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August 10, 2012

## **Guidelines for Undergraduate and Research Assistants Requesting Letters of Recommendation**

I am happy to *consider* request to write letters of recommendation. This document will provide you with important context about letters of recommendation as well logistical and pragmatic issues that I would like you to be aware of and consider.

- Letters of recommendation are among the most important pieces of information that graduate schools, internship sites, and jobs use to make decisions about who to accept. Faculty read letters of recommendation very carefully.
- Grades and scores (e.g., GREs) are limited in what they can tell a potential mentor or employer because most applicants have excellent grades and scores.
- My colleagues almost uniformly tell me that they are interested in students who are:
  - interested in scholarly pursuits
  - hard-working
  - intellectually curious
  - non-defensive
  - a fast learner
  - can work independently
    - (but display good judgment as to when to ask for assistance)

Because I get many more request for letters than I can accommodate, I cannot write for everyone who requests one. Nor is it appropriate for me to write a letter for everyone that asks me. Letters of recommendations are a privilege earned and not a right or something you are owed merely by registering for a class with me or working in my lab.

I am under no obligation to write you a letter or to provide you with a positive letter. Letter writers have an ethical obligation to write honest letters concerning their observations of you and their judgment about your appropriateness for the position you are applying and your potential to contribute to their goals. Like grade inflation, letter inflation hurts everybody.

In a given year I write between 25-75 letters of recommendation:

- 5-10 letters for current and former undergraduate lab members applying for grad school
- 5-10 letters for current and former undergraduate lab members applying for jobs
- 5-10 former students from my classes seeking letters for jobs or graduate school
- 5-15 letters for current and former undergrad and grad students in my lab for awards
- 1-2 letters for doctoral students applying for externship

4-5 letters for former and current students applying for grants  
4-5 letters for doctoral students applying for internship  
2-3 letters for former doctoral students applying for post-doc  
2-3 letters for former students applying for faculty or clinical jobs,  
1-2 letters for colleagues applying for faculty jobs,  
2-3 letters for colleagues for tenure review or promotion,

Each letter can take between 2-8 hours to write (depending on several factors). Because of the volume of letters I write and the time needed to craft a carefully written letter, I triage requests based on my sense of whom I can be most helpful to and who has most earned a letter.

Because letters are best written by someone who knows you well, my letter will only be helpful to you if I know you well enough to comment confidently on your capacities and suitability for the purpose of the letter. A letter that says little more than what can be gleaned from your transcripts is not helpful and can raise concerns about your judgment and why you do not have more appropriate letter writers.

The best letters are provided by people who have:

- worked with you closely
- know you well enough and long enough to write with authority and confidence in a detailed and persuasive manner to be convincing to another faculty member or admission committee
  - This means *having specific examples* to illustrate evaluations or to provide richness, subtly, and nuance that resonates with the reader

Your letter writers should have the expertise to appropriately evaluate relevant capacities and your suitability. Therefore, I need to know you well enough to write a strong positive and detailed letter that I feel will be helpful to you in our pursuits.

Pragmatically, this translates into my usually writing letters for only those students who have worked in my lab for at least two semesters. Even then I reserve the right to not write a letter if I feel that the quality of the person's work precludes ethically doing so. Occasionally, I will write letters for a student who has taken a seminar course with me – if I feel I know them well and if I have positively evaluated the quality of their work in my class. My seminars typically include reaction papers, term papers, and essay exams; therefore, I often feel confident in my capacity to write for such students.

Rarely will I write a letter for a student in a large lecture class if we have not spoken multiple times and/or I do not have any work product beyond exam grades to comment on. Nevertheless, you can certainly ask, and on occasion I have done so, but please do not be surprised if I tell you that I don't think that I know you well enough to be helpful to you.

If I do agree to write a letter on your behalf, please review and adhere to the following guidelines carefully.

## General Guidelines:

- Please contact me by email to inquire about my willingness and availability to write you a letter
- The subject line should read as follows: <Your full name> Recommendation Request
  - For example, Kenneth N. Levy Recommendation Request
- All correspondence regarding your letter should remain in the same e-mail thread (e.g., replying to the same set of e-mails).
  - Failing to do this could lead to a partial retrieval of our correspondence, resulting in a less accurate, precise, and ultimately weaker letter.
- Your request should explain the degree (e.g., MA vs. Ph.D.) and type of program (e.g., clinical psychology) you are seeking admissions to, in addition to the quantity of schools you intend to apply to, and the due date for the earliest application (e.g., December 1, 2011).
- I usually do not need to meet with students to discuss their plans; however, I may ask to do so if I perceive there to be a need. Further, you might also want to if there is some mitigating factor that I need to take into account that is difficult to explain in an e-mail.
- Please contact me well before your deadline (at least one (1) month prior but best to leave yourself time to prepare material) and before you send me any material.
- I should receive your material one (1) month prior to your first deadline.
- I greatly prefer to submit letters online if the program permits (see section below about online letter submissions).

## Materials to be Provided by Recommendee:

- A list in a table format with:
  - each school to which you're applying
  - the type of program (e.g., clinical, social, counseling...)
  - the due date of the letter of recommendation
  - the faculty member(s) you are interested in working with (faculty should be listed in order of your interest)
- A Curriculum Vitæ, including your telephone, e-mail, dates you worked in lab, specific activities, and immediate supervisors (a draft is fine).
- *All* undergraduate transcripts (an unofficial copy is acceptable) with GPA highlighted
- Your overall GPA, last two years GPA, psychology GPA and graduate GPA (if relevant)
- Your GRE scores broken down by subscales (Quantitative, Verbal, Analytic Writing, and Advanced). Also, if you plan on retaking them, note that as well.
- The most recent draft of your statement of purpose or personal statement.
- A list of any special factors that might be relevant but aren't included in the other materials (e.g., an explanation of your freshman year grades)
- Copies of any papers that you might have written as part of your course requirements in a course you took with me. (Please provide me with the copy that has my comments – do NOT send papers from other courses).
- Complete the questions section and include your answers with the material for me.

### **Additional Material to Provide for Non-Online Submissions:**

- Stamped addressed envelope for each school (Please use my address below as the return address)
- All forms from individual schools in which you waive access to the letter of recommendation and rating forms (if applicable)

### **Other Guidelines (VERY IMPORTANT):**

- I highly recommend that you type all material sent as part of your application, but you are free to proceed as you like.
- However, I *require* that you TYPE in on all recommendation forms ALL of my contact information (my name, title, address, telephone number, email, printed name by signature and date).
- The only blank should be for my signature, the date, and the requested ratings.
- I will sign the letters, make any ratings required, and attach a detailed letter.
- Please be aware that although you may have 25 to 75 recommendation forms to complete (12-18 schools x 2-4 letter writers), I typically write 20-25 letters for an average of 18 schools, which would leave me filling in 360 to 450 recommendation forms.
- I will *NOT* complete or mail the forms to you if you leave anything blank or do not type my contact information.
- I may let you know that you have not properly completed the forms; however, I *MAY NOT* as I cannot be responsible for tracking you down. You need to take responsibility for this process. Any missing material may delay your letter OR result in your letter not being sent out.
- Make sure you check off that you waived your right to have access to the letter
  - This is for your benefit as many graduate schools discount letters for applicants who do not choose this option.
- For each school/program where you would like a letter sent, please
  - Buy new envelopes with non-flavored flaps
  - Provide a stamped and addressed envelope
  - Type the address of the school it's being sent to and my return address on the face side.
  - Type my return address (see contact information below) in the upper left corner
  - In the bottom left type: Letter of recommendation for [fill in your name]
  - Make sure that the envelopes are correctly addressed with appropriate postage
- Clip together the relevant materials for each school (e.g., rating form, addressed envelope, rating form)
- Place all material in a large comfortably fitting envelope
  - Preferably a 12" x 15" or larger envelope (you don't want your forms getting tattered).
- Securely tape or staple a sheet of paper with the following to outside of envelope:
  - A typed table listing
    - The programs you're applying to
    - Each program's deadlines
    - Any professors you are interested in working with in the order of your interest

## **Address and Contact Information**

- My contact information is as follows:  
Kenneth N. Levy, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Psychology  
Department of Psychology  
362 Bruce V. Moore Building  
The Pennsylvania State University  
University Park, PA 16802  
Email: [klevy@psu.edu](mailto:klevy@psu.edu)  
Phone: 814-865-5848  
Fax: 814-863-7002

## **Timeline**

- All of your materials should be delivered to my mailbox in the Psychology main office about one (1) month prior to the first application deadline. I generally write the letters on a first come, first serve basis but also as a function of deadlines.
- Although I never failed to submit/send a letter of recommendation, I do not mind polite reminders. Send me a reminder e-mail approximately one (1) week before the first letter is due. PLEASE do not remind me when you see me around campus as I may not remember. I greatly prefer email reminders. Please be polite, entitled emails are not conducive to a good letter writing mood.
- Because of the way my commitments are scheduled, I generally write my letters during Thanksgiving break. I cannot guarantee that I can have your letters before then.

## **Confidentiality and Sending Letters**

Except under rare circumstances, my letters are confidential. This means that in order to preserve confidentiality you need to waive your right to have access to the letter and that I will send my letters directly to the programs themselves. Many programs prefer that students include their recommendations in their application envelope but allow letter writers to send their letters directly to the school. Please indicate in your list of programs if this is not allowed at a particular program. In those cases, I will ask you to bring your application packet to my office where I will place my letter and then have you seal the envelope. In rare cases, I may send you a letter directly.

## **Online Recommendations:**

Most programs now accept or even prefer that letter writers submit their letters online. Some universities only allow for online submissions. I am not only happy to submit letters online, I prefer it. Therefore I request that if the option exists for an online submission, that you opt for it.

- Please note that the same conventions pertain to online recommendations as to hard-copy paper letters. That is:
  - You need to waive your right to see the recommendation
  - You need to submit this document with checkmarks next to each of the bullet points.
  - Enter in ALL of my contact information (my name, title, address, telephone number, email, etc).
  - I will provide an electronic signature, date, complete the requested ratings, and attach a detailed letter.
  - PLEASE, PLEASE attend closely to the online instructions and complete the forms as completely as possible. Some schools use the same online service for letters and some don't. Some schools develop their own systems. Regardless, these systems can vary quite a bit in terms of how intuitive they are. You need to be vigilant to make sure you complete the material for me completely. Some sites are not counter-intuitive, they are outright confusing. If you notice any strange things or quirks, you can give me a heads up.

**WARNING:** From time to time I sign onto an online recommendation site to submit a letter and some or all my contact information is missing. Although some rare online computer programs or recommendation services seem to require me to complete this information rather than the student, 90% of the time, I have found it is a result of student error. There is a very simple way that I can determine that it is student error. If 5 students are applying to a particular program and if for only one of the students is my information missing, I know that it is possible to complete the form (the others did it).

Even when confronted with this information, some students have sworn to me that it was not possible to complete the information, that the website did not allow them to do it. However, when I sit down with them at the computer for them to show me, it becomes readily apparent that they had neglected to do something correctly which would have allowed them to complete this information. PLEASE PLEASE do not do this. Please take the time, attention, and care to complete this information. In the rare cases where it is not possible to complete this information, I understand, but it is annoying when it is not the case.

## **Checking on Missing Letters**

It is understandable that students are concerned about letters not arriving in time. Sometimes programs notify students of missing material, sometimes you are responsible for checking online to make sure your application, including all letters, is complete. As I said earlier, you can certainly send me polite reminders. I have yet to fail to send a letter out. If you are applying to doctoral programs, remember I do not complete my letters until the end of November around Thanksgiving break. So if you are notified or check before then, you should expect that your letter not yet submitted. That said, letters have gotten lost in the mail. Sometimes letters are late going out from our mailroom. Sometimes letters get lost on program you are applying to side. I have even had electronically submitted letters reported as lost or missing –even when I had a confirmation email indicating that I had indeed submitted it. So it does happen and although not common it is common enough that most programs are accommodating in these instances. If this happens to you, simply contact the school to let them know you are checking on it and politely contact me letting me know how you want me to proceed (i.e., who and where to send it to). Often schools will ask that I attach a letter to an e-mail addressed to a department secretary or administrator or a faculty member. I am happy to do so. On the rare occasions that this has happened, I am frequently contacted by a student in panic – sometimes even with an accusatory attitude or tone. Please don't do that. I assure you I sent in the letter and if it is missing there is a remedy.

## **Adding Schools to your List**

I strongly prefer to receive only one packet of information but I understand you may choose to add a program to your list after supplying me with your materials. If you find yourself in this situation please do not hand me loose material. I may lose it. Instead, as with your original material place all new material in a new large comfortably fitting envelope and tape or staple to outside of the envelope a sheet of paper with a typed listing the programs you're applying to, the deadlines, the address that I mail the letter to, and any professors you are interested in working with.

## **Questions to Help Me Write a Letter on your Behalf**

*Please provide the following information on a separate page and neatly typed and presented:*

- How long have I known you (years and months)?
- In what capacity or capacities have I known you (student in class, advisee, independent study, research assistant, work study)?
- What type of program or job are you applying for (e.g. grad school in clinical psychology, a job in marketing)?
- If you are applying to a variety of different programs, what SINGLE general term best captures this goal?
- If you taken a class with me, what were your grades?
- If you wrote a paper for me, what was it on and what grade did you get?
- What part of the class you took with me relates most to the position for which you are applying?
- What do you see as your strength in my class(es)? What makes you distinct from an average student? (E.g., participation, contribution to discourse, ability to work with fellow students, taking leadership roles in conducting studies, independent exploration of topics, performance on exams)
- What general lab functions were you involved in?
- What specific projects did you work on in the lab?
- Were any of them your independent research (e.g., senior or honors thesis)?
- What aspects of the research were you involved in (e.g., design, prepare stimulus materials, subject recruitment, proctor, experimenter, data coding, data entry, etc)
- What skills or content do you think you learned in the lab?
- What part of the research did you like the most?
- What part relates to the position for which you are applying?
- What do you see as your personal strengths (leadership, teaching, analytic skills, math skills, writing, speaking, etc.)?
- What areas are you interested in further developing in graduate school?
- What outside classroom experience do you have that is relevant to your goal (e.g. volunteer for a help line, research at a hospital, working in a camp)?
- Is there any specific aspect of your work in the lab that you want me to mention?
- Is there any weakness in your background that I should be aware of or address in my letter (e.g., low grades or low GRE scores, etc)

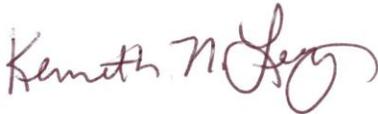
## **Two final requirements:**

First, in order for me to write you a letter of recommendation, you *must* agree to update me about how you fared at each program that you applied to. I would like a written record in table form listing all the schools you applied to and indicating which schools you heard from, which schools invited you for an interview, which schools accepted you, which school *you* accepted, and which programs provided money offers (and how much). Also, please update me on any scholarships you receive at graduation. The reason I ask for this information is twofold: First, having this information helps me advise subsequent students; second, occasionally the department, college or university is interested in what their alumni are doing and where. I like to be able to help out.

Second, for those who are lab members, I would greatly appreciate a post-card from any program at which you interview (to the best of your ability) and definitely a post-card from the program you end up attending (which can wait until the next fall when you begin studies). No need to write on it or send it by mail. You can simply bring it to lab when you return to campus if you prefer. However, I do enjoy written post-cards.

I wish you the best with your applications.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Kenneth N. Levy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "K".

Kenneth N. Levy, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Psychology  
Clinical Area  
Department of Psychology  
Pennsylvania State University

Adjunct Assistant Professor of Psychology in Psychiatry  
Joan and Sanford I. Weill Medical College  
Cornell University