



Toward a Better Letter

Letters of recommendation don't always measure up.
How could they get better?



By Jim Paterson

At a local high school, a counselor and an AP teacher both are again staying late, staring into their computer screens at letters they've been meaning to write for several weeks but never seem to complete. And just up the highway, also behind schedule, a group of college admission counselors are working their way through stacks of similar letters.

They all have something else in common. They aren't certain about the value of the effort.

Letters or recommendation consume a lot of time and thought as they are solicited, written, and read, and, while many high school and college admission officials say that work pays off by providing a university with valuable and sometimes unique information about prospective students, most everyone also agrees they could be more effective.

"Sadly the goals of the letter writer and letter reader are sometimes at odds with each other," said Nathan Kuncel, a professor at the University of Minnesota who has studied letters of recommendation. He said letter writers want students to get in the school of their choice while colleges want clear, accurate information that can help many students improve their status but might exclude others.

Former Dartmouth Director of Admissions Rebecca Sabky was more critical of the process in a recent *New York Times* article, even as she celebrated one letter that had an impact on her (see sidebar).

"Letters of recommendation are typically superfluous, written by people who the applicant thinks will impress a school," she wrote. "They generally fail to provide us with another angle on who the student is, or could be, as a member of our community."

Others, however, think they are useful but could be improved, especially if all three players do a better job of making sure the letters serve the purpose intended: helping the college and the student find the right fit.

"A so-so letter can make a reader question an otherwise solid application," said Suzanne McCray, director of admissions at the University of Arkansas. "But others find a way to lift the student off the page. Those can improve a good, but not great, application and make a committee interview or accept a student or award them a scholarship."

Beth Wisner, executive director of admissions at the University of Vermont, agreed.

"The most memorable are those that tell a story about a student and bring it to life," she said. "I want to get a sense of the student's personality, or find the student has really made a connection with their high school and the community. That will often make an impact in the review process."

WHERE THEY GO WRONG

Kuncel said the letters aren't as effective as they could be for a few reasons.

The writer typically is biased, he said. A student chooses a reference because they believe that person likes them or admires their work and is therefore a supporter. There also is pressure on letter writers, aware they might diminish the student's chances at the school or that the student could see or hear about the letter.

Generally, experts also say people are flattered to be asked and usually are positive in their comments. In fact, research shows fewer than 7 percent of applicants for schools or jobs receive average or below average assessments.

LETTERS THAT STICK

A recommendation letter played a key role in getting a student into Dartmouth College (NH) recently, not so much because of what it said but because of who it was from and what the relationship behind it said about the student.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Rebecca Sabky, the former head of admission at Dartmouth, tells how the letter on behalf of an applicant from a school janitor convinced the Ivy League school to admit the student.

The custodian wrote about the student's thoughtfulness—the only person in the school who knew the names of every member of the janitorial staff. He turned off lights in empty rooms, consistently thanked the hallway monitor and picked up rooms even if nobody was watching. This student, the custodian wrote, "had a refreshing respect for every person at the school, regardless of position, popularity or clout."

"Over 15 years and 30,000 applications in my admissions career, I had never seen a recommendation from a school custodian," Sabky said. "It gave us a window onto a student's life in the moments when nothing 'counted.' That student was admitted by unanimous vote of the admissions committee."

"Given that most applicants select the people who will be their reference providers, we probably shouldn't be surprised by the lenient ratings," said Michael Aamodt, a psychology professor at Radford University in Virginia, who also researched the process.

He said the writer's personality plays a role: They may not think that a certain good or bad quality is important and downplay it—great social skills or introversion, for instance, or the student's habit of planning poorly and turning in late work, especially if a similar trait afflicts them.

Kuncel said admission officials and others reading letters of recommendations should be aware of bias on both sides and differing goals. However, he and other experts warn against colleges being too cynical about letters of recommendation, discounting or ignoring them and missing good data.

"Even in their current form they actually capture some useful information and can add to admission applications if used correctly. Our research suggests that they give us the most information about a student's motivation and drive, and can meaningfully improve our ability to predict whether they'll finish the degree."

Aamodt said readers should still search for information of value even if letters seem excessively flattering.

"Rather than using letters of recommendation as a separate evaluation tool, admission committees should use them to fill in missing pieces—things such as participating in class discussions or never missing class," he said. "Those are things that are probably not in the application materials."

THE READER'S PERSPECTIVE

Aamodt also said that because writers focus on issues important to them, colleges could get better information if they requested brief letters about specifics. "For example, they might want to know about writing skills, analytical skills, or the ability to work on team projects," he said. In addition, he said individual schools should develop a rating system for their admission



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counselors that ranks letters on certain criteria “to indicate how strong the endorsement is” then factor that into other findings or include it in any statistically-driven selection system.

Deniz Ones, the co-author of Kuncel’s study and a colleague at the University of Minnesota, said letters are more accurate when accompanied by a score, but she recommends a ranking provided by the writer using standardized criteria. And, she said they are more accurate when several writers contribute their thoughts.

Ones also recommends colleges specifically look at characteristics that aren’t captured on other application material such as transcripts and standardized tests. “Discipline, curiosity, typical intellectual engagement, and interests have been shown to relate to academic success,” she said.

To help letter writers, McCray believes it is important for colleges to offer written guidelines or information sessions for counselors and other educators, including AP teachers, who often write recommendation letters.

Giving students specific directions also is important, said Candance Boeninger, director of admissions at Ohio University. “We encourage them to find recommenders who truly know them well and can specifically address whether and how the student is academically prepared to succeed in our environment.”

She says they also tell students to think about what information will enhance their application, consider who can address it, and give the letter writer some guidance about what they hope the letter will address.

Richard Nesbitt, director of admissions at Williams College in Williamston, Massachusetts, suggests colleges seek references from teachers since they work with a student every day. “An effective teacher reference provides a direct assessment of the student’s classroom performance, intellectual engagement, curiosity, creativity, and potential for academic growth,” he said. They know about their ability to read carefully and critically, understand and analyze complex ideas, write clearly and persuasively, engage in class discussion, and manage time and work load efficiently, he said.

“If a student asks for a general recommendation letter,” said Boeninger, “too often that’s all they and the college will get.”

FOR THE WRITERS

Experts say school counselors and others charged with writing letters of recommendation should provide applicable, specific insight.

“The more detailed the letter, the more likely we are to use it in the review of a student file,” said Aundra Anderson, director of admissions at

Washington College (MD). She said standardized forms and block letters are less likely to be used. “Examples are the best. Johnny is a leader? Great, can you give us an example of a time he showcased his leadership skills.”

Nesbitt also believes letter writers should be encouraged to discuss any examples of character, interpersonal and collaborative skills, and resilience that a letter writer directly observed.

“We look for compelling information,” said McCray, “something that goes beyond a list. We look for stories that give a face to the student, that take us beyond service hours, GPA, and scores. What makes the student tick? Is the student really engaged in some way? We know that engagement will transfer to other kinds of involvement as well.”

Writing in *Atlantic* recently, teacher and writer Andrew Simmons put it this way: “My job is not to draw big neon circles around a student’s achievements so that an admissions officer will pay more attention to them. Instead of bragging on behalf of the student, I want to render human the person admissions officers may view as a collection of letters and numbers, to say what those grades and scores cannot.”

He wrote that letter writers should think of themselves as a combination of detective and journalist, accurately investigating the student and reporting their findings.

Related to that, McCray said she appreciates it when a counselor or other letter writer explains an issue that might come up elsewhere in the application. For instance, they might discuss the test anxiety of a student with lower than expected SAT scores, describe how an illness affected a student’s grades for a quarter, or even explain how a once unsuccessful student has developed new habits.

“Is there a hardship that the student has overcome that connects to motivation?”

If the writer has a real abiding concern, what is it? Has the student learned from whatever the issue might be? Can the letter writer make the case for why it should not be an issue?”

Kieron Miller, vice president for enrollment at Whittier College (CA), said recommendation letters should be a narrative more than a checklist.

“The best letters tell stories that offer insight. Stories that reveal something not revealed elsewhere in the application. Stories that are memorable and effective with concrete examples to make a student come alive in a way that goes beyond a list of achievements, adding color to an application.” [↪](#)

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