PROFESSION

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Painlessly Write the Painful Truth

The well-documented letter of recommendation can anchor the career of the job candidate and the writer

By Sam Jaffe

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Good" means average. "Great" means good. "Competent" is a blistering criticism. Welcome to the world of letters of reference, where you never say what you mean, and sometimes what you don't say, says it all.

Letters of reference are the dirty work of science—an administrative duty that nobody wants to be bothered with. Yet they are an indisputably important part of being a scientist. In 2000, US universities awarded 25,979 science doctorates, according to a National Science Foundation survey. That translates to 26,000 people looking for 26,000 jobs, each demanding three to five recommendation letters apiece.

In the sciences, reputation is everything, so a letter of reference can be the most potent weapon in the battle for admission to a good program, getting the right job, or getting tenure. "These letters are too important to people's lives and to the functioning of science to take them lightly," says **Moses Vijayakumar**, a geneticist at Oklahoma State University. "It's important that you know how to do it right."

Letters of reference are encrypted in a bland language that results from trying to be honest without harming someone's reputation. Unfortunately, no classes teach how to decipher the code and no books explain the secret. But writing a letter of reference isn't that hard, and a few simple rules will make it even easier.

Legitimacy and Legalities

The first rule is also the most obvious one: never lie. If you want to see a graduate student get that postdoc position, it's not worth it to make up anything, or to omit a glaring weakness. Doing so will harm your own reputation. If that person is hired, the warts will eventually be exposed and any lies or omissions will be remembered and talked about on the grapevine.

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The other good reason not to lie is that doing so could lead to unwanted legal action. "The easiest way to get sued for writing a letter of recommendation is to lie or defame someone," says **Peter Bennett**, an employment lawyer and president of the Bennett Law Firm in Portland, Maine. The legal definition of defamation is a falsehood that damages someone's reputation.

The easiest solution to such legal problems is a simple release form signed by the candidate. Bennett recommends having an employment lawyer draw one up, but notes that a homemade release is probably just as good in court. The release needs to indicate that the candidate has requested you write the letter of recommendation and that the candidate will not sue, regardless of what you say in it. "If you don't lie and you have a signed release, you're home free," says Bennett.

Well, almost. There are plenty of other ways to get sued over letters of recommendation. In *Stanbury vs. Sigal Construction Co*., the plaintiff won damages after a supervisor who had never worked with him wrote a negative letter, without asking anyone who had worked with him for an opinion. The moral of that case is don't write a letter for someone you don't know well.

Bennett points to another legal dilemma; you are legally responsible not only for outright lies, but also for glaring omissions. In *Randi vs. Muroc Joint Unified Public School District*, a high school principal in California wrote a glowing recommendation letter for a teacher and failed to mention that he had been arrested for molesting a student. When the teacher committed the same crime in his new district, the California school lost a million dollar lawsuit on the grounds that it should have warned others about the teacher's criminal past. "If there's been any criminal behavior that would affect their job performance, you have to mention it," says Bennett. This is especially important in light of new workplace violence concerns prompted by several mass shootings, including those on university campuses.

That doesn't mean you have to emphasize a person's weaknesses or list parking tickets. The key is to give specifics and write about actual incidents that the person was involved in. Give detailed anecdotes that back up points you're making about the subject's personality.

Which brings up the next point: Never use a form letter. Although it might be fine for recommending undergraduates to a summer program, it is inappropriate for anyone with a college degree. Every letter should be different and filled with personal details. "A form letter is useless in evaluating a candidate," Burke says. He does recommend saving copies of all letters you've sent out. That way if the same person comes back and asks for another, update the old one rather than starting from scratch.

Substance over Sweet Talk

Keep in mind that the people reading the letter are not interested in whether you think the candidate is right for the job. It's their decision after all. They are reading the letter to get to know the person better, to see the person behind the resume and the published papers. Think of your job as being more akin to a portrait artist than a hiring consultant. "I'll never say 'Don't hire this person'," comments **Ari Gafni**, a biochemist at the University of Michigan. "That's not what they're asking me. They're asking for my opinion about his personality and his professionalism, and I'll write about that in detail."

So what do you do if you're asked to write a letter for someone about whom you only have bad things to say? If it's a matter of simply not knowing the person well enough, it's your duty to turn down the request. But if it's someone you know well and consider that person to be a poor professional, it is sometimes your obligation to write the letter, even if it is negative.

Most of the time, you won't have to write the blistering letter. All you need do is let the candidate know it will be negative and the request may be withdrawn. Vijayakumar stresses the importance of being up front about it. Recalling one such situation, Vijayakumar relates, "I told them that I wasn't going to write [the letter] and explained why. It's never a pleasant experience, but it's better than hiding your reasons and letting the confrontation explode somewhere else."

The difficult part is writing the letter honestly without hurting the candidate. In that case, there's nothing wrong with soft-pedaling the negatives and emphasizing the positives. "You don't have to pick apart the person's failings. Just mention it briefly and the reader of the letter will pick up on it," says Vijayakumar. "Remember that they'll be reading several letters and the flag, however small, will probably be raised in the others also."

It's just as important to avoid the gushing letter that only has positive things to say. "If the letter is all about strengths and doesn't mention any weaknesses, it's going to be suspect," says Burke. "It's better to talk about a weakness, no matter how unimportant it is, so that the letter seems balanced."

European and US reference letters can differ because of the litigious US workplace. "There's a fear in America that the letter will somehow be revealed to the person and that could cause legal problems," says **Raffi Goren**, a horticulturalist at the Hebrew University in Israel. "It's a problem because often a letter from an American professor doesn't give a full evaluation."

That leads to one more unwritten rule about recommendation letter writing: The letter is not the all-important thing. When a letter is seriously considered, it's usually followed up by a phone call to the writer, who can then talk freely without worrying about a paper trail. "Letters are important, but the real information is shared in the phone call after the letter is written," says **Leo Sachs,** a molecular biologist at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel. "Although it's a little less common in Europe, I've found that in the United States, the phone call is more important than the letter itself."

Burke points out that the absence of a phone call can be just as important. "It's rare to see a letter that says exactly what's wrong with a candidate," he says. "You often have to read through the lines. I got one letter that failed to say anything specific about the person we were considering hiring. It wasn't a bad letter; it was just very bland and general. I called up the writer to get specifics and he never called me back. We took that as a bad sign and didn't hire the guy." It turned out the prospective employee had some interpersonal problems that would have made him a bad fit in Burke's lab.

Above all, remember your reputation is on the line as much as the person's about whom you're writing. Your job is not to get the person hired; rather, it's to share what you know about that person's personality and how well they've done their job. If you overrate a candidate or fail to warn about serious weaknesses, it will affect your own standing as much as the candidate's. Likewise, if you're able to paint a complete picture of the person that tips the balance in his or her favor, you're honesty and forthrightness will be remembered.

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