

THE ART OF WRITING A REFERENCE OR NOMINATION

We are often called on to write references, letters of support or nominations for prizes/election to esteemed bodies for staff and students. There is a real skill to writing recommendations, as I have learnt from seeing recommendations for students for jobs, staff promotions, nominations for Nobel prizes and National honours. The quality of the support for the candidate is critical, but also reflects on the writer's credibility and standing - we are often noted and remembered for the quality of references we write, just as we are judged in so many other activities. There are also important legal considerations for any personal comments. My view is - don't write anything you wouldn't be happy to say to the candidate or be revealed publicly.

So having written and read many of these-, some fantastic, others awful- I offer a few thoughts:

Make every comment count

Start and end with the strength of your recommendation. Identify the key strengths you want to highlight, and avoid spurious and general comments (see below). Also avoid long rambling and non-specific comments, which could apply to anyone.

Supporting statements should be specific about the individual and their impact. They should be evidence based – avoid general comments. Keep to the point. Long and rambling references are run the risk of losing the impact of the key statement-though occasionally length equates to support. In some countries, the traditional “British understatement” will not be understood and will be taken negatively for the candidate. Also be wary of “damning by faint praise”- weak statements can be taken as negative and if you don't say something positive about a key area, this may be viewed as a negative comment. What you don't say may be as important as what you do say.

There is good advice in the comments from one of our Faculties: “*What the Committee would find most helpful is substantive analysis, rather than general praise, advocacy, or a summary of what is contained in the candidate's cv.*”.

Give the context and relevance

State how you know the candidate, for how long and identify any conflicts (such as personal links). Pay careful attention to the requirements of those requesting the reference. If they ask specific questions try to answer them but also take account of the norms of your field – the required length and style can vary considerably.

Give some idea of your ranking e.g. *of the xxx students I have taught, y is amongst the top xx%, in my own organisation, X would certainly be promoted to..., I would rank X amongst the top... in the field/UK/world.*

Don't repeat what is in the cv, but do highlight key achievements. For academic promotions, evidence of real contributions to teaching and to students is extremely important and not always obvious from the cv e.g. *X's real efforts to revise the curriculum/address student concerns...etc has resulted in significant improvements in student feedback scores/feedback from student reps...*

Provide evidence rather than just statements

This is the single greatest failing I see in references and nominations i.e. statements of “greatness” with no evidence, or very often narratives of what the candidate *has done* (e.g. been head of

teaching, investigated research problems, acted as head of ...). This is of no help in a reference. The key message has to be *what have they achieved, what difference have they made, what impact?* So for example rather than saying that X led a course in xxx, say *that X's leadership of...led to..., X's work on ?? changed our understanding of, led to, transformed...*

The key to a great reference for any job, promotion or award is-what difference have they made?

What if you feel unable to provide a recommendation?

If you feel that you cannot provide a strong reference (either because of reservations or because you really don't know the candidate that well), it is better that you suggest that the candidate seeks another referee. "Being kind" in offering support when the case is unrealistic is bad for you, for the candidate, for the potential employer, and for those strong candidates who are more worthy of support. However, declining a request to provide a reference could be interpreted as an indication that there is a problem, so it is important that you take care in explaining your reason.

Personal circumstances

It's often important to indicate a candidate's achievements in light of personal circumstances -e.g. real difficulties or adversity. But it's usually best to check with the candidate that they are happy for these to be revealed.

Please note a great article on gender bias in references in the Times Higher Education this week:

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=418648>

Legal considerations

Of course we all have to be careful in what we write-it is important to remember that when providing a reference there is a legal obligation to both the person seeking the reference and to the subject of the reference.

Under the Data Protection Act, individuals have a right to request access to any record held about them. Helpful guidance on some "*do's and don'ts*" can be found at:

Providing references for staff - <http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=495>

Writing references for students - <http://documents.manchester.ac.uk/DocuInfo.aspx?DocID=1921>

It may be useful for you to offer in your reference "*you may want to call me about this*", or "*do follow up if you wish to discuss further*", if there are complex issues.

Reputation

Our references and nominations define our own standing and credibility as much as those that we write about. If you can't write a strong case, tell the candidate and suggest that they get someone else. It's also unreasonable for people who you haven't seen for years to ask for your support. But do remember that the references that we write can say as much about us as, about the candidate!

Nancy Rothwell