



How to Write an Effective Letter of Recommendation (LOR)

PURPOSE: A letter of recommendation provides a snapshot of a candidate and it should come from someone in a position to evaluate the candidate's professional competence and personal character. An effective LOR verifies experience, confirms expertise, defines strengths, and builds credibility. It also helps a school learn more about a candidate's character, behaviors, attitudes, and impact. It is one piece of the greater puzzle that a school considers. By taking the time to provide thoughtful feedback, in your own words, you can help that candidate stand out.

CONTENT: Recommendations ask specific questions. Your answers should be full and complete, directly addressing the question prompt(s). If not otherwise instructed, seek to convey some or all of the following:

- Your relationship with the candidate, including how long and in what capacity you have known each other.
- The candidate's duties, responsibilities, assignments, projects, and achievements.
- The candidate's knowledge, leadership skills, judgment, commitment, initiative, creativity, resourcefulness, or other attributes you can illuminate by concrete example.
- How the candidate's performance compares with his/her peers'.
- How the candidate takes feedback.
- How the candidate has grown over time.
- How the candidate has seized opportunities to make a mark.

Broadly speaking, your content should convey the impact the candidate has had on your organization and on other people. It should include specific examples of how the candidate accomplished his/her mandates and of results achieved and the specific capabilities that you saw the candidate demonstrate. Please avoid simply listing what the applicant has done, as such information is already available to the admissions committee in other forms.

If you come from an industry that the admission committee may not be familiar with, help them understand it by giving appropriate details of how things work in your environment. Even if your response must be limited by word-count or space considerations, endeavor to provide one or two examples that will help readers understand your world, and why this candidate stands out from others in that context.

STYLE: The golden rule is "show, don't tell." A list of superlatives may sound laudatory, but it does not convey concrete information about the candidate. Use specific examples that demonstrate the candidate's special qualities and characteristics. Seek to write in a clear, descriptive style with the minimum amount of detail necessary to illuminate your point. Discuss the *whys* and *hows* behind the *whats*. Provide concrete evidence about what you think of the person. Describe how they behave. What do they do extremely well? What weaknesses or areas of improvement have you seen from the candidate? How do they handle rejection or failure?

RATINGS: Many schools ask the recommender to rate the candidate according to a quantifiable scale. Apply these ratings candidly. When a candidate receives blanket top ratings from a recommender, the LOR may seem to lack authenticity and a candidate's true strengths will not stand out. Furthermore, the school will wonder if the candidate really needs them. Perhaps the candidate you are recommending truly deserves top marks in every category. If that is the case, you should include in your narrative the reasons for such stellar ratings. You might also want to indicate that you do not give such "perfect marks" often, if ever. If this candidate is truly one-in-a-million, please show it in your answers.

HOW TO APPROACH WRITING THE LOR: First, gather some details on how the candidate has impacted your organization, for example performance reviews or reports on relevant projects. Then, sit back, reflect and let the questions guide you. Be objective and honest. Ask yourself things like, why is this person's impact significant? If they left tomorrow, how would the organization be affected?

Last updated on 7/6/15; to suggest corrections or to offer feedback, please contact shiela@aigac.org

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HOW CAN THE APPLICANT HELP? Some candidates may want to initiate a productive dialogue by sharing their essays. Others might prepare for you a customized, one-page bulleted summary of program-specific career goals, key work achievements and results. Conscientious candidates will provide you with an overview of how their achievements or results demonstrate specific competencies or character traits that are desired by the target program. Candidates may also suggest specific stories or examples that will help make them come alive on paper. If you receive such information from the candidate, be sure to infuse it with your own perspectives and insights. If you use only the candidate's talking points, the LOR will feel stale and deprive the reader the opportunity of seeing the candidate through your eyes.

SHOULD THE APPLICANT WRITE HIS OR HER OWN LETTER? Admissions committees expect you to write the letter, and not to delegate that task to the applicant. They want to read your ideas in your words. If you ask the applicant to write the letter on your behalf, you may materially hurt the applicant's chances of admission. Typically, letters written by the applicant, even when requested by the recommender, are considered a violation of the school's honor code and may result in denial. Please take the necessary time to write the letter yourself.

NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS: Schools look for candidates with international experience, which often means that candidates' recommenders might not speak English as a first language; however, in a letter of recommendation, the recommender's facility with English is not at issue. A LOR from a non-native English speaker can still get across enough information and insights. Schools are used to assessing content rather than how well a letter is written. You can also write a letter in your native tongue and get it translated.

WHAT IF YOU DO NOT WISH TO PROVIDE A LOR? Have a frank conversation with the applicant about both the positive and negative points that you would want to convey. Then, together with the candidate, you can decide whether you are the right person to provide a recommendation, and, if not, to which other potential recommenders the candidate might turn.