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Recommendation letters are letters written by professors who know you, assessing your capacity to meet the requirements of a program you are applying for. They're supposed to help decision-makers to get a better picture of your potential. The sure thing is, if you apply for a Master's program, or for a PhD, sometimes even for a summer school, you cannot avoid them. Another part of the harsh reality is that due to different reasons, if you are a student in Eastern Europe you will often find yourself in the position to write these letters yourself. The professor will, in this case, only proof-read and sign the text. In case you belong to the lucky ones who don't have to write recommendation letters themselves, you should still read this section. You will find useful hints about how to handle properly this delicate part of the application process.

How to deal with them. Usually, recommendation letters have to be written on especially designed sheets of paper that come as part of your application form. In some cases, letters on letterhead will be accepted, if for some reasons, you can't use those special pieces of paper. Read carefully what has been written in the application booklet about such situations. Fill in the fields at the beginning of the form that ask for your name, department, etc. Take the forms to a professor who knows you and is familiar with your skills or activity. Allow the professor as much time as possible (ideally 2-3 weeks) to write your letter. Try to make sure the professor is aware of who you are, what your interests are and understands what you are applying for. A small talk when you are handing the recommendation forms or a printed summary of all that accompanies the forms can help to this respect. Try, with politeness and attention, to make sure the professor will write you a recommendation in warm terms. Recommendations tend to be, even though not always, somewhat bombastic in vocabulary. If you ever get your eyes on such a text, you might upgrade the opinion you had about yourself. Be prepared with envelope and stamps, in case the professor wants to send the letter him- or herself. You should also read the related lines from the application booklet about this point. Some universities prefer to receive the recommendation letters together with the rest of the application, while some would rather get them separately, sent directly by the professor who recommends you. It is usual practice that envelopes are signed by the professor over the lid, in such a way that one cannot open the envelope without deteriorating the lid. In order to increase the confidence the recruiters put in the letter when you have to send the recommendation together with the rest of the application, we advise you to request such a signature and/or an official seal.

Content. Sometimes, a busy professor will suggest more or less directly that you produce a first draft of the text that he or she will correct and sign. In other cases, this is the only way you can get a letter that differs from the standard text every student gets from that professor. Our goal is not to discuss the reality of Eastern European campuses here. Still, if you think you might be offended

by the practice of writing your own recommendation letters, it is probably better that you do not read the rest of the text.

A recommendation letter ideally starts by stating the name of the professor who writes the letter and his/her title, together with the name of the student for whom the letter is written. The professor should also state since when s/he has known the student: year, class or other activity. It should in any case be clear that the professor had the opportunity to get to know the student well and assess his/her capabilities.

The assessment of the student's capabilities should be made from a multiple point of view over the next 3-4 paragraphs. From a professional point of view, it should give account of the student's knowledge, interests and capabilities, activities and results, work capacity, etc. Personally, it should assess the student's personal characteristics, character, social skills, his or her relations with the students and professors. Same as in other application documents, the direction should be from facts/experience to qualifications, and from those, to value judgments. Especially those skills relevant for the desired program should be outlined throughout the paper.

The final paragraph should provide an overall assessment of the student's potential to fulfill the requirements of the program, even though partial judgments can and should be provided in the body of the letter.

Some of the graduate study programs supply you with forms for the recommendation letters that ask the professor to ask a number of specific questions about your skills and qualifications. Sometimes, space for the answer is allowed after each question, and there is where the answers should be written, rather than on a separate sheet of paper. Other times, the questions come as a block, and in this case you have the option to answer the question still in the form of a letter. Should you choose this option, make sure the letter answers clearly every single question, preferably in the order in which they are asked on the form.

Don't forget to write the date and the name of the home university. The name of the program you are applying for should come out explicitly in the body of the text, in order to make clear that the letter has been written for that occasion. Unless the format of the paper on which the letter should be written makes this difficult, you can print the text. Even better, have the text on a disk with you, in case the professor will consider any changes necessary. Be ready to give the professor time to read your draft and make those changes.

Most recommendation forms contain a certain number of fields, the multiple-choice kind, where the professor has to assess, by checking cells, your abilities. Make sure those fields are checked and insert the text in the place left for additional remarks. We strongly suggest that you do not leave blank that portion of the form, but use it instead as a self-standing recommendation letter.

Good luck.

Source: http://www.eastchance.com/howto/rec_let.asp