

# Helping Students (and Ultimately Faculty) Write an Effective Recommendation Letter

Mary R. Anderson-Rowland and Julie E. Sharp  
mary.anderson@asu.edu, julie.e.sharp@vanderbilt.edu

**Abstract - Both undergraduate and graduate students need recommendation letters to help them reach various educational and career objectives. Professors sometimes have difficulty getting sufficient information from students to make each letter unique and persuasive. Students often have trouble writing specific details to substantiate their claims. Without this information, writing a recommendation letter can place unnecessary time demands on the professor. This pilot project is designed to help students provide sufficient specifics for an excellent letter of recommendation and to improve writing skills. The authors have devised a checklist to help students write a recommendation letter. The checklist can also serve as a useful career planning tool, establishing a framework on which to build and a guideline for analyzing the gap between school and work. The authors also suggest a handout to generate the first draft. Using the checklist can empower any student to develop an effective letter of recommendation.**

*Index Terms* – Faculty recommendation, recommendation letter, recommendation letter checklist

## INTRODUCTION

Students, both undergraduates and graduates, need recommendation letters for scholarships, internships, jobs, and graduate and professional schools. Most applications require several recommendation letters with one or two from a faculty member. Each letter must be written for a specific situation and often must include comments on certain aspects of a student's skills or experience. In addition, a motivated student may apply for several scholarships or to several summer internship programs. Consequently, a faculty member may be asked to write several recommendation letters for a particular student and to write letters for many different students. Writing numerous letters especially occurs if the faculty member teaches large classes or is involved with many students in other settings. Such is the case with one author who directs three academic scholarship programs involving over 75 students. She sends notices of summer internship opportunities to these engineering and computer science students, encouraging them to obtain an internship in industry or a research internship at another academic institution. Therefore, the program director experiences a high demand for recommendation letters, especially from lower division students who have not yet had many classes in their major.

Professors often have difficulty getting enough information from students to make each letter unique and persuasively detailed. In addition, without this essential information, the task of writing a recommendation letter can place unnecessary time demands on the professor. Each student requesting a recommendation letter may be asked to submit an updated resume and a draft of a letter that the student would like the professor to write. Students, however, often have trouble writing specific details persuasively. For example, first and second-year college students usually have a difficult time translating high school accomplishments and employment into skills that are valued in engineering and computer science.

The authors present a method to help students provide sufficient specifics for an excellent letter of recommendation. One author, the director/mentor of engineering and computer science academic scholarship programs, regularly requires students to write their own drafts as a basis for her recommendation letters for them and to turn in an updated resume. The other author, a technical communication professor, requires a writing sample assignment to introduce a course module on job search communication, where students write recommendation letters from the perspective of a professor or employer.

The director of the scholarship program has had success with a resume checklist for her students. Using it, students are able to write resumes containing the required items with reduced training time [1]. At the same time, the students are empowered to develop a resume more easily than previous students without the checklist. These students are taught to show their engineering-related skills through using active verbs in their resume. Identifying these skills in a resume can be very helpful for the faculty member in writing the recommendation letter.

Since both the resume and a student-written, simulated recommendation letter are requirements of the scholarship program, a checklist for the letter seems needed. The director tells the students to avoid being shy and to write a strong letter about themselves. She also assures them that if she disagrees with something in the letter, she will change it; on the other hand, she may add more good attributes she has noticed.

The director also encourages these academic scholarship students through the "Guaranteed 4.0" system taught in their program to get to know their professors by visiting them once a week [2]. Once a professor knows the student, then it will be much easier for the student to request a recommendation letter. It will also be easier for the

professor to write a letter including more than “This student earned an A grade and finished third in a class of 50 students.”

This pilot project is designed to help students provide sufficient specifics for an excellent letter of recommendation and improve writing skills. Writing their own letters helps students write in a different persona, target the audience, and use persuasive, specific details. The authors have devised a checklist to help students write an effective recommendation letter explaining required, relevant categories with detailed examples. The checklist can also serve as an excellent career-planning tool, establishing a framework on which to build and a guideline for analyzing the gap between current qualifications in school and those still needed to get a desirable job. The students in this project are scholarship students, many of whom are women and members of underrepresented groups. Most of these students are freshmen. Although designed initially for these scholarship students in an Academic Success class, the checklist can help any student write the basis for a strong recommendation letter ultimately written by his or her professor.

### LITERATURE ON RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Asking students to provide written information to help professors complete recommendation letters is, of course, not a new concept. Some professors ask that students respond to certain questions. For example, one professor gives his students these questions:

1. Describe the nature of the course and the challenges it presented.
2. How did you meet these challenges (demonstrated leadership, handled novel situations, etc.)?
3. How has your experience in the course affected your outlook or the way you think about the subject matter or your future academic pursuits?
4. Why are you a good candidate for the program/internship/job/graduate school [3]?

These questions seem similar to what one source has called an “interaction sheet,” describing interactions or occurrences in the class to provide anecdotal evidence [4].

Other professors often ask for a student-written recommendation letter to help form the basis for the professor’s letter. The best recommendation letter for a candidate is specific and factual, citing memorable details about the person [5]-[8]. Describing the student in a way that sets him or her apart from other applicants is important [9]. A problem often encountered, however, is that students will write in very general terms. For instance, a student will write “John is hard working and goal-oriented” without any examples to show that he has either trait. Consequently, the reader has to take the statement at face value without evidence.

The letter needs to “show, not tell.” For example, to show that John is hard working and goal-oriented, the writer could say: “John has worked 20 hours a week and carried a full course load in a rigorous engineering program while maintaining a 3.5/4.0 GPA.” The purpose of the checklist is to elicit such detail.

When a professor asks for the student’s letter, it should be only one of the documents requested. The student should also provide a resume and other items pertaining to the application: personal statement for graduate school, job or internship description, program description, transcripts, or course list [10]. Meeting with the student and talking about the student’s goals will also help the professor to know the student better [6]. Students, therefore, should be cautioned to request a recommendation at least three weeks in advance of the due date although some sources recommend even longer [11].

Wilcox’s outline for a recommendation letter includes the introduction naming the person to be recommended, the program or position desired, and some background containing the length and description of the recommender’s relationship with the applicant; a description of the person’s goals, interest in the position, and relevant hobbies, activities, and talents; a description of social competence, work competence, and character attributes; and a conclusion [12]. Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu provide a sample reference letter that follows a similar three-part structure: the introduction with the time and circumstances of knowing the applicant, the body of the letter describing qualifications, and the final summary [13]. This structure is reiterated by Kuther [14].

### THE CHECKLIST

In generating the recommendation letter checklist, the authors have drawn from their experience teaching the recommendation letter and writing numerous letters themselves. In addition, they have incorporated recommendations from the literature when appropriate. In the *Handbook of Technical Writing*, Alred, Brusaw, and Oliu say that a recommendation letter should “address specifically the applicant’s skills, abilities, knowledge, and personal characteristics” [13]. The authors started with these categories and generated numerous items to fit within them. They then re-organized the items, substituting two categories of competencies from Wilcox’s “Outline of a Recommendation”: “social competence” and “work competence” [12]. To that, they added “academic competence” and “basis for recommendation” in section I about the content of the letter and then added sections II-IV after once again consulting the literature. They re-evaluated the items, consulted letters they had written and program/job descriptions, and edited the list. Sections II and IV were added to reflect suggestions in the literature for format and items to give to the professor.

Finally, after creating this working draft, the authors refined and edited the list after analyzing the scholarship students’ recommendation letters and resumes to determine

what needed to be included, combined, or eliminated in the list. Table 1 shows the final checklist.

In evaluating the students' resumes and recommendation letters, the authors evaluated section I, the content of the letter, to determine what items would be most appropriate. Using a truncated checklist in Table II for each student, they checked the items listed and noted any examples given. The exact number of examples for an item was not listed, only the fact that an example was given. Some items fell into more than one category. The items listed in work competence are skills or traits that students have that will carry over into the workplace, not necessarily those that they have already demonstrated in a job. After noting the results, the authors revised the checklist to its final form in Table 1.

TABLE I  
CHECKLIST FOR A STUDENT-WRITTEN RECOMMENDATION LETTER

Include all items in sections IA, II, III, and IV. For IB-IE in Content, answer yes to a minimum of three items with at least one example per item. List the number of examples in the appropriate column.			
Item			
<b>I. CONTENT OF LETTER</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
<b>A. Basis for Recommendation</b>			
Amount of time knowing applicant			
Relationship to applicant			
<b>B. Academic Competence [12]</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Intellectual ability			
Quick learner			
Problem solving			
Going beyond requirements			
Written communication			
Oral communication			
Research			
Course work/knowledge in the field			
Projects			
Hardships/challenges overcome			
Bi-lingual/ multi-lingual			
Honors/awards			
<b>C. Work Competence [12]</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Productivity/efficiency			
Teamwork skills			
Organization			
Leadership			
Computer skills			
Ability to execute tasks			
Ability to define tasks			
Design skills			
Accuracy/detail oriented			
Time management			
Management/responsibility			
Awards/certifications			
Analytical ability			
Thoroughness			
<b>D. Social Competence [12]</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Extracurricular activities			
Ability to influence others			
Sensitivity to/respect for others			
Relating to individuals/groups			
Unselfishness/volunteer			
Congeniality/personable			
Cooperative attitude			
<b>E. Personal Characteristics [13]</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Honesty, Integrity			

Sense of humor			
Maturity/emotionally stable			
Dependability			
Work ethic/persistence			
Independence			
Positive attitude/confidence			
Self-motivated/initiative			
Perceptive			
Judgment/decision making			
Adaptability/flexibility			
<b>II. FORMAT</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
Greeting			
Three-part letter (Basis-IA, Evidence, Summary) [12-14]			
Closing (optional, depending on format)			
Name and signature			
Job Title			
<b>III. FINAL QUESTIONS</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
1. Did you answer yes to all of sec. IA.?			
2. Did you answer yes to at least three items in sec. IB-IE?			
3. Did you answer yes to all of sec. II?			
4. Did you review your resume to find all possible traits, knowledge, and skills?			
<b>IV. ITEMS TO GIVE RECOMMENDER [12]</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	
1. Name of intended recipient			
2. Due date for letter			
3. Method for sending letter (online or mail)			
4. Self-addressed, stamped envelope if mailing			
5. Reminder e-mail before due date			
6. Resume			
7. Program, job, or internship description			
8. Personal statement, if applicable			

ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' PAPERS

The resumes and recommendation letters written by 12 students in the scholarship program were analyzed by the authors to determine how many items in the checklist were included. These undergraduates included eight freshmen, one sophomore, and three juniors and, for the most part, are women and members of underrepresented groups. If an attribute was mentioned, the attribute received a yes vote; and if at least one example was mentioned with that attribute, the example received one vote. In many cases, more than one example was given for a particular attribute, but the count was still one example for that attribute.

Analysis of the data indicates that the students should be instructed to include at least one example with any attribute they claim in a recommendation letter. The attributes in recommendation letters ranged from a letter having a total of 3 attributes (only 1 with an example) to a letter having a total of 15 attributes (only 3 with an example). The number of examples per letter ranged from 1 to 10. The best recommendation letter gave 12 attributes, 10 with examples. The resume attribute totals ranged from 6 (all with at least one example) to 14 (all with at least one example). For the 12 letters, attributes were mentioned 103 times; however,

only 53 had at least one example backing up the claim. On the 12 resumes, attributes were mentioned 111 times. Only 8 had no examples. Table II shows this analysis.

The authors anticipate that with this checklist, students will think of more attributes and examples to include on their draft recommendation letters and their resumes. Although a few categories were not used in the sample letters and resumes, the authors have left in these categories because they believe that some students may have good examples of such attributes.

TABLE II  
CHECKLIST SUMMARY FOR STUDENT-WRITTEN RECOMMENDATION LETTERS AND RESUMES N=12

This truncated checklist with Section I for content only was used to evaluate content of the recommendation letters and resumes.				
Item	Letter		Resume	
	Yes	Example	Yes	Example
<b>I. CONTENT OF LETTER</b>				
<b>A. Basis for Recommendation</b>				
Length of acquaintance	6	3		
Relationship to applicant	8	3		
<b>B. Academic Competence [12]</b>				
Intellectual ability	8	6	9	9
Quick learner	4	1	1	
Problem solving	1	1		
Going beyond requirements	4	2	1	1
Written communication	2		1	1
Oral communication	4	2	2	2
Research			4	4
Course work/field knowledge	1		2	2
Projects			3	3
Hardships/challenges overcome	2	1		
Bi-lingual/ multi-lingual	1	1	4	4
Honors/awards	3	3	10	10
<b>C. Work Competence [12]</b>				
Productivity/Efficiency	4	1	3	3
Teamwork skills	2	1	2	2
Organization	2	1	3	2
Leadership	3	3	6	5
Computer skills			8	8
Ability to execute tasks	3	2	4	4
Ability to define tasks				
Design skills			4	4
Accuracy/detail oriented	1		3	2
Time management	4	2	3	1
Management/responsibility	3	2	6	6
Awards/certifications			1	1
Analytical ability			2	2
Thoroughness				
<b>D. Social Competence [12]</b>				
Extracurricular activities	6	5	11	11
Ability to influence others				
Sensitivity to/respect for others				
Relating to individuals/groups	4	3	8	8
Unselfishness/Volunteer	4	3	3	3
Congeniality/personable	5	1		
Cooperative attitude				
<b>E. Personal Characteristics [13]</b>				
Honesty, Integrity	1			
Sense of humor				
Maturity/emotionally stable	1	1		

Dependability	4	1	3	3
Work ethic/persistence	11	5	1	1
Independence	1			
Positive attitude/confidence	4	1		
Self-motivated/initiative	8	4	3	1
Perceptive	1			
Judgment/decision making				
Adaptability/flexibility	1			

In addition to the checklist, students can receive handouts first to help them think about what to include in their simulated recommendation letter. Although the Table III example is used to introduce job search communication in a technical communication class, it or something similar could be used to generate ideas for students' first drafts for professors. This assignment has consistently produced letters with substantiating details for most claims. After using it to write their drafts, students could then use the checklist to revise. The letter serves as a way for students to begin thinking about their strengths and qualifications for the job market. Table III presents an excerpt of the assignment, dealing with content; the instructions about purpose and format are not included here.

TABLE III  
EXCERPT OF WRITING SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT: RECOMMENDATION LETTER FOR PROFESSOR SHARP'S TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION CLASS

Assignment for the Recommendation Letter ES 210w Prof. Sharp	
<p>Assume the role of a former employer or a professor who has been asked to write a recommendation for you to get a job. Select and specify a job that requires both written and oral communication. As a heading, center the words "Recommendation for (Your Name)." Write in a tone appropriate for the audience and purpose. Include the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengths of academic background (such as current knowledge in the field, major, GPA, academic awards or honors, special projects, design experience, coursework, teamwork skills, etc.)</li> <li>Work experience showing achievements, expertise, work ethic, or desirable character qualities</li> <li>Strengths in writing, especially technical writing (experience, training, variety of formats or purposes, etc.)</li> <li>Strengths in speaking (such as experience, training, targeting a variety of audiences, languages)</li> <li>Special skills (such as computer skills, Web design, technical skills, certifications, etc.)</li> <li>Personal anecdotes showing expertise, work ethic, or desirable character qualities</li> <li>Extracurricular activities showing leadership, teamwork skills, awards, achievement, well roundedness, time management, community service, or desirable character qualities</li> <li>Any other appropriate information (such as tough decisions, overcoming adversity, etc.)</li> </ol>	

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students sometimes complain that professors are not doing their jobs if they ask students for a self-written recommendation letter. However, students usually know their own attributes and strengths better than a faculty member does. The student can help to make the professor's letter stronger with specific examples that the professor may have missed.

A resume is commonly thought of as a list of accomplishments with evidence. These recommendation

letters clearly show that the students do not consider a recommendation letter in that way. They used the resume checklist previously developed for this course to write their resumes and produced better resumes with more specific results. Without a recommendation letter checklist, however, these students did not provide sufficient evidence for their claims in the letters, describing attributes mostly in general terms.

A future study will include having these same students write a revised recommendation letter with this checklist and also a revised resume with the resume checklist. The authors will then compare the results. They will also solicit students' comments on using the recommendation letter checklist and suggestions for revising it.

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### AUTHOR INFORMATION

**Mary R. Anderson-Rowland**, Director of Academic Scholarship Programs, Associate Professor of Engineering, Industrial Engineering, Ira A. Fulton School of Engineering, Arizona State University, [mary.anderson@asu.edu](mailto:mary.anderson@asu.edu).

**Julie E. Sharp**, Associate Professor of the Practice of Technical Communication, Chemical Engineering Department, Vanderbilt University School of Engineering, [julie.e.sharp@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:julie.e.sharp@vanderbilt.edu).