course, she was the best student in the class. Her performance exceeded that of the incoming graduate students, including an NSF fellowship recipient. She always came to class prepared and was clearly far above her peers in understanding and appreciating the course material.

I have been especially impressed by Janet's determination and sparkle. Her work on the Model United Nations program (MUN) is an extremely large responsibility. The Model United Nations program convenes approximately 1000 high school students from around the world to simulate the experience of the UN. Janet has responsibility for designing and executing all phases of the simulation. She reviews the agendas of the UN over the previous year, and then collaboratively develops the student-run assembly

Letter to Recommend Janet Lerner—2

agenda. To undertake this task successfully, she must understand international relations, international political economy, and world economic development issues. Her UN work has clearly influenced her interests and has been a very broadening experience for her. I am sure one explanation for why she has done so well in courses with me is that she understands the geography of the global economy from the simulated, yet very real-world perspective of the Model United Nations program.

Concerning her potential as a teaching assistant, Janet has detailed experience in developing educational materials for courses. After many years of dissatisfaction with economic geography texts, I decided I would develop a laboratory manual for my introductory course. Based on Janet's superior performance in the course I employed her to put the manual together. Although we talked at length about the project and I gave her broad outlines for each segment, nonetheless the lab manual is very much her creation. It is a five-assignment workbook built around a hypothetical scenario in which the student is a staff advisor to a program officer of the Ford Foundation. The assignments require that students complete a thorough analysis of a country, including an economic history, demographic analysis, trade assessment, and policy proposal. The manual is designed such that a student will be able to retrieve the necessary quantitative and cartographic information to complete the projects. Each assignment results in a memo based on a template Janet developed. Janet identified and tested all sources listed in the manual, and this project would not have reached fruition without Janet's tireless efforts.

I know from discussions with colleagues and graduate students in my department that we all think Janet is a very special student. I have enjoyed getting to know her as a person and find her surprisingly mature for her young age, quite capable of working entirely on her own in a self-directed manner. I am pleased that Janet is planning to enroll in graduate school starting this fall. I have no doubt that she has the skills, focus, and determination to successfully complete a master's degree in a timely fashion. I also believe she will seek to complete a Ph.D.

Janet is a rare find. She is well-trained, ambitious, and yet very open-minded and even self-effacing. I believe she will be successful wherever she ends up attending graduate school. She will be a dedicated student and a competent professional.

I recommend her very highly and without reservation.

Sincerely,
Janet Teacher
Janet Teacher
Professor of Geography

Graduate School Recommendation



November xx, 20xx

Letter of recommendation for Janet Lerner's graduate application

Janet Lerner is the best student I have this year, and I enthusiastically support her graduate application. She is highly intelligent, works well as a team member, and has demonstrated leadership potential. I enthusiastically supported her application for the student position on the Mythic University Board of Trustees for the same reasons. She was the runner-up for that distinguished post, and Mythic University lost out on a true leader. But I believe her time is yet to come.

Janet has taken only one class with me, but we have maintained contact through discussions in my office and on the squash court. She is an excellent student—she received an A in my class and was among the top two or three students in all facets of the course. She writes well, she is very analytical, she is articulate, and she is prepared. But the A hardly did justice to her performance in my class. A major component of this class was a local government simulation. Students played a variety of roles and dealt with issues given to them in the simulation textbook and by me, as simulation leader. We spent over three weeks of class time on this activity, and it allowed me to evaluate my students' strengths and weaknesses in some depth. Janet did not simply succeed in this simulation; rather, she *owned* it. The simulation included a zoning/development problem that is intended to be virtually intractable given the assigned roles and other simulation constraints. Janet beat the simulation. Her proposals were innovative, but within the confines of the simulation rules. She developed a solution, built the necessary coalition, developed creative compromises, and worked through to the proposal's enactment.

For her ingenuity, creativity, adherence to role, and enthusiasm, she received the class award for the most valuable simulation participant. But from my perspective her contribution went beyond this performance. Through the simulation Janet helped to set a tone, to take the simulation seriously and never say "it's not real" as would many of the other students. She showed leadership within the simulation and within the class.

Reflective now about Janet's contribution to the class, I would add one more point about the simulation. Janet was also the most severe critic of its design and my operational decisions. She challenged me to keep the simulation realistic and to avoid contradictions and implausible developments. Janet is critical, perceptive, aggressive, but not overpowering. Her criticisms were honest and appropriate.

Needless to say, I would love to teach a whole class full of Janet Lerner's. She will make an outstanding graduate student. She has the intellectual capacity and she has the ambition. Based on what I have seen of her in the classroom and on the squash court, she also has the drive. And she will bring to graduate school a breadth rarely seen among graduate students: She double-majored in Political Science and Art History, a combination you do not often see. She speaks easily, and unusually perceptively, about politics, sports, the university community and academia in general, and anything else that comes up.

She will be a rare catch for any graduate school, and I will watch her career develop with great interest and high expectations.

Sincerely,
Janet Teacher
Janet Teacher
Assistant Professor of Political Science

Graduate Scholarship Recommendation



MU

MYTHIC
UNIVERSITY

123 Ivy Road, Mythic CA 99999 555-123-4567

OCTOBER xx, 20xx

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 Téacher
John Teacher, PhD
Instructor in Film Studies



武 汉 大 学

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Dear Admissions Committee:

As the mentor for Ms. Qianwen Zhang, I have the distinct pleasure to write a recommendation letter for her, who does excellent work in my laboratory. My acquaintance with her, spreading over two years, has given me an opportunity to witness her growth from a novice to a qualified undergraduate researcher. Therefore, I highly recommend her to your distinguished program.

I became Qianwen's advising professor through the Candlelight Guide program which was launched by our department to track the undergraduates' academic performance. Frequent meetings and discussions led me to find that this young lady displayed great enthusiasm for computer science discipline and did very well in all of her professional courses. I was very happy that she expressed eagerness to join my research team and get involved in research on data management. Via subsequent working together with her, I have further confirmed that Qianwen is an intelligent, dependable and dedicated person, who is always ready to achieve her goals.

Although she was unfamiliar with her first project here during the initial period, she worked extremely hard and adapted herself to it fairly fast. After reading the technical reports and related codes, she soon caught on to how our trusted web email system worked and could generate interesting and thought-provoking ideas to further optimize the system efficiency and security in weekly seminars. Qianwen also showed remarkable problem-solving capabilities. There was a time when our trusted email system could not classify emails automatically midway through the experiment. She spent a full weekend troubleshooting the system. Finally she made it and corrected the minor but critical error, thus perfecting our system.

Moreover, I was deeply impressed by Qianwen's commitment to scientific research and outstanding programming qualification. Once we needed experimental support for our original proposals, she would immediately design programs that could support the theoretical analysis. A student without a quick analysis of complex problems and deep understanding of knowledge in algorithms and data structures could never accomplish such jobs so smoothly. In particular, I cannot fail to mention that Qianwen nearly devoted all her time to our later project in the laboratory, which illustrated her high level of motivation. She was usually the first one in the lab in the morning and the last to leave in the evening, and made a significant contribution to the whole group's accomplishments. Her devotion and aptitude for research are sure to bring her more scientific fruits in her forthcoming study.

Except for academic dedication, I am informed that Qianwen has also engaged herself



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in a lot of social voluntary work. As the vice minister of the Youth Volunteer Club in our department, she continuously led her club members to repair the computers for free in the local community and spent a summer in some undeveloped areas of China teaching children there the basic computer skills. I am so glad that she not only focuses on her individual growth but also delivers her best to help others.

All in all, Qianwen exhibits great potential as an eligible graduate student. Clearly she is one of the best few undergraduates I have ever cooperated with in my laboratory. I would very much like her to undertake our graduate program. Even though I hope she stays here, I think she would benefit more from the overseas research environment and bring exceptional vigor to your program. I give her my highest recommendation.

Sincerely,

Zhiyong Peng
Ph.D., Professor, Vice Dean
School of Computer, Wuhan University
Email: peng@whu.edu.cn
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学生请老师写推荐信，首先要试探老师愿意不愿意写，通过老师的态度来判断他能不能写好推荐信。比如有的老师非常热情地答应，非常愿意帮忙；而有的老师态度冷淡，话中带有保留，那么学生应该不必勉强这种带有保留的老师。但是有一点必须强调的是：自己的直接导师必须出示推荐信，否则在用人单位眼里看来就是"redflag"，看到这种情况（没有导师推荐信）就枪毙。

老师只要答应了请求，一般不会写坏话。在 Kathy Baker 的 *At the Helm: A Laboratory Navigator* 一书里，作者从用人者的角度介绍到："You will seldom receive an overtly bad recommendation. Candidates will usually request recommendations only from people who think they will give a good report. In addition, most people who would write a bad recommendation will inform the candidate." 但是不写坏话就够了吗？Kathy Baker 说："A P.I. may write a less-than-honest recommendation to make sure that the candidate finds a job, i.e., to be sure that the candidate leave the P.I.'s lab... But usually, even the most desperate person will not be totally dishonest and will couch their problems in telltale phrases hidden among the compliments." 也就是说，有的导师虽然看似在说好话，但其实锦里藏针，把一些话潜伏在句子里面！也就是说，话中有话！让我们阅读书上举出的例子：

Reading Comprehension: Success in 20 Minutes a Day 里面举出一个例子："Nicole Bryan usually completes her work on time and checks it carefully. She is a competent lab technician and is familiar with several ways to evaluate test results. She has some knowledge of the latest medical research, which has been helpful". 这个虽然没有说一句坏话，但是绝对不是好的推荐信！用人单位看到这样的推荐信保证当场枪毙了。

那么，怎样写才是好的推荐信呢？Reading Comprehension: Success in 20 Minutes a Day 里面举出另外一个例子："Nicole Bryan always submits her work promptly and checks it judiciously. She is an excellent lab technician and has mastered several ways to evaluate test results. She has an extensive knowledge of the latest medical research, which has been invaluable."

两段话的字面意思几乎一样，但是为什么差别这么明显？读者们，你们体会到了吗？

再比如 *At the Helm: A Laboratory Navigator* 一书里，作者举例："I am writing in support of XX for his application to graduate school. XX was in my lab for 3 years and was a conscientious worker, always doing what was suggested. Although his work resulted in only one senior author paper, he is an author on two other papers in the lab and was always willing to help the more junior lab members." 这看上去是一封好的推荐信，也许很多想出国的学生得到的推荐信也是这样的，但是事实是这恰恰是一封坏的推荐信！

好的推荐信除了没有“话中有话”以外，还表现在“吹捧”的程度上，网上资料 *How to Write a Good Recommendation* (The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 31, 2008) 说："As

one associate professor of English noted, 'the level of praise is so high that any assessment short of 'brilliant' can look tepid. That means that any consideration of a candidate's weakness is probably a kiss of death.'也就是说，美国人就是喜欢“吹”的，推荐信里面不写高度赞扬的话，被推荐人就很难得到职位。中国人喜欢用"good"来形容一个人，但是在美国看推荐信的人那里，good 就是一般，outstanding, excellent, brilliant, extraordinary, superb 才是好！

推荐人写信的语气语调（tone）也非常重要。坏的推荐信采用一种不瘟不火、有气无力、带有保留、有种不大认识被推荐人的感觉的语调，这种语调叫做 cool, lukewarm, tepid。有这种语调，保证被推荐人会吃大亏。而写得好的推荐信正面、富有激情（passion），如燃烧的火焰。这正如收到推荐信后，用人单位打电话给你老板。虽然你的老板没有说你坏话，但是有气无力，没有富有激情地力荐你说你是百年不遇的千里马缺你不行，你就是拿不到工作。

写推荐信要注意：不要只是吹捧而忘了举出实例、给出细节！比如说，推荐人说该生科研能力强，那么请给出个例子并举出具体的数字！网上资料 How to Write a Good Recommendation (The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 31,2008)说："The dean of academic affairs we talked with said that details help to give 'a rationale for the superlatives--not just that 'Dr. Smith is the greatest academic of her generation' but why she is special."该资料还说："Details can help those reading the letters get an idea of the quality of the relationship, and how the referee regards the applicant beyond the effusive praise that is often standard."知道这个道理后，需要写推荐信的人可以主动给推荐人提供自己最新的背景材料，如简历、情况总结、发表文章等，并和推荐人多沟通，商量你要强调自己什么。

最后，看推荐信的人不但看推荐人写了什么，而且看推荐人没有写什么！在 Kathy Baker 的 At the Helm: A Laboratory Navigator 一书里，作者从用人者的角度介绍到："Look for things not said. Look for the qualities you do require."比如，很多准备出国的人在自己起草的推荐信里面都漏掉“积极参加系里的学术报告和国内学术会议”这一句话，还有的人缺乏对于人相处、合作的描述。再比如，出国读研究生主要需要科研能力，但是如果推荐信上写该生花了大量时间在下象棋上或者唱卡拉 OK 上，或者助人为乐上，却只字不提该生的科研能力、科研成果和成果的意义，这有用吗？

写推荐信的学问很多，好的推荐信和坏的推荐信，一看就能看出来。这篇博文是写给学生和老师看的。如果学生读者发现自己老师没有写好推荐信，欢迎把本文推荐给老师。如果觉得有启发，欢迎学习并推荐给同学。