

# John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

## Writing Recommendation Letters for Students

As a first-year writing seminar (FWS) teacher, you may be asked by students to write letters of recommendation for them for internships, campus jobs and organizations, or even for graduate school. While juniors and seniors should be requesting letters from faculty in their majors, who they have worked closely with, first-year students may have limited interactions and relationships with faculty and advisors. That is, you may be one of the only teacher's they've worked with closely or had in a small classroom context. Thus, it's useful to be prepared for recommendation requests, by having some guidelines to give to students and an approach to drafting these letters.

### Before Writing a Letter

Whether you're engaging with a student via email or talking with them in person, you should request the following:

- Recommendation expectations—while you will be asked for recommendation letters, some positions merely require an online form or even a phone call as more of a reference check
- Letter due date
- Student resume and any writing sample/essay they wrote for the purpose (to apply)
- Information about the position, program, etc.

You may also ask the student to do some work that will help you write your letter and cater it to their purposes. For instance, you might ask them to write up short responses to the following questions. Their answers can help you focus your letter or you might even quote from their responses in your letter.

- What do you want me to highlight from our work together and why?
- What did you learn in our FWS class and how do you think it applies to what you're applying for?
- What do you think your strengths are as a writer and student? How might these apply to the position you're applying for?
- Why do you think I should recommend you?

If there's anything questionable in the student's behavior, request a meeting to discuss:

- What did you learn from X issue that came up in our class? (tardiness, a low grade, etc.)
- How should I frame X issue in your letter?
- Or, Why should I overlook X Issue in my letter?

Also, remember it's important to set boundaries. You might not want to agree to write a letter of recommendation in the following situations. However, make sure that you're upfront with students and quickly tell them that you're unable to write a letter for them and why (so they can learn from this experience).

- Students list you as a reference without informing you;
- You can't, in good conscience, write a letter that genuinely is supportive and positive of their work and engagement in your class;
- Students ask for a letter without enough time for you to write it;
- You have personal issues or are otherwise overwhelmed with work.

## What kinds of information should you include?

- How you know the student (your role, length of time)
- Your understanding of the student's strengths
- Useful context: what did the student do with you? (select relevant information about your course--assignments, course focus, etc.)
- Student engagement with course, work ethic, personality
- Quality of the student's work
- Quote from student writing (if this seems appropriate and valuable)
- What characteristics and qualities make the student a good fit for what they're applying for--if you can, try to describe not just what they did for your course, but also how that makes them a strong candidate for position X, grad school, an internship, etc.

## Can you craft a reference letter template? Is this a good idea?

Yes & No. Ideally, it's always best to be specific and cater letters for specific students and their specific audiences.

However, if you're recommending students from the same course--there are sections that you can keep fairly similar. For instance, you might have a template description of your big assignment, an overview of the course, or an intro and conclusion. Your description of the work that students do can be reused.

An advantage of a template is that if you get requests at the last minute from students you'd otherwise like to support, it's less of a challenge. And, you can always ditch the template or do more.

## ProTips for Writing Letters

- Try to capture not only WHAT the student has done, but the VALUE of the work/activity. How does this work, these skills, or their personality traits potentially transfer to other contexts, graduate school, or jobs?
- Get a digital departmental/university letterhead (all departments have one for this purpose)
- Create a digital signature (you can save this and use it forever)
- Request a student's resume--you want to provide a small sense that you know the student--naming their major and the scope of their work is a small move that adds a lot
- Ask your friends, faculty advisors, or Knight Institute faculty if you can see their letters of recommendation as models

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