

letterhead, it is often better to use the actual name or specific title of the person to whom you will mail the letter (e.g. "Dear Director of Admission,") than to write a general statement such as "To whom it may concern." Again, specific targeted references are more effective than general ones.

A note about waiving rights to read references:

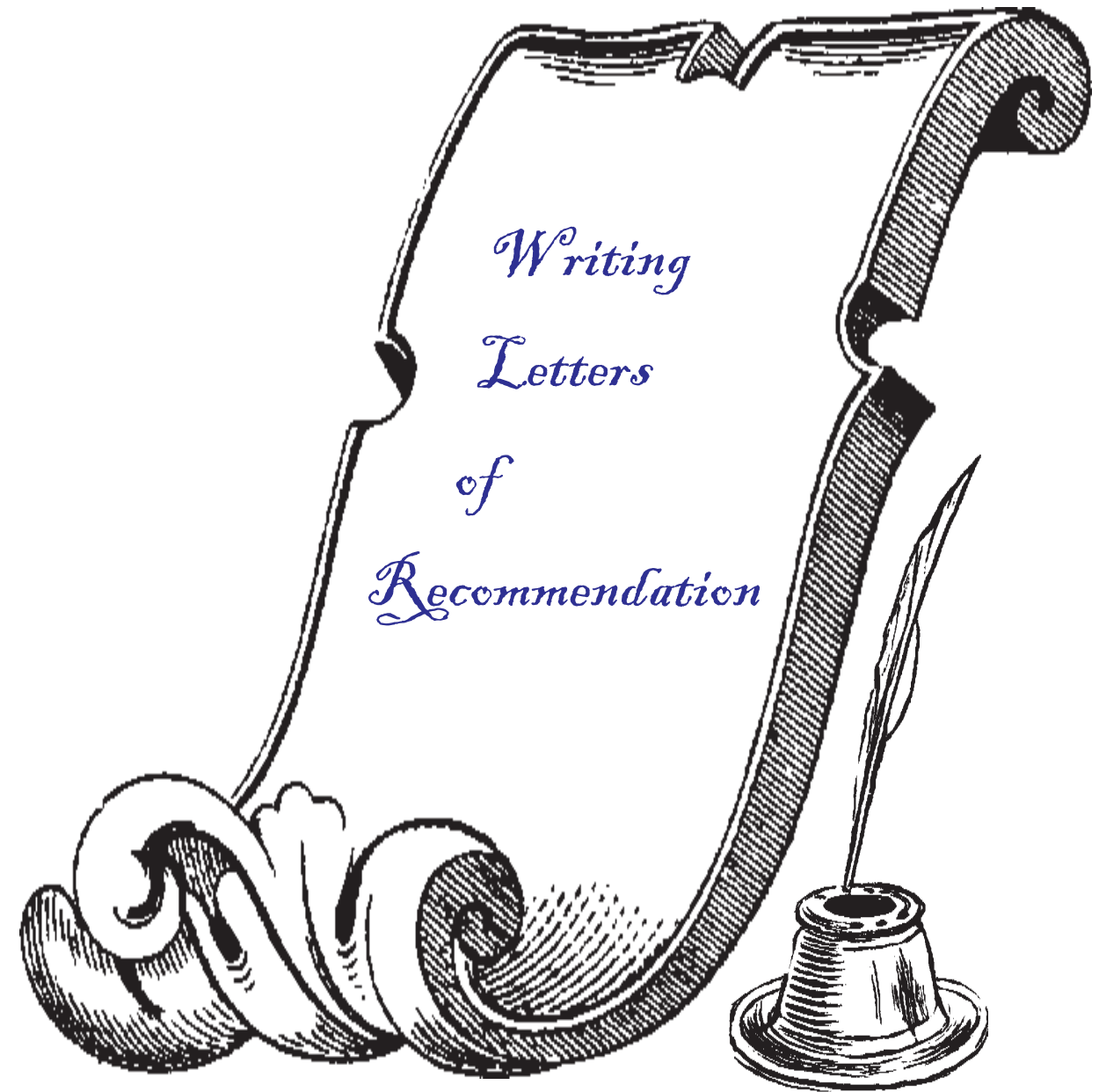
Employment references:

The Career Center does not offer students the opportunity to waive their access to their references. Research from the National Association of Colleges and Employers indicates that businesses, who are the primary recipients of credential files, do not give more weight to closed files. Students, therefore, are generally better served by having the opportunity to read (and remove negative references from) their files.

There is an added advantage in students having access to their files, as a senior with a 3.75 GPA once volunteered. He had asked his major advisor to write a letter of recommendation for an internship late in his sophomore year. His advisor had not indicated to him that he would express concerns when he agreed to write the letter, but upon reading the recommendation at the Career Center, the student learned that the professor had disapproved of his inattentiveness at 8:00 a.m. classes and felt he wasn't performing up to his potential. The student had not realized the professor had had this impression of him, and said he worked hard to improve his performance as a result of reading the letter.

Graduate school references:

Most graduate and professional schools contacted by the Career Center claim to view open letters as having less credibility than closed ones. Therefore, if a school's own forms enable students to waive their right to read recommendations, students should strongly consider doing so. However, if students do opt for a closed letter it becomes very important for you clearly to inform them of any concerns you plan to mention in the letter, or of your reluctance to write at all, so that they may select another referee if they prefer.



Writing Letters of Recommendation

Jeffrey G. Allen states in *The Perfect Follow-up Method to Get the Job*: “References are among the most misunderstood, mishandled, and missed areas of the hiring process” (101). The following guidelines were developed by the Career Center to address common questions of those writing letters of recommendation.

Before you agree to write a recommendation, assess the appropriateness of your serving as a referee:

How well do you know the students requesting references? Can you write substantive, detailed letters about their skills?

If you describe students in generalities, you could actually do more harm than good; potential employers may believe that vague comments veil a negative opinion.

Can you write a positive letter?

It is your responsibility to give students a general idea of what you plan to say in your letter, especially if your evaluation expresses specific concerns. Do not assume students will anticipate that sleeping through your class and handing work in late will lead to a bad reference. Often students believe your agreeing to write a reference at all commits you to writing a good one. If you cannot write a positive reference, either tell students your concerns beforehand so that they have the option of finding another referee or decline to write the letter; even mediocre letters can have a harmful impact on students’ futures.

Do you know specific details about the fields the students are seeking?

Unless you have a clear claim to expertise in a student’s chosen field, your opinion may carry little weight with members of the field. To improve your credibility, ask students to describe the types of skills valued in the field, then address their possession of those skills specifically in your letter. For example, if they express an interest in sales, even if you have never seen them on the job, your comments about their skills in persuasion during class discussion, ability to think under pressure, competitive approach toward assignments, and goal-oriented nature will indicate an aptitude for the field. The *best* references are those from people established in the field:

- Graduate school references written by faculty in the same discipline,
- Job references provided by former employers, especially if from the same field, and
- Professional school references from a mix of faculty and professionals in the field (for example, a medical school applicant would be well served by choosing two science professors and a physician whom the student shadowed for the summer.)

Do you have time to write?

Students should inform you of deadlines and give you ample notice to meet them. Try to give them a realistic idea of the date the recommendation will be complete.

Students should provide the following background documents:

- Most important, a clear communication of their intended goal. Graduate school statements of purpose work well; “something in business” is not specific enough. If they can’t articulate their goals clearly to you, send them to the Career Center for help,
- A resume,
- A copy of a transcript, and
- A copy of a research paper or other writing sample.

Address the following in your recommendation:

- A brief description of your credentials,
- A statement specifying how well, how long, and in what capacity you have known the student,
- Your assessment of their intellectual and academic skills in relation to their intended goals,
- A discussion of their general work behaviors (e.g. ability to work with others, dependability, punctuality, professionalism, and attention to detail), and
- Your prediction of their performance in their chosen field, citing specific observations to provide evidence for your assessment, based on your knowledge of the skills required by the field.

Engage your reader’s interest by providing specific detail; include examples to illustrate a skill or behavior.

Expressing ambivalence:

Potential employers and graduate schools read recommendations for messages found between the lines. As Jeffrey Allen states, “What references *say* isn’t as important as *what they convey*” (101). If, despite your stated concerns, students still ask you to write on their behalf, remember that there is as much hyperbole in letters of recommendation as there is score inflation in Olympic figure skating; if you are cautious in your assessment, you will sound negative. Often summary statements most clearly reflect an overall appraisal: “excellent candidate,” “the brightest I’ve had in fifteen years of teaching,” and “my highest recommendation” reflect the highest regard for students, while “satisfactory” or “seems to be,” and conditional statements such as “would be a good candidate given the right environment,” are likely to be viewed as negative comments.

Avoid:

- Phrases that sound patronizing or that are irrelevant to the goal, such as “nice young lady,” and “attractively dressed.”
- A misplaced focus. The majority of your comments should address specific skills relative to the intended goal. Do not distract the reader by discussing such things as detailed course descriptions and family connections.
- Gender-exclusive salutations, for example “Dear Sirs” or “Gentlemen.” If you choose to use