

## **WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION FOR APPLICANTS TO LAW SCHOOL**

Letters of recommendation are an important and required component of a student's application to law school. The application process has become increasingly competitive, and a persuasive recommendation letter can have a significant impact on an individual's candidacy. As one of about three letters written on behalf of UVA applicants to law school, yours is essential to the admissions process. The Preprofessional Advising office is aware of the substantial time commitment involved in writing letters of recommendation. After reading this material, if you have questions about letter-writing or the law school application process, contact us at 924-8900. We are located inside University Career Services in Bryant Hall.

### **The Basics**

- Think carefully about how well you know the student who is requesting a recommendation letter. Do you know him/her well enough to write an endorsement for law school? If for any reason you do not feel that you can write positively on a student's behalf, be honest with him/her and decline to write the letter.
- We advise prelaw students to give recommenders information about their academic pursuits, employment history, extracurricular activities, and community service. A writing sample from a course assignment may also be useful in evaluating the individual's language skills. Ask for this material if it is not provided.
- Sit down with the student and discuss his/her interest in the legal field and motivations for earning the J.D. degree.
- Confidentiality. It is the student's right to decide if the letter will remain confidential or non-confidential. The LSDAS (Law School Data Assembly Service) Letter of Recommendation cover sheet, provided by the individual you are recommending, should indicate that he/she has waived the access rights to your letter. Confidential letters are taken much more seriously than non-confidential letters, and we strongly encourage students to keep their letters confidential.
- All letters should be on official letterhead. Sign your letter. Make sure to use your full name and professional title.
- A student may provide you with a school-specific recommendation form, including a chart or grid where you are asked to rank students. You are welcome to complete this form if you would like, particularly if you know the student exceptionally well, but you are not required to do so. All U.S. law schools accept the general letters submitted by you to LSDAS and distributed to schools on the student's behalf.

### **What to Include**

An author's personal style influences the format for his/her letters. However, many writers follow a composition similar to the following:

- Express your pleasure at having the opportunity to recommend the applicant.
- Indicate how long and in what capacity you have known the applicant.
- Note that you would recommend this student specifically for law school.
- Explore how this applicant compares in intellectual ability to other students you have encountered this year or in previous years. This is important, as it can be difficult for admissions committees to interpret your enthusiasm for the student without a standard for comparison.

- Evaluate the student's potential in the legal field. Has this student demonstrated an interest in the law? Do they strike you as someone who will make a good lawyer some day? Do they seem like someone you would consult for legal advice?
- Discuss the student's coursework, including the nature of the course(s), difficulty of coursework/major, grades received, notable work assignments, etc. This may be a good opportunity to reflect on the student's academic ability, including attention to detail, capacity for hard work and commitment, foreign language skills, organizational ability, originality, observational abilities, and resourcefulness. If applicable, pay particular attention to the student's research skills, as these are important to success as a law student.
- Discuss a few of the student's strengths that you know well and wish to highlight. The following are suggested areas that law schools will find particularly helpful:
  - *Language and communication skills.* This is the area of most interest to law school admissions committees, including clear and effective oral and written expression, and the ability to read and listen carefully and effectively. What kinds of written assignments were required in a course? Did the class size allow for significant student participation?
  - *Intellectual ability,* such as capacity for critical thinking and the ability to understand, analyze, and synthesize information, deductive, inductive, and analogous reasoning ability, intellectual curiosity, and problem-solving skills.
  - *Interpersonal skills,* including ability to collaborate and get along with peers, response to criticism, leadership, and attitude toward supervision.
  - *Personal qualities,* such as maturity, responsibility, creativity, ability to handle stress, persistence, demonstrated judgment, motivation, self-awareness, and initiative.
  - *Extracurricular activities,* including depth of involvement and achievements.
  - *Special attributes, assets, or circumstances.* Have you observed any special talents in this student not previously mentioned? Are there any extenuating circumstances that might have negatively impacted their application? If you have served as an advisor to this student and can help to explain a poor semester or other anomaly on the transcript, do not hesitate to do so. Law schools appreciate as much context as possible for reading transcripts.
- You may wish to conclude your letter with a reaffirmation of your endorsement of the student's application and an offer to answer follow-up questions.

### **What to Avoid**

- Don't speculate. Give concrete examples to illustrate your characterizations of the student. Base your statements on observations and information obtained through direct contact with the student or their school record.
- Avoid discussing an individual's race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, age, disability, citizenship status, or marital status. Also avoid commenting on a student's appearance, family background, health, or other personal circumstances unless they are immediately relative to their application.
- Students should not be asked to write their own letters of recommendation. In addition, if another person assists you in writing the letter, the pronoun "we" should be used throughout the letter and it should be co-signed.

### **How to Submit Your Letter**

Recommendation letters are submitted to law schools through the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS), a service of the Law School Admission Council. The applicant should provide you with a LSDAS Letter of Recommendation cover sheet and a stamped envelope addressed to LSDAS. After you have completed your letter, fill out the bottom portion of the LSDAS form, enclose it in the envelope with your letter, and send it to LSDAS via U.S. mail. For more information about LSDAS, visit [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org).