

How to Write a Good Recommendation ?

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

Question: In my department, we are finding that the largest problem in evaluating candidates for new appointments, promotion, or tenure is in their letters of reference, which often fail to address our criteria. Have you ever considered a column on how to be a good reference?

Answer: While we have written a couple of columns on how to get strong recommendations for your first (or second or third) foray on the academic job market -- "How Important Are Letters of Recommendation?" and "Getting Good References in Bad Circumstances" -- we have never focused a column on how to write those letters.

It's no secret that many letters of recommendation -- whether they are for someone seeking a job opening, or for a faculty member seeking promotion and tenure -- are so full of superlatives as to be almost meaningless. We decided to ask administrators and faculty members to share their experiences with both kinds of letters. What makes a good letter? How does a letter for a job applicant differ from one for a tenure candidate? And what do both types of letters often fail to mention?

One constant in the suggestions we heard: Letter writers need to give a clear picture of the impact of the subject's work. Explain the context of a candidate's research and give readers a sense of how that work can, and will, contribute to a given field.

One of our sources made a great comparison between the challenge of writing a letter of reference and the task facing Clarence, the angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*: "Clarence elucidates the importance of George Bailey's life by showing George what it would have been like if George had never been born. A great letter explains what a field or discipline would have been like if the candidate had never contributed to it, and thereby establishes the candidate's contribution."

Job candidates seek out letters from someone who knows their work best. In many, if not most disciplines, those letters extol the applicant's virtues.

As one associate professor of English noted, "The level of praise is so high that any assessment short of 'brilliant' can look tepid. That means that any consideration of a candidate's weakness is probably a kiss of death."

An assistant professor of health policy said reference letters are "one of the last things I look over in reviewing an application. As they will almost invariably be positive, I use them mainly to confirm impressions from a candidate who has already piqued my interest."

Job-market letters suffer from the "Lake Wobegon phenomenon," said a dean of academic affairs in the biomedical sciences, referring to Garrison Keillor's mythical town where "all the children are above average."

Indeed, we sometimes hear from job candidates worried that their letter writers might not be aware of that, and might doom their candidacy from the start by writing a more reasonable assessment. If you are a faculty member inexperienced with composing reference letters, you should check with senior professors in your department to make sure your letters have the right tone.

Given the required rhetoric of excellence, how can a letter for a job candidate be written to be more useful?

We received several excellent suggestions. Make the letter as concrete as possible, including precise descriptions of the applicant's work, and his or her relationship to the letter writer. "Detailed portraits [of teaching] are the most helpful," said one associate professor of English.

The dean of academic affairs we talked with said that details help to give "a rationale for the superlatives -- not just that 'Dr. Smith is the greatest academic of her generation' but why she is special." Job candidates can help their letter writers be concrete by providing them with useful materials such as an updated CV, recent research papers, teaching evaluations, and sample syllabi when asking for a recommendation.

The associate professor of health policy echoed the call for specificity: Details can help those reading the letters "get an idea of the quality of the relationship, and how the referee regards the applicant beyond the effusive praise that is often standard."

A good letter of reference will also contextualize the candidate's research in a meaningful way, making it interesting even to those committee members who know little about the area of expertise. As the associate professor of English put it, "The most helpful letters are those that deftly explain the 'payoff' of a candidate's research project."

Writing a letter of reference is a professional service, not only to candidates, but also to the search committees evaluating them. You shouldn't write a positive letter of recommendation if you can't do so honestly. As the dean of academic affairs said, "Letter writers should be advised that they don't want to acquire a reputation as 'easy,' or even worse as a provider of bad advice. Their credibility is on the line every bit as much as the candidate's credentials."

Letters supporting a faculty member's promotion or tenure differ significantly from those supporting a potential hire. Tenure letters are supposed to be objective so they are more likely to include both praise and criticism. The letter writers tend to be faculty members

from outside the subject's department who have expertise in the relevant subject area but who don't necessarily know the candidate well. And while a letter for a potential hire might focus more on her scholarly potential, a letter for a tenure candidate will concentrate more on evaluating the work he has already completed.

"In my field," said the associate professor of English, "even supportive

promotion-and-tenure letters are often careful assessments of strengths and weaknesses. (I would say that for a good, tenurable candidate, about 40 percent offer only praise and 60 percent combine praise and criticism.) ... A good letter will help nonspecialists to fit a given scholar into a broader context of currents in the field, highlight especially fine dimensions of the work, and offer a fair-minded discussion of what seems more questionable about the research (as opposed to small-minded complaints or criticisms that stem only from the letter writer's own intellectual predilections. This happens with some frequency, unfortunately)."

The danger of including critical comments is that they give administrators and campuswide tenure committees a rationale for sinking a promotion -- even one that is strongly supported by the department. Still, this associate professor said, "The value of rigorous, contextualized evaluations probably outweighs this danger."

In writing a lucid evaluation of someone's work, again, the key is to think about a candidate's impact on a given field. "For tenure deliberations," said the dean of academic affairs in the biomedical sciences, "we are most interested in an evaluation of the candidate's impact on his or her field and/or most important achievements. Many letters re-describe the candidate's scholarship, typically available from the personal statement, but entirely duck the question of impact/importance."

When the evaluative component is left out of those letters, they are often read with frustration by tenure-and-promotion committees, as the dean illustrated with the following examples:

- What the letter says: "I am thrilled to provide a reference for Dr. So-and-So, whom I trained and with whom I thereafter collaborated for many years." What the committee members think: The department was supposed to get letters from objective reviewers. Why is it wasting the reference's time, and ours?
- What the letter says: "Dr. So-and-So richly deserves this promotion. She has published 79

papers on Garcia's disease and received 7 NIH grants." What the committee members think: Big deal. We can count, too. This letter writer is too lazy or ignorant to read the work and evaluate it.

- What the letter says: "Dr. So-and-So is a remarkable scholar." What the committee members think: Yes, but remarkably good or remarkably bad? It would be nice for you to tell us.
- What the letter says: "Dr. So-and-So is of good character and meets the highest standards of professional ethics." What the committee members think: Nice to know, but what does that have to do with academic achievement?
- What the letter says: "If my beloved mother, blessed be her memory, had had Garcia's disease, I would have wanted her to be in Dr. So-and-So's care." What the committee members think: What's love got to do with it?

The dean also talked about an issue that merits more discussion in academe: the difference in recommendation letters written for men and women. He suggested that people writing reference letters read a 2003 article in *Discourse and Society*, by Frances Trix and Carolyn Psenka, "Exploring the Color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty." They found that letters for male faculty members were longer and included more repetition of strong words like "outstanding," "excellent," and "superb," compared to the letters for their female counterparts. The letters for men also tended to refer more to their research and professionalism, while the letters for women tended to emphasize their teaching and training, effectively portraying them "as students and teachers, whereas the men are portrayed more as researchers and professionals."

It is important to pay attention to the language you use when describing male and female candidates, and make sure you are providing as unbiased an evaluation of both as possible.

We urge letter writers to balance superlatives with cogent evaluation of a candidate's actual and potential contributions to the field in question. By carefully crafting a letter of recommendation, you will not only provide the best assistance to the candidate but also enhance your reputation in your discipline and the larger scholarly community.