

By Roger S. Day

# Want a letter? You write it for me

A few years back, I asked two colleagues for letters of support for my grant proposal. One colleague drafted a letter personally. The other, citing heavy time pressures, asked me to draft the letter myself. I was sympathetic, but I felt queasy pretending to be someone else as I described my own work. To appease my conscience, I wrote as myself: “I” meant me and “you” meant my colleague. This was risky. If the colleague simply signed and sent the letter, neglecting the required pronoun switcheroo, the letter would instantly reveal its true originator. I am grateful that the colleague saved me that embarrassment, and even added authentic language to the letter.

Later, at a workshop on winning grant-writing strategies, I asked the instructor about this practice, describing my discomfort. The response was, “Get over it.” The practice is common, after all. A letter from an established senior person—a VIP for short—can strengthen an application for school admission, a job, or a grant. To write an informed, original letter from scratch, however, would require more knowledge of the candidate and the project than the VIP has time to acquire. It would be a poor professional investment, with the VIP’s own duties, articles, and grant proposals clamoring for attention. Furthermore, as a salary comparison would show, the VIP’s time is far more precious than the applicant’s. (But how valid is this?

Who knows what the applicant might achieve years hence? What was an hour of young Einstein’s time worth?)

So the VIP says, “Sure! Glad to help! Of course, I’m a busy person. Draft it for me.” The applicant may be startled. How awkward, trying to write words of praise about oneself while pretending that they are someone else’s. How much flattery is too much, or too little? Besides, isn’t this a deception that betrays academia’s dedication to truth?

In fact, a reviewer can often detect words that originated with the applicant. The discovery correctly devalues the letter, harming the applicant’s chances. When the VIP does write an original and well-informed letter, the reviewer may still assume that its authorship, like that of so many other letters, is partly misrepresented. This is an injustice to both the applicant and the responsible VIP.

Pity the applicant receiving two such requests, feeling doubly queasy trying to draft two different letters for the same committee. Facing time pressure, the applicant may give both VIPs similar drafts, hoping they will make



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the extra effort to customize their letters enough to disguise the common origin. On a committee reviewing one such applicant, I read two letters that were virtually identical. The applicant took the fall, but the fault lies with the two VIPs, whose indifference doomed the application.

The worst consequence of this practice is the message imprinted on a young applicant’s mind: “Everybody does it.” Apparently, minor frauds like this are not just condoned but expected by academic leaders. Apparently, people rise in the system by offloading work to the less powerful. Apparently, the words of the more prestigious are not golden; sometimes they are not even their own. Perhaps around the corner a slightly

larger fraud is acceptable, including those too-common courtesy authorships for the highly placed. Then that leads to larger ones: covering up data problems and, ultimately, falsifying data. Thus do we introduce young people to our system. Several students I know lost some respect for VIPs who had students writing letters that they should be writing themselves.

You can help fix this. If you are a VIP asked to write a letter of support and you write it yourself, just add a notation: “The content of this letter is original with the undersigned author.” Applicant, go ahead and encourage your VIP to add it. The readers will know to exempt the letter from the usual degraded valuation. If this practice catches on, our scientific culture may swing back toward reverence for integrity. ■

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