Tips for Writing a Letter of Recommendation

I. The Basics

Surveys have shown that letters of recommendation are second in importance to personal interviews in determining who is hired for most teaching positions. Your letter of recommendation may play a significant role in the student teacher's future.

The final form should be typed and signed. You may choose to print the letter on your school or district letterhead.

Take the time to make sure that your letter is correctly formatted and free of spelling or grammatical errors.

II. The Opening

Explain the relationship between yourself and the candidate as well as why the letter is being written. For example:

- ◊ Bill Jones took over two of my skills level US History courses for 14 weeks under my supervision.

Note the characteristics of the experience. Include information such as:

- ◊ specific classes taught
- ◊ length of assignment
- ◊ diversity of populations (cultural, academic)

It is appropriate and advisable when recommending an outstanding student teacher to begin the letter with a statement reflecting the candidate's excellence.

- ◊ Ms. Smith is an <u>outstanding</u> teacher candidate.

- ◊ I would like to <u>highly recommend</u> Ms. Smith for a position as an English teacher.

When making reference to the student teacher, it is appropriate to use either titles such as Ms. Jones or Mr. Brown or their first name. Be consistent, however, by using the same reference throughout the recommendation.

III. The Body

Identify the student teacher's strongest characteristics and cite **SPECIFIC** examples that will support your viewpoint. The candidate may have some exceptional strength such as a very high energy level or excellent communication skills. A candidate may also have a specific area of knowledge or experience such as a strong background in science, an undergraduate degree in another area or related work experience in education, a research project, coaching, extracurricular activities, etc.

- ◊ Example: Joe not only demonstrated a strong knowledge of technology, but also integrated it purposefully into his classroom instruction. He began several lessons with a YouTube clip that previewed the key objective of the day. He would ask the students to focus on a particular question as they watched the clip and then began the lesson using their responses.

Employers will look for information on a number of key aspects of teaching:

- ◊ **Ability to work with others:** Is the applicant a team player? Creative? Flexible? Friendly? Responsible? Is he or she able to accept feedback, both positive and negative? A good role model?

- ◊ **Classroom management and discipline:** The letter of recommendation should illustrate how the student teacher employed a good classroom management scheme. Organization is also a skill necessary for success in the first years of teaching. How the student teacher handled the time in the classroom effectively should also be referred to in the letter.

- ◊ **Instructional Strategies:** Mention the new teacher's ability to create a student-centered classroom environment where active learning takes place. Does the student teacher use a variety of instructional strategies? Has he or she effectively incorporated technology in the classroom?

- ◊ **Knowledge of Content:** The letter should include a reference to the student teacher's general command of the subject matter. Does the student teacher articulate an understanding of the content? Can he or she accurately and confidently respond to students' questions?

IV. The Closing

The closing of the letter should briefly summarize previous points and clearly state that you recommend the candidate for the position.

- ◊ Because of her desire to grow professionally, her student-centered approach, and her role as a team player, I believe that Jane will make a wonderful addition to any mathematics department

V. Other Tips

Length: The student teacher has worked many hours for this recommendation. If possible, limit your remarks to one page. However, the recommendation should be of sufficient length to adequately cover the important aspects of the student teaching experience.

Anecdotal Evidence: Try to give specific examples whenever possible. If you mention that the student did an excellent job integrating technology, also mention a particular activity or lesson.

- ◊ Mark Maxwell writes: "I always say anecdotal evidence says it all. The letter writer can say very nice things and offer anecdotal evidence to support those statements, and it is the quality of the information communicated in the anecdote, which will reveal the depth of truth in the complimentary claims. A 'mediocre' or 'struggling' anecdote will reveal itself as such no matter what adjectives the letter writer offers. For instance, the letter writer might say a student teacher has 'good communication skills', and as evidence he might offer the following anecdote: 'She always wrote homework assignments on the board.' That would be a pretty mediocre anecdote compared to, say, the following: 'She always accurately identified students who were struggling and tried to determine their needs by meeting with them one-on-one after class, during lunch, or after school.' See the difference? Another slightly more sophisticated way to do this is through metaphor or analogy."

References:

Stellar Letters of Recommendation

Letters of Recommendation - UIUC

Sample Letters:

Example of a letter for a mediocre student teacher – Most administrators can read between the lines when you choose to emphasize very basic teaching tasks in your letter. Also notice the use of phrases like "made some progress" and "continues to develop skills in."

During the approximately eight weeks that Jane Doe taught my Freshman Intro to Literature/Writing class, she made remarkable progress. She mastered the responsibilities of attendance-taking and following-up on attendance problems, and of contacting parents regarding problems. She was outstanding in her ability to talk to parents, in her dependability, and in her meticulous record keeping. She always arrived promptly with an upbeat attitude. When I made suggestions, she responded in a positive manner.
One illustration of this positive attitude toward suggestions is her response to the suggestion that she extend her classroom experience into her spring break so that she could finish teaching a unit of her own design. She carried through on this plan and taught the unit to completion.

In the area of preparation and planning, Jane made some progress, but felt, "I could improve in this area." She had some difficulty determining how long activities would take and sometimes had to "scramble" to fill in time at the end of a period when her scheduled activities finished early. She recognizes her need to develop this area of her teaching.

Her teaching activities were good in most cases. She tried a variety of small-group and large-group activities. She realizes her need to continue to develop skills in direct and indirect questioning, revising lessons for the needs of individual classes, and utilizing class time for optimum efficiency.

Jane related well to the English Department staff in a quiet, pleasant way. She is always delightful to be around, and worked hard during her time at Main High School.

Sample Recommendation

April 15, 2012

To Whom It May Concern,

I was Tom Smith's cooperating teacher for his student teaching assignment during the Spring, 2011 semester. Tom completed fourteen weeks of student teaching in my United States History Classes under my supervision. During this time he taught three units of study incorporating a variety of activities for all skill levels.

During Tom's student teaching experience, he was highly motivated to learn as much as he could and perform to his best capacities. He frequently put in long hours to develop lesson plans and monitor student progress. He asked for feedback on a daily basis and accepted constructive criticism with maturity.

Tom has several strengths, but his main strength, from my observations, is his ability to motivate students. He was always sincerely interested in his students' progress and encouraged them to try their best in every activity. He presented new material in a way that captured their attention. For example, he had a group of students map out a "road-trip" across the United States. The students had to plan the trip to include a given number of state and national parks, major cities, and historic battle sites. The students really dived into the project with enthusiasm. Tom consistently displayed this type of creativity in planning lessons and motivating students. He quickly learned that the best way to manage a classroom is to keep students on task with projects that were both interesting and challenging. He also did a good job of recognizing when a student needed special assistance or attention and sought additional resources whenever needed.

In summary, Tom displayed the qualities that make a teacher successful. He is dependable, motivated, and in tune with the needs of his students. He works well with colleagues and administration and is able to learn from those around him. I highly recommend him for a teaching position.

Sincerely,

John Green
Social Studies Instructor

Sample Letter
Recommendation for Nancy Smith

May 20, 2012

This semester I had the opportunity of working with Nancy Smith as she completed her student teaching at Prospect High School. Nancy taught two classes of Introduction to Literature and Writing, a core freshman English class. This population includes students with a wide range of ability and motivation. As a result, Nancy needed to employ very structured classroom management techniques as well as a variety of strategies to keep the students interactive and involved with the subject matter.

Nancy approached her experience in the classroom with enthusiasm and professionalism. It took very little time for Nancy to acquaint herself with our curriculum, procedures, and routines. From the first day she appeared "at home" in the classroom. She kept precise records and a detailed outline of her daily objectives. Her lessons were inventive and thoughtful, targeting the diverse abilities of the students. She employed a variety of questioning techniques and developed projects that called for using creative as well as cognitive abilities.

Nancy was articulate and very expressive in her presentation of material. She walked around the room during her lesson helping to refocus students' attention, clarifying instructions, and answering questions. Her thoughtful evaluation of students' essays reflected an excellent knowledge of the principles of good writing. She provided very specific feedback and suggestions for improvement. The handout she designed for peer editing was thorough and easy to follow.

Nancy had a wonderful rapport with her students. She genuinely liked being with them, and that enthusiasm was quickly captured by the members of the class. She has a straight-forward, unequivocal style in relating her expectations and standards, which immediately garnered the students' respect. They knew what she wanted from them and why. The students also knew that she was always available for help. Nancy worked with students individually during their free time - before, during, and after school hours. She also made it a point to communicate with special education teachers and counselors and attended special meetings to discuss a student's success. Nancy put in a lot of additional time beyond her teaching assignment.

Nancy's quiet demeanor can be somewhat deceptive. She has an enthusiastic, positive spirit and sense of humor that clearly is reflected in her engagement with both students and staff. I really enjoyed working with Nancy during her time here at Prospect, and I have no doubt that she will be an asset to any school.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Moore
English Teacher