

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

You may occasionally be asked to provide letters of recommendation from the individuals on your reference list or from other sources. If you apply for a judicial clerkship, be prepared to submit several letters to each judge. Letters are also often required for fellowships and LL.M. programs.

Here are some things to consider:

Determine who your recommenders are; it can be the same individuals as your reference list or it may be individuals who would be willing to write a onetime letter for multiple positions rather than being on-call like a reference.

It is ideal that each letter be individually addressed to the employer to whom you are applying. However, this may be unrealistic in some circumstances. You may have to use a "To Whom It May Concern Letter" for some employers. To be especially prepared, obtain such a letter from one or more of your references so it will be available to send out when needed. Also, ask your references if they would consider writing individualized letters if the need arises.

Letters should be as recent as possible. If you have a general letter, you should ask the reference to update it each year.

A letter of recommendation should accomplish several purposes: describe how the writer knows you, discuss your personal and professional attributes, comment on your past performance, and state the writer's general level of recommendation.

Ask your recommenders if it is easier for you to draft a letter of recommendation for them to sign, especially if they are short on time or you are short on notice. Generally, the recommender will want to draft their own letters of recommendation particularly if you are asking one of your professors (undergraduate or law school).

SAMPLE OUTLINE OF A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION (If you are asked to draft one for your recommender to sign)

Letters will come in all forms, but this provides a general idea of the content of a good letter of recommendation.

First paragraph is introductory

Establishes how reference knows job applicant:

“It is my pleasure to write this letter of recommendation for Erin Scott. Erin has worked as a legal intern with the Spokane City Attorney’s Office since May 2000. During this time, she has reported directly to me, so I am very familiar with her legal abilities.”

Second paragraph specifically addresses person’s attributes

Describes individual’s personal and professional attributes which would be applicable to the prospective employer. Worthy of mention are communication skills, ability to work with others, poise under pressure, and ability to deal with stress. It is particularly important to address specific qualities which will be important to the potential employer’s areas of expertise.

Third paragraph should comment on performance

Comments on specific duties the individual has performed, and level of competency.

Fourth paragraph should summarize recommendation

States general level of recommendation. “I would rate Erin as excellent and would not hesitate to give her the best possible recommendation for the position of _____.”
The reference may wish to indicate if he or she is willing to discuss the individual further by phone.

Adapted from the Career Services Handbook of the Northwestern School of Law of Lewis & Clark College.