

Why write a letter of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are often used by an organization's hiring officials to gather additional information about a candidate. It is assumed that a letter of recommendation will provide a candid viewpoint of an applicant's abilities and professional promise. The letter of recommendation should give a picture of the candidate's personal characteristics, performance and experience, strengths, capabilities, and professional promise from someone who has worked closely with the candidate. The employer's selection committee relies on these letters to assist in making a final decision.

When not to write a letter of recommendation.

There are several reasons to refuse a request to write a letter of recommendation. You may not know the applicant well enough, you may not have time to write it by the time the applicant needs it, you may not feel you could say good things about the applicant, etc. You need to be honest with the applicant about your reasons. If it is lack of knowledge, perhaps a conversation could give you enough information, or the time frame might be negotiable. If you feel you can't write a good letter, it is vital for the applicant to clearly hear why. This can be an opportunity for growth and a "reality check" for the applicant. It is difficult to say no, but if done with grace and tact, it can be quite productive for the applicant in the "long run."

What to write?

Preferably, the person writing the letter of recommendation has been in a supervisory or mentor relationship with the applicant. The letter should be about one page in length, and generally consist of three parts: the opening, the body, and the closing.

Opening: The writer should explain the relationship between himself/herself and the candidate as well as why the letter is being written. Were you a supervisor? President of the company? Advisor? Professor? It is important to indicate this because a professor may see the academic skills while a supervisor may be able to identify work habits.

Body: The body of the recommendation should provide specific information about the applicant based upon the observations of the writer. Information may include: 1) personal characteristics such as poise, confidence, dependability, patience, creativity, etc.; 2) specific areas of strength or special experiences/projects on which they work; and 3) how they work with other people, etc. The applicant may have some exceptional strengths such as a very high energy level or excellent communication skills. An applicant may also have a specific area of knowledge or experience such as a strong background in science, an undergraduate degree in another area or related work experience in education, a research project, coaching, extracurricular activities, etc.

Closing: The closing of the letter should briefly summarize previous points and clearly state that you recommend the candidate for employment (or graduate school, etc.). Finally, you may provide your contact information in case the recipient would want to contact you directly.

The Meeting

Meeting with the applicant can yield a great deal of information. You should be inquiring (they should be telling you) about what this letter will be used for, in general (ie. employment, graduate school, scholarships, etc.). The applicant should also supply you with information regarding their relevant skills, experiences, abilities, strengths, qualities and qualifications - anything that will help you write the letter. Have the person give you a list of accomplishments, organizations that he/she belongs to, or any other relevant information. It might surprise you to see how much that person has done outside of your contact with them. This can also help you get a more accurate picture of the individual. Having the person give you a copy of his/her resume is an easy way to have this information at hand. You have to find out what sets the applicant apart from the "average." The more informed you are, the higher quality the letter and the quicker and easier it will be to write it. A simple question "Why should I write you a letter?" can be enough to get the conversation started.

Important Points To Keep In Mind

1. Give honest and factual information. The letter should not include anything you are not willing to defend in public. Employers often skim the letter and pick up the phone and ask you pointed questions about what you wrote and how the applicant specifically could benefit their organization.

2. Concentrate on several different aspects of the applicant. Specifically identify his/her skills, attitudes, personal attributes and growth, as well as his/her contributions to and performance within your organization. It is extremely important to include examples where possible. It is one thing to state that someone had some good ideas and another to say, "John consistently used his creativity in designing eye-catching promotional materials which translated into higher numbers of residents attending his programs." Also, if you do make negative comments, back them up with facts.

3. The appearance of a letter is a reflection on both you and the candidate and it can also determine whether it will be read or not. Please type your recommendation neatly. You may want to keep a copy on computer for future updates.

4. If you are using a standard recommendation form, please do not restrict your reference to the space provided. Feel free to use office letterhead or stationery.

5. Don't reference characteristics that can be the basis of discrimination, such as race, color, nationality, gender, religion, age, appearance, any handicapping condition, marital or parental status, or political point of view. In cases where an applicant's strengths or involvement might reveal potential controversial or sensitive information (ie. President of BiGala) you will need to closely work with the applicant to determine their comfort level in terms of what you write.

6. The letter should include a reachable phone number for the writer. Keep a copy and expect a call (some HR officers believe that they can get a more authentic "read" of recommendations by phone. It's not necessarily true, but they do call). Not remembering what you wrote could reflect poorly on your credibility and the candidate.

Confidential vs. Non-Confidential Letters

Ask the applicant if this letter will be confidential or non-confidential; it is a collaborative decision. If it will be confidential, you will need to send the letter directly to the organization to which they are applying or the Career Services office if they have opened a credentials file. *Some employers (traditional organizations like banks, or educational institutions) prefer confidential letters; the rest are about equally divided in regards to which type they prefer. We recommend that confidential letters be prepared on Career Services reference forms.

Character References

These are generally used to support a candidate in terms of his/her personal qualities, not necessarily his/her professional competencies. Generally, these are not very valuable for employers as they don't necessarily speak to the applicants work experience and work related strengths.

The Power of Words

Beware of the power of words! Some words seem harmless in every day conversation, but carry positive or negative connotations to a prospective employer.

Avoid bland words such as:

- nice
- good
- fairly
- reasonable
- decent
- satisfactory
- various

Powerful words which are appropriate to use include:

- articulate
 - effective
 - sophisticated
 - intelligent
 - observant
 - significant
 - expressive
 - creative
 - efficient
 - cooperative
 - imaginative
 - assertive
 - dependable
 - mature
 - innovative
 - outstanding
 - proficient
 - energetic
-

What Do Employers Look For In Applicants?

The following is a list of attributes often listed by employers as tools on which to base eventual selection. These are excellent points to address:

- *ability to communicate*
- *willingness to accept responsibility*
- *energy level*
- *interpersonal skills*
- *goal achievement*
- *direction*
- *intelligence*
- *initiative*
- *imagination*
- *self-knowledge*
- *competitiveness*
- *teamwork*
- *self-confidence*
- *leadership*
- *flexibility*
- *ability to handle conflict*
- *appropriate vocational skills*
- *strong work ethic*

• **Personality**

Getting along with others, outgoing, sense of humor, good sport, acceptance of other ideas, ability to communicate.

• **Independence**

Intellectual courage (defends own ideas), independent worker, initiative (leader, follower).

• **Attitude**

Positive, optimistic, facilitator (instead of blocker), enthusiastic, sense of fairness, motivated, curious, interested, responsible.

• **Character**

Integrity, perseverance, values, ethics.

• **Maturity level**

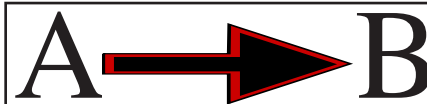
Ability to live away from home, ability to make judgments, process of inquiry, competency for job, work habits, communication abilities, participation, enthusiasm for job, pride in work, receptive to instruction/feedback, strives to improve, helps others be better, etc.

• **Technical Skills**

Ability to work with computers and other office equipment, willingness to learn fast, to have a grasp on as many software programs as possible (word processing, database management, desktop publishing etc.), and to know a bit about intranets/networking within/out an office, internet savvy.

Career Services

606 Culkin Hall, SUNY Oswego
(315) 312-2255



We'll Help You Get There

• *First Year* • *Sophomores* • *Juniors* • *Seniors* • *Graduate Students* • *Alumni*

Career Counseling

- Walk-ins
- Choosing a Major
- Discuss Educational Goals
 - Grad. School & Exams
- Investigate Career Options
- What Employers Seek

Career Assessment

- Personal Appointments with Professional Career Counselors
- DISCOVER - computerized decision-making system
- Interest/Personality Inventories

Job Search

- Learn About Employment Trends
- Review Job Listings in Office/on Web
- Utilize our Resume Lab
 - laser printing, scanning, examples
- Review Career Publications/Specialized Directories

Need Help With Answers?

What will my major be?
What careers interest me?
What jobs am I qualified to do?
Is graduate school right for me?
How do I get a job in my field?
How do I write a resume?
Should I find jobs on the Web?
How do I learn about companies?
What is networking?
Do you have any career fairs?
Where have Oswego grads gone?

Seminars

- Resume and Cover Letter
- Interviewing
- Specialized Career Programs
- Job Search & the Internet
- How to Work Job Fairs
- Teacher Recruitment Days

Technology

- CD ROMs for College and Employment Information
- Self - Assessment Programs
- World Wide Web Terminals
- Listserve for Office Bulletins/Updates
- Resume Lab/Scanning/Printing

Recruiting

- Videotaped Mock Interviews
- Teacher Recruitment Days
- On-Campus Interviews
- Campus and Regional Job Fairs
- eRecruitment Online

Hours of Operation

When classes are in session:
M - F, 9am - 4:30pm
Wed., open until 8pm

Summer:
M-F 9am - 4pm

Employers | Alumni | Faculty | Parents

home » student » career

CAREER SERVICES

606 Culkin Hall

Thinking about your career after graduation is not just for seniors any more. In fact, it is wise to begin thinking about a career sooner rather than later during your stay at SUNY Oswego. For example, it is easier to keep track of your involvement in clubs and organizations and/or community service projects that would complement your resume as they happen, rather than trying to remember after the fact.

Our Experienced-Based Education program helps place students in quality, comprehensive internships on-campus and off-campus. These internships allow you to take knowledge obtained in the classroom and apply it to real-life settings, as you gain hands-on experience in a desired field. We also offer career awareness programs that allow you to explore career options or hone your skills within a certain career path.

You are encouraged to visit Career Services to take advantage of career counseling, assessment and advisement. We maintain a current and comprehensive network of potential employers, as well as coordinate on-campus job fairs that allow students to make direct contact with a number of employers. Additional services include: resume development and refinement, job search seminars and workshops, an information and upcoming events list-serve, use of the Discover career planning program, and graduate school research assistance.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:
Summer 2004
Career Services conducts Orientation programs
Sept. 17, 2004
Resume deadline for Accounting Recruitment
Soon!
More to come

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

www.oswego.edu/careerservices