

How to Write a Nomination or Reference Letter

Leadership Toolbox

Podcast Transcript

Centennial Student Union & Student Activities

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Most of us, even as early as in our high school years, will have to have a nomination letter or a letter of reference written on our behalf. These types of letters can be for a job, scholarship or for acceptance to college. No matter how positive the experience may be with the writer of your choice, a great reference doesn't always make a great nomination/reference letter.

If you haven't already, you may, in the future, be asked to write a letter on someone's behalf. This podcast will help you make sure your letter both serves as an example of your positive experience with the person you are writing for as well as an example of a great letter!

One aspect of writing an effective letter that is of the utmost importance but often overlooked is the salutation or greeting. A successful letter will include a personal greeting to the person you are writing to. If you are unsure of the person's name, ask the person you are recommending or call the office that the letter is being sent to, also making sure of the spelling of the person's name. Spelling of a name might be thought of as a minute detail but can cause offense if proper care and attention aren't taken. Putting in this extra bit of effort shows that you care and that you are serious about the nomination or reference. It should be a last resort to use the general, "To Whom It May Concern".

Next, the body of your letter can be arranged into five paragraphs. These paragraphs include a large amount of information but should remain clear and concise with little filler. If you don't think that the detail is a deal-maker or breaker, then it shouldn't be included. Remember to assume that someone reading nomination or reference letters will be reading many of them, so it is important to engage the reader with relevant information and smart details.

Paragraph 1

The first paragraph of your letter explains your connection to the person you are recommending, including how you know them and why you are qualified to write a recommendation letter. Your qualifications may be just as important as theirs. It is also a good idea to clearly state that you are nominating or recommending that person. For example, if you are nominating John Smith to receive an award for his volunteer work with small children, you might say, "Mr. Smith is a person who is deeply committed to the promotion of childhood literacy and his work with the Maverick's READ program can attest to this. Therefore, I highly recommend that he be given the The Davy Family Volunteer of the Year Award."

Paragraph 2

The second paragraph of the recommendation letter contains information regarding why the person you are writing about is special, including a detailed description of why they are qualified. Choose a few points, giving specific examples reinforcing these points and then return to those throughout the letter. Using specific examples is a must. This will allow the candidate to stand out from others. Here is an example of how you might give a detail and then reinforce it with an example. "Mr. Smith's dedication to reading is one of his most valuable

assets and extends beyond his involvement on campus. Over Spring Break this past year, he volunteered in the 4th grade class that his mother teaches in his hometown, reading with the students every day.”

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 3 will address the specific skills this person possesses relating directly to the award criteria or job position. When writing a letter of nomination for an award, the information included will again be concise and include an example that is relatable to the criteria required for the award. Along those same lines, when writing a letter referring a candidate for a particular job opening, the recommendation letter will include information on how the person's skills match the skills required of the position they are applying. It is helpful to ask for a copy of the award criteria or job posting and a copy of the person's resume so you can target those qualities for your recommendation or nomination accordingly.

Paragraph 4

This section of the recommendation letter contains a brief summary again of why are you are recommending the person. It is important to stick to the points that you brought up in the previous paragraph and not to introduce any new information that you will not be able to explain in the remainder of the letter. The person reading the letter should have no doubt in their mind as to what the nominee or candidate's qualifications are. It is also a great idea to once again state that you "highly recommend" the person or you "recommend them without reservation".

Paragraph 5

The concluding paragraph of your letter will contain a statement declaring your faith in the candidate, your hopes for the letter and an offer to provide more information about the candidate. You may include contact information, phone number and e-mail address, in this paragraph but it is absolutely essential to include that information once again in your signature at the bottom of the page. A conclusion to your letter may sound like this, “Mr. Smith continues to impress me with his dedication to the promotion of literacy among children. It is my sincere hope that you will choose him for The Davy Family Volunteer of the Year Award.”

Signature

Finally, the signature section of your letter should include a sign off such as, “Sincerely”, an actual hand-written signature, your name, title if you have one and contact information. An example of a standard signature might read:

Sincerely,

Jane Doe
Department of English
Minnesota State University, Mankato
(507) 389-2117
jane.doe@mnsu.edu

And the letter would be personally signed as well.

Let’s review quickly what was presented: we discussed the importance, as someone who is nominating a person or acting as their reference, to

do your research and ask for information, to choose a couple of key points and stick to them, to be sure to give specific examples of those skills and to be as clear and concise as possible. This outline is an effective way to develop your nomination or reference letter writing skills.

This podcast was presented by Student Activities at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Find other podcasts at <http://www.mnsu.edu/activities/toolbox.html>