

## **Information for Faculty on Writing - Letters of Recommendation for Law School**

The law school admission process is very competitive. Letters of recommendation from faculty play an important role in helping law schools learn more about a candidate's academic and personal qualities, providing a more descriptive view of the candidate, "beyond the numbers" (LSAT and GPA). Law schools judge candidates on their academic ability, intellectual capacity, motivation, and oral and written communication skills. General character, leadership abilities, and interpersonal skills are also important. Law schools seek candidates with a wide variety of academic and personal backgrounds, and are interested in a diverse student body.

### **To Write a Letter, or to Not Write a Letter.....**

The student should ask you directly "do you believe you can write a strong and supportive letter for me?". There are times when you might doubt that you are the "right" person to write a good letter of recommendation for a student, perhaps because of insufficient acquaintance, or reservations about the student's qualifications. Such doubts should, of course, be discussed with the student. If you feel do not know a student well enough to write a strong and supportive letter, it is better to say this and direct the student to other possible recommenders.

If you have doubts about the student's qualifications for law school, or negative impressions about the student, and you feel comfortable having this discussion then you should discuss these with the student. This will help the student gain valuable knowledge about himself or herself, and it can give the student a chance to clarify some confusion and perhaps change your perception.

### **Information provided by the Student – to a recommender**

It is suggested that students provide the following when requesting a letter of recommendation:

- An unofficial transcript
- A resumé (law schools have indicated that this may be longer than the standard business resume of one page (up to two full pages is acceptable by many law schools) so that it includes more detail and clarity what you have done.)
- A list of courses they have taken with you, and of specific assignments for the class (papers, homework, essays, exams, projects, etc.)
- Required forms from Law School Admission Council (see below)
- A stamped envelope

### **Content of the Letter of Recommendation**

- **Indicate how long and in what capacity you have known the student.**
- **Be specific about the student's academic work.** What class(es) did the student take, taught by you? Describe the curriculum. If you are the student's faculty adviser, describe any significant or unusual aspects of the major's requirements. How demanding was the coursework? How well did the student perform in oral and written work? Did the student stand out in any way? If so, indicate the specifics of your judgment about the student: describe an important paper or assignment, class presentation, research responsibilities, or other achievement. How does the student compare to other students you have taught in this class, or in past years?
- **Describe achievements and experiences outside of class:** if you are familiar with the student's non-academic achievements, please note these, especially extracurricular activities involving leadership and community involvement, employment and internship experience.

**Personal Background:** If you know of other aspects of the student's background that may be interesting to a law school, describe these: is the student bilingual? was the student born in another country or did s/he move to the United States from another

country? is the student first in the family to attend college? what are the family circumstances of the student? what obstacles has the student overcome in seeking a college education? has the student been responsible for most college expenses?

- **Other suggestions:**
  - Avoid unsupported adjectives (reliable, mature, bright, responsible, etc.). It is better to describe how you have reached a conclusion that the student possesses these qualities, including specific examples wherever possible.
  - The most helpful letters accomplish three things:
    - Provide facts about the applicant
    - Render a judgment as to the applicant's ability
    - Make the applicant come alive as an individual, so that s/he will be remembered in the decision process

### Where to send the letter

- **Law School Admission Council (LSAC) Letter of Recommendation Service**

The LSAC offers a letter of recommendation service to candidates who register for the Law School Data Assembly Service (a required service). Most law schools prefer that candidates use this service.

**Recommender sends the letter directly to LSAC. Each letter sent to LSAC must be accompanied by a signed Letter of Recommendation form found in the candidate's online account at [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org)**

LSAC offers an informational "demo" on use of its Letter of Recommendation Service at [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org).

- **Law Schools**

Some law schools continue to use their own Letter of Recommendation forms. School-specific forms often ask the recommender to complete a grid or checklist about the candidate, in addition to asking specific questions about the candidate's ability and experience. Even when a law school offers its own form, it is rare that use of the form is required.

A school-specific letter of recommendation is most valuable to the applicant seeking admission to a highly selective law school, or in a situation in which the recommender has a connection (i.e. alumnus or faculty) to the law school.

**The school-specific letter can be sent to LSAC, as described above, or directly to the law school. If the letter is to be processed by LSAC, the candidate should "target" the letter to the particular law school through his or her LSAC online account. This information is clearly spelled out for the candidate in their LSDAS account.**

### **Questions about Letters of Recommendation for Law School?**

Please contact Mary A. Tetro, University Coordinator of Pre-Law Services, 919.513.0912, 209 Ricks Hall or via email [mary\\_tetro@ncsu.edu](mailto:mary_tetro@ncsu.edu) (please put law in the subject)

Information used with permission from: Heather Struck, Assistant Dean Arts and Sciences, Cornell University

**Title: Letters of Recommendation or Letters of Ruin? "LOR's"**  
**By: Victoria Taylor Carter and Beth Walker McCarthy, Charlotte School of Law**  
**Fall 2007**

*Um.....excuse me....Professor Smith....I am applying to go to law school next year and I need to submit two recommendation forms. Would you please fill out this form and give it back to me next week? You will? Thanks!*

Does this scenario sound familiar? It plays out in the lives of many law school applicants every day and, unfortunately, it's a bad start and may do more damage than good. Why? Because it is the wrong way to manage a key part of the law school application process – Letters of Recommendation (LOR).

Let's start with your desire to go to law school. If the mere thought of sitting in a Constitutional Law class or joining the Mock Trial team sends your heart into over-drive, then one of the best things you can do for yourself is to present the best law school application you can. The best law school application will tell your unique story, and you should see each application requirement as an important step toward this overall goal – an unforgettable file. Avoid the last minute crash and burn by managing the LOR step closely and don't leave anything to chance.

Here are some LOR suggestions and some things to avoid. First, think seriously about the people you ask to write on your behalf. Ideally, the best people are former/current professors because they can talk about your academic abilities. A professor who has taught you in more than one class is ideal! However, if you've been out of school for a while and need to ask people from your professional/work life, that's fine; but just remind the letter writer that what you need is a letter focused on your skill set that highlights your academic ability; you don't need a business letter that talks about how many widgets you can produce in an hour. That kind of letter won't mean much to the members of a law school Admission Committee.

A word of caution about the people you choose to serve as recommenders. Please avoid selecting someone just because s/he is a judge, attorney, politician or someone with a "fancy" title especially if they really don't know you and cannot add to your unique story. Most admissions directors are not impressed by letters from politicians and members of the bar who can only say that they know your parents or that they watched you grow up. This kind of letter of recommendation does not add much to your file. Additionally, avoid submitting only character reference letters (usually from church officials or neighbors). Again, this type of letter usually doesn't highlight the skill set Admission Committee members are most interested in knowing about – your academic abilities.

The second step is to make an appointment to meet with your recommender. Prior to the appointment give your recommender a copy of your current resume, a list of your on-campus and/or community activities, a paper that you wrote in the class, a copy of your transcript (include graduate work if applicable), and a copy of your Personal Statement (if you've written it). Allow your recommender at least a couple of days to review these items. Show up to your appointment on time and be prepared to answer any questions s/he has. The goal of this meeting is to help your recommender really understand who you are and your motivation for attending law school. After a twenty to thirty minute chat, your recommender should now be in a good position to write a letter that will assist you in presenting an unforgettable law school application. One last thing, you should also give your recommenders a stamped envelope (addressed to either the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS) or the law school), and your cell phone number and email address so that s/he can contact you in case questions come

H:\Pre-Law\Personal Statements and Recommendations\Guidelines for Letter of Recommendation\LOR article\_The Advisor\_charlotte\_law.doc

**OVER**

up when writing your recommendation. Oh, and do let them know the deadline for sending in the letter.

In a perfect world, both (or all three) of your LORs would come from academicians; however, we know that may be a challenge for some applicants. If you are not able to get a LOR from a current/former professor, consider including a one paragraph addendum in your application that explains why that is. Your providing the proper context will go along way instead of leaving it up to the admissions professionals to assume why an academic LOR is not included.

A mature approach to managing this key part of the law school application process will net you the kind of letter that you want. Poor management of this step may result in a letter that does not help you at all. Believe us.....it happens. We read letters that say negative or luke warm things about applicants all the time. Shocking as this may seem..... believe us, it happens.

Finally, if you have questions about what you should do with respect to LORs, call the law schools you are interested in and ask questions. That's the best way to get the guidance you need. Never assume. Also, in the midst of this process don't loose sight of your overall goal – to attend law school. An organized approach to the application process that includes managing every little detail will take you ten giant steps closer to achieving your dream. Stay positive, keep a smile on your face, tell your unique story, and allow others to support your application by submitting strong LORs and not letters of ruin. Good luck!