

Five Tips for Faculty: Strong letters of recommendation are a CINCH

The secret to writing great letters of recommendation without getting overwhelmed is to be intentional. Understand what parts of the process you can usefully and ethically assign to students and then bring your professional experience to bear on the student's qualifications and potential for excellence.

Clarify your Process. Take an hour or so to establish a **clear process** that you want students to follow when they ask for letters, and make that widely known, even including it on your syllabi and website. This clarity helps lower stress for you and for students.

Get Information. Get lots of up-front information from the student. This shifts some of the burden of letter content to the student while leaving you with full control and responsibility for authorship of the letter. It can also help students figure out if you are in fact the best person to write the letter. Consider simplifying this process by using a form such as the one we've developed for our university,* which asks about the student's relationship with you, the position details, and how they believe they fulfill the position or award criteria. This is qualitatively different than asking students to draft (or write) the letter itself, which puts them in a difficult and uncomfortable position.

Say No if you have to. Though it can be difficult, it may be better for the student for you to say no if you feel you can't write a strong letter or if you can't deliver it on time. You can still have a productive conversation that helps the student understand what makes a good choice of recommender and brainstorm alternatives.

Address the **Criteria**. Be sure your letter has a central claim that directly addresses how the student is well-suited to the position or opportunity. Don't meander too far afield, and return at the end to this main point about how the student fulfills the desired qualifications.

Humanize yourself and the student with concrete and substantive details (ideally both quantitative and qualitative). Consider including details that quickly establish your credibility and authority, such as how many students you've taught or supervised over how long a period and relevant comparisons to these other students, as well as vivid anecdotes that help bring the student to life, letting us see the student in action, through your eyes.