

100 recommendation letters

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I just finished reading applications from fifty high school students, which means that I've just read a hundred recommendation letters.

Reading the applications—from students who lived in the slummy side of the Maryland suburbs but went to a really good high school, were immigrants and the children of impoverished single parents—was pretty fun, because that was me, back in my youth. But now I'm here on the receiving side of the recommendations, rather than the begging-for side; I think that makes me old. [Also, today is my birthday.]

But you're not here to listen to me complain and reminisce and otherwise blog—you're here to find out what made for a good or bad recommendation.

Out of these hundred recommendation letters, 0.0% said anything bad about the student. The closest any came was a form like *Student has a low GPA, but it doesn't reflect student's abilities in...*, which I won't really count because the student's GPA is clearly written on the transcript. Such letters often turned out to be the better ones, as I'll explain below.

While I'm on transcripts, I have to give a shout-out to Baltimore's schools, many of which produce readable transcripts that say GREAT KIDS GREAT SCHOOLS in full color at the top. This is brilliant: the arguably most important audience for a transcript are colleges, scholarship programs, and other people to whom the student and school are pitching—¿why not make the transcript appropriate as part of a package selling the student?

Back to the recommendations, every last one of which was positive. They all used the relevant adjectives: hard-working, bright, a social leader, et cetera. The adjective list was requisite, meaning that everybody had one, meaning that it's not possible to use them to distinguish one student from another. [Some of the recommendations for the female students used adjectives like *attractive* or *beautiful*—that's just creepy, and not exactly what the program focuses on.]

But if the adjective list wasn't there, then I'd worry. One guidance counsellor sent in a progress form in lieu of a letter, which just made me wonder why the counsellor chose not to say anything. So the adjective list and the associated fluff paragraph has to be there, even though nobody can use it for anything once it's there.

Many of the recommendations were badly written. Typos were common, prose was hackneyed, form letters recommended the student for the wrong program, and one was printed in Comic Sans. I couldn't in good conscience downgrade students because their teacher or counsellor wasn't sufficiently careful, though maybe there are readers out there who are fine with doing so.

Any recommendation longer than about three paragraphs got skimmed. Dear recommender: it's not about you.

OK, everything I've mentioned to this point was about what didn't matter: everybody says nice things, lots of recommenders haven't had an essay-writing class in a few decades, and none of it reflects on the students.

What did work: personal anecdotes fleshing out other parts of the application. Any single data point that indicated that the student did something remarkable. *Dear reader, you saw that the student took AP English, but you may not have noticed that she took that a year after graduating from the English as a second language program. Or the student often stood up in defense of his fellow students during class discussion. Or the student's grades actually rose after giving birth to her son.* From my limited experience, the recommendations that took a cue from literary theory and characterized by showing concrete action were the ones that most often caused me to bump up scores on the scoring sheet.

These sorts of anecdote do what the transcript can't do—and also what the student can't do, because an essay about how I stood up against intimidation and I did what is right just sounds cocky. That's why events always have somebody introduce the keynote speaker: if the speaker listed his or her awards, we'd be throwing tomatoes, but when somebody else does it, then it's just flattery.

The secret that we all know is that those intros are written by the speaker. The back cover blurb on both of my books, glowingly describing my background, was written by me in the third person, and it's safe to assume the same of any other back-cover blurb you may run into, unless it has an explicit attribution.

I almost expect recommendation letters to be the same: the student should be orchestrating the message, and the student should be suggesting what the recommender highlights in his or her letter. At least that's my opinion, and on the handful of occasions when I've written recommendations for others, I've always expected the applicant to tell me what to say.

If we accept that the recommendation letter is a chance to highlight interesting details among the forms and statistics, then this is a fine formula.

We'd have a problem with this if the recommendation letter were supposed to be an independent party presenting an honest, blind-to-the-applicant opinion of the applicant. But that's just a fiction. As above, 100.00% of the recommendations were positive, so the only thing demonstrated by the positive adjectives is that the student managed to find two people who weren't so jaded as to write a poison pen letter. I mean no offense to the high school teachers and counsellors of the world, but I did not look at a single name out of those hundred recommendations, and if I did, I wouldn't have recognized you. One person got the school principal to write, and that stood out just for being infrequent.

The point in my stressing the anonymity of the author is to stress what a fiction is the recommendation as personal opinion. I don't know who the author is, and I know the author is going to say something positive, so there's little space left for the sort of personal opinion implied by the fiction. Instead, the recommendation letter is a space in the application package where specific successes can be touted and additional detail presented. From my admittedly tiny sample of a hundred, I found that a lot of people didn't understand that, and instead simply added more glowing adjectives.

Those recommenders hurt their applicants.