

Writing a Letter of Recommendation for Law School Admissions

Through the requested Letters of Recommendation, law schools hope to gain insight into a candidate's promise in the study of law, so they value honesty and candor from the writer. Letters that reflect real knowledge of an applicant's performance and character are the most useful to the admissions committee and, therefore, to the candidate. One or two paragraph letters full of generalities, however complementary, are not particularly helpful. In fact, some schools have begun using the term "Letter of *Evaluation*" to clarify what they would like to see in these letters.

Law schools are generally looking for information on the following characteristics and abilities. You are unlikely to have direct knowledge of the applicant's abilities all of these areas, so you are advised to focus on the areas that you can speak to the most effectively. It is helpful to applicants to tell them what you can address so that they can find others who can focus on the remaining areas.

Intelligence (analytical skills, rigor of thought, reasoning abilities): Give your assessment of the applicant's analytical skills and reasoning ability and provide examples. Discuss his/her ability to deal with complex or abstract ideas. Also explain any special circumstances that may have affected the applicant's academic record so that it does not reflect his/her true ability.

Independence of thought (originality, imagination, creativity): Provide an assessment of the applicant's demonstrated ability to come up with new and creative solutions, or to conceptualize information in new ways.

Communication Skills (oral and written): Does the applicant's written work demonstrate mastery of the conventions of English? Is it clear, well written and vibrant? Is the student articulate when speaking in class or giving presentations?

Motivation and Industry (persistence, efficiency, self discipline): To what extent has the applicant demonstrated these traits? Is there any reason to doubt the applicant's commitment to the study of law or diligence as a student?

Judgment and Maturity (conscientiousness, common sense): Is the applicant consistent with follow through with assignments and other responsibilities? Does he/she know when to press forward with an argument and when to back off? Give examples of how the applicant has demonstrated these traits.

Leadership Skills: Provide your assessment of the applicant's willingness and ability to lead others. How was he/she able to engage, motivate, and persuade, while also encouraging input from others?

Character: Is the applicant someone who you would choose as an attorney? Does he/she enjoy the respect and trust of professors, fellow students, or colleagues?

Tips for Making Your Letter of Recommendation Stand Out

- 1) Ask the applicant to provide as much information as possible--Personal Statement, resume, transcripts, papers, assignments, or work reports, etc. Your letter should dovetail with, not duplicate, the rest of the application. Try to provide information and details not available elsewhere.
- 2) Briefly describe your qualifications for evaluating the applicant and for comparing him or her to other applicants.
- 3) Describe how well you know the applicant.
- 4) Choose two or three qualities, perhaps from the list on the previous page, that you have observed in the applicant.
- 5) In discussing those qualities, support your statements by describing specific instances where you saw those qualities demonstrated. Be as concrete and detailed as possible.
- 6) Try to quantify the applicant's strengths, or rank him or her against other applicants that you have observed.
- 7) Avoid generalities or platitudes.
- 8) Include some mild criticism, typically either the flip side of a strength, or balanced by efforts by the applicant to correct the weakness.
- 9) If you have first-hand knowledge of special circumstances that have affected the applicant's performance, and you do not believe measures such as the GPA are a true indication of the applicant's ability, describe the circumstance and describe your assessment of his or her true ability.
- 10) Discuss the applicant's potential for success in rigorous graduate work. If you have sufficient knowledge of the discipline, discuss his or her potential for the study of law in particular.