

# Helpful Hints for Letters of Recommendation for Law School

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Some schools, such as Harvard Law School, receive over 5,000 applications every year from students with the highest of credentials, of which only 500 will be admitted. Applicants must know what constitutes a letter of recommendation that is likely to result in a successful application. A correctly written letter of recommendation is at the top of the crucial list for favorable consideration—along with LSAT scores, college grades and standing.

The first rule in obtaining any letter of recommendation is the full appreciation that it will be in competition with 15,000 other letters the committee will review in any given year. A successful letter of recommendation must place the applicant at the top of his or her peer group and it must “jump out” at committee members.

If the writer is not able to set the applicant above his or her peers, it is in the best interest of everyone that the writer so advise the applicant and the request for the letter be withdrawn.

At the writing stage, the most important rule for the applicant is to make the writer's job easy and enjoyable. It is a mistake to simply ask for a letter of recommendation; too much work is involved.

Contemporaneous with the request for a letter of recommendation, the applicant should provide the writer with a list of the applicant's achievements or a resume. Materials which support the applicant's achievements should be supplied. This not only facilitates the writer's agreement to write the letter, but also facilitates a well conceived and well written letter. Providing writers with talking points is of immense value to them. The preparation of a letter of recommendation requires the bringing together of past facts and a statement of views, which is time consuming and involved. Friends who write letters of recommendation are typically very busy on other matters and are not accustomed to setting aside those matters to write letters for law school admission.

The letter must be non-generic. That is, it must be individualized. The following are some general guidelines:

1. The successful letter of recommendation will in one page “draw” a picture of why the applicant is likely to excel beyond her or his peers and become a life success story. It is critical that the writer provide information not otherwise available to the committee.

2. The first paragraph of the letter should indicate the degree to which the writer recommends the applicant—“very highly,” “very strongly,” et cetera. Although such puff is so standard as to be almost useless, it is a necessary formality.

3. The writer's credentials are important. If they are not self-evident from the letterhead, a *short* sentence should be included early in the letter to point them out.

4. Acknowledgement of a long term relationship is significant. A model second paragraph would begin by specifying in what capacity/relationship and for how long the writer has known the applicant (if not in the first paragraph).

5. The applicant's strengths and specific achievements should be noted and evaluated. Areas in which the applicant excels should be identified. Remember, achievements, obstacles overcome, etc. known to the writer, but not otherwise available to the committee are highly significant. The writer should evaluate/rate the applicant (at the top of his or her peers).

6. Significant events in which the applicant has proven his or her ability to overcome adversity or surpass his or her peers at endeavors that might indicate future success are highly relevant.

7. It is best to tie the applicant's skills and achievements into a showing of what the applicant brings to the law school, and why the applicant will succeed and be a good addition to the school.