

The Value of Good RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

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Whether you currently have a job, are looking for one, are up for promotion or tenure, or are pursuing some other opportunity, sooner or later you will most likely need a supporting letter. Let's say that you've just decided to apply for a position, or perhaps a fellowship or an award. You've spent hours conscientiously filling out the paperwork and you've asked the best people you can think of to write letters on your behalf. It seems like you've done everything right so far, doesn't it?

Well, maybe not.

What did your references say when they agreed to write a letter for you? Did the conversation go something like, "Professor X, I'm applying for the xyz fellowship. Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?" with the Professor replying, "Sure, I'd be happy to"? If that was the limit of your communication, you may have made a big mistake! You've just put your hopes into the hands of someone 1) who may be too busy to write a letter that truly reflects your talents, 2) who knows very little about you, even if you think otherwise, 3) who is unfamiliar with the criteria that will be used to evaluate your application, or 4) who may not think as positively about you as you think.

Do you think that someone's willingness to write a letter about you implies that the person supports you? If so, I suggest you rethink your strategy for getting appropriate letters of support.

I recently heard someone say, "I hear you write a good letter." It was clear this person wasn't looking for a letter that necessarily said something *good* about him personally, but carried the sense that "I hear that you can write letters that have a high probability of getting me what I want." Perhaps this doesn't sound like much of a difference, but I can assure you, it is quite different.

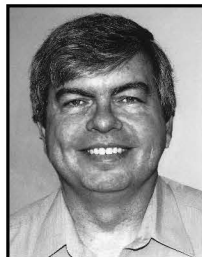
Let me begin by giving the reviewer's perspective of your application, based on my own experience. I have served four

years as a panelist for the NSF graduate fellowship program and four years for the Fulbright Foundation. The NSF fellowship program application pool consists primarily of college seniors, while the Fulbright program that I served on was for faculty sabbaticals in England, Ireland, and Canada. All applicants in these national and international competitions are bright, have strong backgrounds, and present good supporting documentation. Frequently, the deciding factor will come down to the *quality* of the reference letters supporting the application. Quality in this context not only means that the letter says good things about you, but also that it is believable and that it addresses the criteria for the award or position. As a reviewer, I have to believe the supporting letters—and in a tie-breaker, the most believable letter can make the difference.

The following examples paraphrase letters I've read. How would you feel if one of your references said something like

I can't believe Joe Bob asked me to give him a recommendation. He was a horrible student in my class—when he bothered to show up. There must be someone more deserving of this award.

What do you think of Joe Bob's chances for a highly competitive award if his application contained such a recommendation? Or, how would you like to be mentioned in a letter that said



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I am Distinguished Professor X. I have a Nobel Prize in Chemistry. I know Joe Bob. Award him a fellowship.

What has the committee learned about Joe Bob from this masterful piece of writing? All I learned was that he knows an egotistical chemistry professor. I learned nothing about Joe Bob himself.

Perhaps you think I'm making these letters up, but I assure you that within a word or two, I have seen them—the excerpts are as factual as my memory allows (we can't keep copies of applications). The good news for most of you (but not, unfortunately, for Joe Bob) is that of the approximately 1200 letters I've read, I estimate that only about 10 were that bad.

An example of a reference writer not understanding the criteria for an award is demonstrated by an excerpt from a supporting letter for a Fulbright that stated

I can think of no better reward for Professor X's accomplishments at Distinguished U than allowing him and his lovely wife to enjoy a relaxing year at Cambridge.

At the time, the criteria for the award for which Professor X was being considered focused on research and/or teaching collaboration between U.S. and foreign scientists and long-term benefits to both the visitor's and the host's institutions were important. A reward for past accomplishments, or a vacation in the English countryside, was most certainly not a goal of the program!

There is another type of letter that hurts an application. Some letter writers make up things, or cut and paste from other letters, or simply have no idea what to say about the applicant. These letters quite often contain errors in fact or actually contradict the body of the application. An example follows.

The NSF panels have twenty to thirty reviewers sitting in the same room who are, for the most part, reading. Occasionally, however, a comment will be made about a statement in an application. During one of these panels, a colleague noted that according to the department chairman's supporting letter, two students from the same class of about twenty had ranked in the "top 5% of the class." (Engineers appreciate these little mathematical oddities—it's just part of our nature!) This doesn't sound like a big deal so far, but then someone else remembered they had also seen that statement. Within a matter of minutes, seven applications that were submitted from this same department were checked, and each contained a letter from the department chairman indicating that each applicant had been in the top 5% of the class.

Those letters no longer contained any credibility.

Another possibility is that your references simply do not remember that much about you, or that they don't remember what you remember. A few years ago I had a wonderful student who I enjoyed teaching and who has kept me updated once or twice a year through e-mails. Several months ago he relocated and sent me a note with his new address, adding a personal note of a memory from his school days. He related that one day when he was walking down the hall after class, he met me and two visiting chemical engineers, and that I had invited him to go to lunch with us. He said that at the time he had been considering leaving chemical engineering, but that listening to the industry guys talk about their jobs and other general topics had revitalized him, and he ended up staying in the program and getting his degree. He wanted me to know and to thank me for that lunch invitation. I'm afraid that I have no recollection about that lunch whatsoever! I'm glad I did something to help him stay committed to engineering, but if he hadn't mentioned it I would never have known. While this is exactly the type of personal story that could be used in a letter of recommendation to show commitment and dedication, it can't be related if it isn't remembered.

How can you help yourself? There are several things I recommend in order to get supporting letters worthy of the time and effort you devote to your application:

- ▶ Determine if the letter-writers actually support your application. This is easily determined—just ask! Don't start with, "Will you write a letter of recommendation for me?" Instead, tell them that you are interested in applying for a particular program or award and ask them what they think your chances are. Do they feel you would be competitive? Ask if they have any advice on how to compete for the job or award. What do they know about your strengths and weaknesses that would allow you to be successful if you applied? Ask if they would be supportive of your application. DO NOT ask them to write a letter of support until you have heard their responses to the above and are convinced that they have your best interests in mind. If you're not sure, say thanks and walk away. After some thought, you may conclude that they should be one of your references after all, and in that case approach them again with "...remember the conversation we had the other day...."
- ▶ Educate your reviewers. Most potential reviewers will not know the criteria of the specific award or program.

All applicants in these national and international competitions are bright, have strong backgrounds, and present good supporting documentation. Frequently, the deciding factor will come down to the quality of the reference letters supporting the application.

Even if your letter-writers were familiar with the program several years ago, don't assume the criteria are the same today and that your references are up to date on them. You need to be sure they understand the criteria upon which you will be evaluated. Feel free to communicate which criteria you believe best match your skills and which you think need the most support.

- ▶ Tell your reviewers something about yourself. Tell them why this award or position is the perfect match for you. Allow them to make the letter as personal as possible. They won't have the perspective you have; you have more knowledge about yourself and why you should be the recipient than they do. If you can sell them on your dreams, they will be able to focus that energy into a letter that can truly support you.
- ▶ Meet their timetable! Don't ask for a letter that's due tomorrow. To ensure all deadlines can be met, I suggest planning ahead by at least two weeks. A rushed letter will most likely have omissions that could hurt your application.
- ▶ Consider having an extra letter sent. One too many is better than one too few. Read the application details or call the program administrator. Usually, an extra letter just goes into the file, but the bottom line is not to be a letter short of the required number. Feel free to get confirmation that letters were sent. Some application pro-

cesses have a return postcard so you can be sure.

- ▶ Try to guide the letter so it matches the narrative application and forms you have written. Don't write the letter for your reference, and if they suggest that you do so, I recommend you find someone else to do it. You want a sincere and honest opinion from a conscientious supporter. I suggest that you prepare a letter to your reference that contains the criteria and a bullet list of items you feel the letter should consider. A bullet list allows them to add their own prose as they address key points so that all letters won't sound alike. Also, just in case, if you have similar bulleted lists for different references, mix the order so they don't go down the line and hit the same points in the same sequence.

Let me add a note specifically to those of you applying for a Fulbright or other international award. For the high-demand locations such as England and Germany, you can assume that all applicants have invitation letters offering a desk and computer access. Look for *real* ties to your host institution. In today's world where it's easy to have collaborators from around the globe, you need to give the judges a reason for *physically* being there. Help your references explain why you *have* to be overseas. If possible, in addition to the host letter, have another colleague(s) within the same or a nearby country describe what your presence will mean to them.

Good luck! □

ChE *letter to the editor*

To the Editor;

Regarding the article "Making Phase Equilibrium More User-Friendly" by Michael J. Misovich,^[1] we endorse some of the points made, but are also concerned by some general attitudes expressed about teaching this subject (and by extension, chemical engineering thermodynamics in general, since he makes passing reference to chemical reaction equilibrium).

On the positive side, we commend the considerable emphasis on the calculation of properties and presentation of the data graphically. We also agree with the importance of developing an intuitive understanding related to such things as order-of-magnitude values of thermodynamic quantities, and the likelihood of the occurrence of azeotropes.

On the other hand, some statements are made that seem to place the subject matter in a very limited position relative to other courses that he mentions. For example

- "Phase equilibrium . . . in which abstract concepts are

presented to the near exclusion of practical examples."

- ". . . most phase equilibrium courses (sic) do not connect these (calculations) to real processes or equipment."
- ". . . this class deals with techniques for generating data . . . to the total exclusion of applications."

It seems no wonder then that "students who perform calculations satisfactorily seem confused over the meaning of what they have learned." These statements also tend to run counter to Felder's TIP 1,^[2] notwithstanding the subsequent emphasis on graphical presentation.

To the contrary, we believe that teaching this subject without overtly involving applications (processes and equipment) amounts to emasculation of it. One thing that should be emphasized is that thermodynamics (as the umbrella subject) provides limiting or boundary solutions to problems, but is silent on "efficiency," in various guises, that translates the limiting-case results into actual results. It is inevitable that