7 Tips for Writing a Winning Letter of Reference

University Communications
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With 2018 Commencement in the rearview mirror, the UA's 5,900 newly minted graduates are now looking ahead to the next step, whether it's graduate school, an internship, a new job or some other adventure.

While some already have their plans confirmed, others are still figuring out their next move, and in the process, they may be looking for letters of reference from faculty and staff they got to know during their time at the UA.

A good letter of reference can go a long way when applying for academic programs, scholarships or jobs, says Mary Frances Kuper, associate director of career education in Student Engagement and Career Development [1].

"For a really strong candidate ? if they've checked all the boxes, they have everything they need, and they're a great fit ? the recommendation serves to confirm that the information they provided lines up. And that confirmation really can help a committee feel great about their decision," Kuper said. "If the application process is really competitive, those recommendations play an even greater role."

To help UA employees provide the best references for students ? or professional colleagues embarking on a new journey ? Kuper offers the following tips.

Get the background

Before starting your letter, you should ask the person you're recommending to provide you with a current resume and a description of the opportunity for which they are applying. You might also ask the person to list for you the three things he or she is most proud of, or what specifically they would like you to address in the letter.

"I see a recommendation as an opportunity to collaborate with the person and support their application," Kuper said.

Be specific

Once you have a description of the job or opportunity, you should tailor your letter to address the requirements outlined in that description, providing specific examples to illustrate why a candidate is a good fit.

"The more specific you can be, the better," Kuper says. "A committee can smell a form letter a mile away, and then it can be doing more harm than good."

Keep it short and sweet
A written recommendation should not exceed one page, and should include the following: an introductory paragraph explaining who you are, how you know the candidate and how long you've known him or her; a couple of paragraphs addressing the candidate's specific strengths and how they relate to the opportunity for which he or she is applying; and a closing paragraph that wraps up the letter and reconfirms why a candidate is a good match.

"You want to put your strongest recommendation up front, and it doesn't need to go on for pages and pages," Kuper said. "It can be four paragraphs and say all that you need to say."

**Avoid biased language**

The UA's Commission on the Status of Women offers guidelines [2](https://csw.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/avoiding_gender_bias_in_letter_of_reference_writing.pdf) for avoiding gender bias in reference writing. The commission advises emphasizing accomplishments rather than effort, focusing on professional contributions rather than personal lives, and avoiding adjectives that evoke gender stereotypes, like "caring," "compassionate" or "warm."

"Talking about someone's personality is not necessarily going to be as powerful as giving examples of their work," says Kuper, who was not involved in drafting the CSW guidelines. "The key is really focusing on the skills they bring to the table and how you see those skills applying. We tend to want to use a lot of superlatives and complimentary adjectives about a person, but those can only really be powerful if they're paired with an example."

**Address growth, not shortcomings**

If asked to speak to a candidate's weaknesses, focus not on negative aspects of their performance but, rather, on steps a candidate may already have taken to overcome a developmental curve or address an area for improvement, Kuper advises.

**Ask a colleague for help**

If you're writing a letter of reference for the first time, Google can turn up lots of examples, but you might also want to ask a colleague for their suggestions, or if they have good examples of letters they have written that they might be willing to share with you, Kuper suggests.

**Know when to say no**

Just because you like a student or colleague doesn't mean you are the best person to provide a letter of reference, Kuper says. You should only provide a written recommendation when you think it will truly help a candidate achieve his or her goal. If students are applying for a competitive graduate program, for example, they are probably best served by references from faculty members who have worked with them in an academic setting. If your interaction with a student was in more of a support service role, you may not be the best reference for them and you might want to encourage them to ask a more appropriate source, Kuper says.

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**Links**
[1] https://career.arizona.edu/