Success Center

Directed Learning Activity (DLA)

The Letter of Recommendation

TR001.1

Directed Learning Activity—The Letter of Recommendation

Description: ***A letter of recommendation is an endorsement one person writes on behalf of another person. The recommender supports the recommendee's candidacy for a job, an admission to a particular university, a scholarship, or an award. In order to help you develop a thorough understanding of the elements of a strong letter of recommendation, this Directed Learning Activity (DLA) will guide you through the process of writing one for yourself in the voice of one of your professors at Cerritos College.***

Materials: ***To help you write a draft of your recommendation, gather these materials:***

- ***Unofficial transcripts;***
- ***A resume or list of your experiences, including education, honors and awards, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, memberships, employment, special skills (such as technology or languages), and other achievements that you are proud of or that are relevant to your goals;***
- ***Information related to financial need or other hardships;***
- ***The name and title of the professor who will be writing for you (in this activity, you are going to pretend to be this person as you write your letter);***
- ***Copies of work you have done in the class(es) you have taken with your chosen professor;***
- ***Copies of projects, if possible, relevant to your intended major or to the job you are seeking;***
- ***Information on the potential employer, university, scholarship, or agency that will be receiving the letter from your professor; and***
- ***A highlighter (you may use your pen if you have no highlighter).***

Step One: Checking Your Prior Knowledge about Letters of Recommendation

Test your expertise in letters of recommendation by answering the following true-false questions. Circle your responses, then check your answers against the explanations provided below.

1. **True or False:** I should seek recommendations from professors, counselors, supervisors, or coaches who know me well rather than from those who know me only by my reputation or opinion of myself.
2. **True or False:** I should avoid seeking recommendations from professors in whose classes I have earned grades lower than *A*.
3. **True or False:** The purpose of a letter of recommendation is to let the readers know how much I want the job, internship, scholarship, or acceptance that they have to give.
4. **True or False:** Actions speak louder than words: specific accomplishments mean more than vague praise.
5. **True or False:** All my professors know me well enough to write a good letter for me off the tops of their heads.
6. **True or False:** I need to ask a recommender for a reference rather than presuming that the person will be happy to provide one.

7. **True or False:** It is courteous to provide a recommender with unofficial transcripts, a sample or description of work done for that person or class, a list of relevant accomplishments (such as education, awards, extracurricular activities, volunteer service, internships, memberships), a statement of financial need if relevant, contact information, and any forms the recommender needs to fill out.
8. **True or False:** I should provide the recommender with these materials even if the recommendation will be sent online.
9. **True or False:** I should fill out those sections of forms that ask for basic information, such as names and addresses; and I should provide stamped, addressed envelopes for recommendations that need to be mailed.
10. **True or False:** I have the legal right to see my letter unless I have waived that right.

Answers:

1. **True.** Make sure your recommenders know you well enough to vouch for you. When in doubt, ask. Always offer to provide background information that might help your recommender.
2. **False.** It is important that the recommender think highly of your work, but straight *A* grades are not necessary.
3. **False.** The recipients of the letter know that you want what they have to offer; otherwise, you would not apply. The letter's function is to make them eager to give it to you rather than to the many competitors who want the same thing just as much as you do.
4. **True.** Readers will not believe that you are a "highly motivated person" without specific examples to support the claim. Inflated language usually backfires in such cases, anyway. Solid work and achievements must be presented to provide the information needed to choose you over the competition. That said, bear in mind that students often underestimate the achievements they actually have. Group presentations in class, clear reports, fundraising for a club, teaching children at church, and engaging in research projects all are examples of real accomplishments.
5. **False.** Even if your professor does know you well, many students have the same names, and specifics about that final project you did last year may not instantly come to mind when the professor receives a request to write about you. Make it easy to write an excellent letter by providing ample and organized information. (See #7 below for a list of information to provide.)
6. **True.** Professors often announce their willingness to write letters for students, and some may have spoken to you individually, but you should ask, anyway, because that is the professional and courteous thing to do.
7. **True.** Make it easy to say great things about you by supplying all of this information. Your GPA and relevant classes should be highlighted on your unofficial transcripts. Also, offer to answer questions or provide additional information if needed.
8. **True.** The fact that the recommendation is requested by the agency online does not release you from the responsibility of providing a convenient package of information.
9. **True.** The person recommending you is doing you a favor. Allow that person to focus on substance by neatly filling in the routine items and paying for postage.
10. **True.** You do have the legal right to see a letter written about you. However, many agencies and universities ask you to waive that right. If you refuse to give up your right, the letter may be discounted, because readers may presume that you have something

to

hide. While the choice is yours, be aware that the vast majority of your competitors will waive this right if asked to do so.

Step Two: Highlighting or Underlining Relevant Information for Your Recommender

To complete this step in the process, you will need the first two items listed under "Materials" on page 1: your unofficial transcript and a resume (or a list of your experiences).

First, highlight or underline the following information on your transcript: your grade point average (GPA) and classes you have taken with this professor as well as the grades you earned in those classes.

Next, highlight or underline your resume (or list of experiences) so that particularly important information is easy to find. Important information includes anything particularly requested on applications and anything you believe supports your candidacy. For example, highlight computer skills if they are relevant, work experience related to the position you seek, honors projects if they indicate a capacity to research and organize complex material, and volunteer work that shows your commitment to helping others. Use your judgment, remembering that you don't need to include all highlighted material in the actual letter.

Step Three: Freewriting Preliminary Material for Your Letter of Recommendation

Now that you have identified—by highlighting or underlining—the most relevant information to include in your recommendation, the next step is to **freewrite** material for some of the most important sections of the letter. If you are unfamiliar with this term, **freewriting** is a prewriting technique in which an author writes for a set period of time without worrying about spelling, grammar, or mechanics.

Try to devote at least five minutes to freewriting material for each of these five sections of your letter of recommendation:

A. Describe the excellent work you have done for this professor. Give details about projects, papers, classroom activities, and examinations on which you excelled.

B. Describe a particular project or activity, whether inside or outside the classroom, that makes you stand out from your peers and that is relevant to the position you seek.

C. Describe your volunteer work or another activity that shows your commitment to helping others.

D. Describe your financial need, if any, or other challenges you have overcome to seek your education.

E. Describe any other material you highlighted on your transcript or resume that has not yet been included.

If your freewrites have led you to discuss unhighlighted material, highlight that material now.

Step Four: Drafting Your Letter of Recommendation

After freewriting material for some of its most important sections of your recommendation, the next step in the process is to write a draft of the entire letter. To see an example of an actual letter of recommendation, please see Attachment 1. Then, follow these nine steps to put together the first draft of your recommendation on the lines below.

A. Write today's date in the upper left corner of your paper.

B. Your salutation should read "Dear _____." Fill in the blank with the name of the person or group receiving the letter. For example, "Dear Admissions Officers" or "Dear Scholarship Committee." Insert a colon (:) after the name.

C. The first paragraph should include the following information: the name of the person being endorsed (you, in this case), how long the professor has known you, and in what capacity. For example, "It is a pleasure to recommend Megalis Vega for the position of tutor. Ms. Vega has been a student in four of my Biology classes at Cerritos College and has earned grades of *A* in all of them. She also has served as president of the Health Professionals Club, which I advise." End the first paragraph with a statement about your work and goals that the rest of the letter can support. For example, "Ms. Vega is an excellent writer and thinker who readily helps her classmates and plans a career in pediatrics." Write a paragraph that follows this format now.

D. The second paragraph should provide evidence of your success in your work with the professor writing the letter. Draw from your freewrites and from the highlighted or underlined information in your materials to help make this paragraph detailed and meaningful to a skeptical stranger. Research projects, oral presentations, group activities, laboratory experiments, and so on should make up the bulk of this paragraph. Provide quotations and examples from your own work, if possible, for support. Write this paragraph that follows this format now.

E. The third paragraph should describe extracurricular activities and memberships, particularly those in which you have shown leadership and initiative. If you have been a club member, for example, and have won a Silver Falcon award for it, be sure to explain the activity and award. Do more than list activities: bring them to life through details. If you have no extracurricular activities, skip this paragraph. Otherwise, write one that that follows this format now.

F. The fourth paragraph should describe your volunteer work, community service, or other activities in which you have shown dedication to doing good deeds in the world. Again, provide details, examples, and even quotations where possible. If you have no such activities, skip this paragraph. Otherwise, write one that that follows this format now.

G. The fifth paragraph should relate your special skills, financial need, long-term goals, and hardships overcome that are relevant to the position or award you seek. Include any

information

not already covered that you believe will support your candidacy. Include everything else you believe to be important. Write this paragraph that follows this format now.

H. Your closing paragraph should be a simple statement: “Please let me know if I can further support the candidacy of _____.” Fill in the blank with your name. Write this statement now.

I. Write “Sincerely yours,” then leave space for a signature. Underneath where the signature will go, write the instructor’s name. Underneath the name, write the title of that person. For example:

Sincerely yours,

Adele Carpathia
Professor of Sociology
Cerritos College

Step Five: Editing Your Letter of Recommendation

As always, proofread, edit, and revise your work, checking for accuracy and completeness as well as for style. If you feel like you need to review these important steps in the writing process, the Success Center recommends completing the Directed Learning Activity "Essay Essentials 6: Revising, Editing, and Proofreading Essays."

Once you are finished proofreading, editing, and revising your letter of recommendation, you may present the whole packet to the professor of your choice!

Sample Letter of Recommendation

The following sample letter can give you an idea of what your product might look like. Your recommendation will differ in details, of course.

31 January 2012

Dear Admissions Officers:

It is a pleasure to recommend Santiago Rodriguez for admission to the University of Southern California. Mr. Rodriguez has been my student in four honors English classes, earning grades of *A* in the last three. In the past two years, I have seen him grow from a committed but uncertain student to a confident scholar with a GPA of 3.8 and a campus citizen sure to distinguish any university lucky enough to have him.

Mr. Rodriguez is a persuasive speaker, writer, and researcher. In honors Critical Thinking and Advanced Composition he explored the boundary between free speech and bullying through a sustained (3,000-word) research project, developing his expertise through engagement with primary and scholarly sources as well as through analysis of popular media. Motivated by news stories of suicides by college students who had been bullied, Mr. Rodriguez entered public discussion in a blog to call for more than mere tolerance of difference: rather, Mr. Rodriguez suggests, we should support difference as a positive force in campus culture as well as in national and global contexts. This advocacy for the vulnerable characterizes Mr. Rodriguez's academic work as a public relations major.

Promoting the well-being of others also characterizes Mr. Rodriguez's extracurricular activities. Mr. Rodriguez has striven from humble beginnings to his current role as Treasurer of the Scholars' Honors Club, Student Senator, and Public Relations Officer for the International Students Association. His experience in emigrating from Mexico to the United States has given him knowledge of life as an outsider, and he has carried his empathy and good will into helping others who are living away from home, struggling with English, and trying to make their way in strange territory in spite of economic and social challenges. Last year Mr. Rodriguez worked with international students and the Cinematic Arts Club on campus to create a gala event featuring films from the United States and Korea. This experience brought him to the attention of the Literature Club, which I advise and which he joined after the gala. He has helped us organize our constitution and raise funds, fostering an enduring alliance between the International Students Association and the Literature Club. Thus he has proven himself as a bridge-builder, a capacity which he hopes to expand after transfer to USC.

In addition to his roles as an honors student and a campus organizer, Mr. Rodriguez has been an active spokesperson for social justice through his church. He teaches Sunday school and helped establish an ongoing food drive to feed the poor. He volunteers as a translator when members of his church need assistance with English. USC has strong programs in international studies, film production, and public relations: Mr. Rodriguez's experience suggests that he would be an excellent fit for you in combining these areas of interest. By the way, Mr. Rodriguez is a participant in the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) segment of our campus, meaning that he is extremely impoverished and multiply at-risk. All the more remarkable, then, is his outstanding record of achievement, a record I hope he has the chance to expand at USC. Please let me know if I can further support the candidacy of Mr. Rodriguez.

Sincerely yours,

Linda J. Palumbo
Professor of English
Cerritos College

PRINT STUDENT NAME **STUDENT #**

Tutor Feedback:

_____Has the student included the date and salutation?

_____Has the student indicated how long the professor has known the student and in what capacity?

_____Has the student clearly indicated the position, scholarship, or other goal that the letter supports?

_____Has the student included enough specific information to support the candidacy?

_____Has the student maintained a professional tone?

_____Has the student organized the letter into paragraphs?

_____Has the student properly closed the letter?

Additional Comments:

PRINT INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR NAME **DATE**

INSTRUCTOR/TUTOR SIGNATURE