

excerpted from CHAPTER 1

ETHICAL MATTERS

Action indeed is the sole medium of expression in ethics.
—Jane Addams

I give context to the ethical issues surrounding letters of recommendation by summarizing three breaches of ethics by students. One graduate student, suspecting a damning evaluation by an advisor based on an authoritative tip, successfully hacks into the advisor's computer to read a copy of the letter. Another grad student, after being denied access to a confidential credentials file, breaks into the graduate office to Xerox the file. Lastly, an undergraduate, collecting the requested letter of reference in a signed, sealed envelope and nervous about its potential contents, tears open the envelope and reads the favorable letter, then—relieved—sheepishly places the letter in a new sealed envelope with a forged signature. All true accounts, underscoring just how desperate some students become about letters of recommendation, and how some will even take foolish risks just to find out what we've written.

I have many more typical scenarios, though, where both student and letter writer are uplifted by the process. A graduate student writes a letter of recommendation for the first time, and finds that a 30-minute interview with the student improves the detail of the letter and helps the student win a national scholarship. A faculty member writes a graduating senior a glowing letter that also includes one paragraph of criticism, and discusses the criticism with him as a way to point the student towards self-improvement. An alumna keeps her mentor informed once a year on her progress even six years after her graduation, and thus her mentor is able to write several informed, detailed reference letters for her as new opportunities arise.

These examples and others tell us that recommendation letters are not mere formalities involving “paying back favors” we once received from others, nor just redundant paperwork to help students advance—letters of recommendation offer

us lessons about relationships (or their lack), growth, power and empowerment, professionalism, attitude, protocol, communication, ethos, and trust. To understand them fully, then, we must consider that the process and act of writing recommendation letters can have powerful ethical repercussions.

Instructive in this regard is a 2002 letter to the editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by the Chair of the Department of Mathematics and Physics at Troy State University, in which the writer quips: “Scoundrels always seem able to get good letters.” The writer summarizes how he spent a year after completing his PhD staring at the ceiling and getting no interviews, even though he had been assured by a professor that all three recommendation letters in his file were good. “Only during this period did I come to understand that the aforementioned professor had plotted to keep me from getting a job . . . After 18 months, I resolved not to . . . apply in academia again. I worked in industry, and it was merely by chance that I later came to get full-time work in academia” (1).

In other articles on the subject of recommendation letters, *Chronicle* readers will find further complaints about foes carrying out vendettas, deliberate obfuscations, parallels between inflated grades and inflationary rhetoric in letters, even calls to abandon the system entirely and pay outside reviewers. On the other hand, readers will also find strong defenses of the current system, acknowledgments that inflationary rhetoric exists but that letters are critical nonetheless, arguments that letters are only one variable among many in the evaluative process, and insistence that letters teach us more about candidates than any other part of their application.

Scoundrels always seem able to get good letters.

While many of the above examples go to the issue of letters for faculty seeking tenure and promotion, they also illuminate the ethical issues involved as we write letters for our students, who often approach the process of soliciting our aid in something of a nervous haze, not fully aware that none of us achieved our positions without the help of former faculty mentors writing letters for us. In a string of favors exponentially repaid, most of us write at least 10 times more (even 100 times more) recommendation letters than we actually received for ourselves; thus we contribute to a system that is only as good as the work we deliver to it. Only by better understanding the system can we hope to improve it.

And there's nothing new under the sun. Just as modern studies do, studies on letters of reference from the 1920s and 30s show a questioning of the very functions of the documents, concern with the clarity, specificity, and credibility of qualitative praise, arguments about the effect of confidentiality in letters, and open attempts to warn selectors against particular candidates. Consider this excerpt of findings cited in a 1935 study (2), just as relevant today:

1. The writer of testimonials and letters of recommendation is likely to view his task lightly.
2. The writer for mere accommodation will often exceed his knowledge or falsify it.
3. There is no way of checking against errors.
4. Bias or carelessness of the writer is a factor.
5. The writer may overstate or underestimate the case of the candidate.
6. The writer may simply make inadequate statements perfunctory in character.

And enjoy these ironic excerpts from a 1936 study (3), quoting actual letters written to "recommend" public school teachers:

"Some people in this section have questioned her department on certain occasions. . . . I feel that she might do better work in another community."

"Miss N came to us a year ago. She has been in three different systems in the four years of her experience. . . . We don't feel that we should prevent Miss N from continuing her annual change."

"His pupils are fairly well interested in their work, but never excel. I believe you could procure his services at his present salary."

"Please destroy this letter when you have read it."

Considering, then, the substantial power that recommendation letters have to either help or harm the student, and assuming that by the very act of agreeing to write a letter we mean to help, let us begin by recognizing the ethical context in which we write, from the built-in implications to the nuances that we control.

Lawsuit. n. A machine which you go into as a pig and come out of as a sausage.
—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Recommendation Letters and the Law

Faithful readers of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* will realize that academia is increasingly becoming a litigious arena. Faculty members sue their schools over tenure denials; students sue over a flap about objectionable website photos, citing free speech. Two of my favorite cases were in 1994, when a University of Idaho student tried to sue after crashing through a third-story window while mooning his friends (4), and two Pace University students sued because they found a class they had enrolled in to be too hard (5). The badly injured mooner sought nearly half a million dollars per cheek, but the judge turned his back, while the Pace University students initially won \$1,000 apiece plus course tuition reimbursement, but a New York appeals court later overturned the decision.

More to the point, in one of the few instances of legal action over evaluative letters, in a case involving the University of Missouri Medical School, the US Supreme Court upheld that a fourth-year medical student could be dismissed from school as a result of written evaluations criticizing the student's erratic attendance at clinical sessions, poor interpersonal skills, and lack of "a critical concern for personal hygiene" (6). However, in another case, the University of Pennsylvania failed at repeated attempts to retain sole access to the complete tenure file documents of six faculty, which were requested in a claim of sex and race discrimination (7). In this case, then, letter confidentiality was not supported.

Though these legal cases involved faculty and grad students, most letter writers have some sense—often a vague one—of potential legal issues involved in writing letters for undergrads as well. Though actions taken against letter writers are rare, many faculty write letters with a nagging, even if unfounded, fear of legal action, and it certainly influences what they write. In fact, one study of 150 faculty at 150 schools found that "more than half agreed that letters frequently are inflated because writers fear legal retribution for negative comments" (8).

To sort through this and consider the relevant issues squarely, we can explore the fairly straightforward legalities of letter confidentiality and grades.

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Confidentiality

In 1974, the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) gave students the right to inspect letters written about them, while the later Buckley Amendment gave students the option of waiving access and required them to let their references know if they were doing so. This waiver access, in effect, protects the recommender's right to offer subjective commentary, as long as the letters are used "only for the purposes for which they were intended" (9). If over-analyzed, these two documents create something of an "access tug of war" between student and writer, and one law seems to trump the other, but in practice the standard is clear: confidential letters of recommendation are the norm, and for good reason.

In plain terms, everyone is more comfortable when a student opts for a confidential letter.

Not surprisingly, studies find that confidential letters do contain comments about students that are less favorable than those in open access letters, but reviewers of letters are also more likely to trust the information when they know that students have waived their access (10, 11). In plain terms, everyone is more comfortable when a student opts for a confidential letter, and such a letter will also likely be perceived as more trustworthy. Thus, we typically urge students to waive their access rights, and we can do so by assuring them that this is the standard practice held in much higher favor by schools and selection committees.

Grades

FERPA also speaks to the issue of the confidentiality of students' personal and academic records. Personal "directory" information about students such as their name and phone number—even their date and place of birth—may be disclosed without permission, while academic records such as grades may only be disclosed "to parties with a legitimate interest" (9). Certainly, most people would interpret this language to mean that grades can be discussed freely in letters of recommendation, but many schools as a policy hold that faculty cannot discuss a student's grades without the student's expressed or written permission.

To be certain that they're not committing an ethical breach, many faculty address this issue simply by asking students for whom they write letters for permission to discuss their grades, pointing out that such quantitative measures—especially if the student earned a lesser grade than desired—are best put into proper context by those who give the grades and work within the system in which they're given.

If we were to wake up some morning and find that everyone was the same race, creed, and color, we would find some other cause for prejudice by noon.
—George Aiken

Discrimination and Recommendation Letters

In 2003, the Department of Justice investigated a claim by a student at Texas Tech University that religious discrimination was inherent in a professor's policy of not writing recommendation letters for students who didn't support the theory of evolution. On the professor's website, he told students seeking letters: "I will ask you, 'How do you account for the scientific origin of the human species?' If you will not give a scientific answer to this question, then you should not seek my recommendation" (12). The student hadn't sought a letter from the professor, nor enrolled in his class, but sat in on the class for a few days and objected to the professor's posted policy. While a representative at the Liberty Legal Institute, which supported the claim, called the professor's actions "egregious conduct," a spokeswoman at Texas Tech defended the stance: "Professors don't have to write recommendations at all, and we certainly don't tell them who they have to write for . . . He's not saying he wouldn't write a letter for a Christian—he's saying he wouldn't write a letter for someone who doesn't believe in evolution" (13). The investigation was dropped after a short time, after some changes to the professor's website, including a comment that the policy should not be "misconstrued as discriminatory against anyone's personal beliefs" (12).

Whatever stroke you swim in this ethical soup, you are well-advised as you write letters to consider the issue of discrimination as a complex, potentially combustible one. Any number of stances might be supported in the above scenario, but the back story to this tale should be equally interesting: presumably, the professor came to this stance after repeatedly facing the issue with students requesting letters—i.e., the position developed from experience. When a claim of discrimination surfaces, considerations of experience and intention seem to be critical on behalf of both parties. And these considerations are best weighed within context. In the context of letters of recommendation, writers must be concerned about discrimination based on gender, race, and a host of personal circumstances.

Considering gender, one study of over 1,000 letters of recommendation from the 1970s provides some revealing language. One candidate was described as a “tallish blue-eyed blond,” another was cited as “not neglecting her family,” and another was characterized as having a “remarkable [devotion to scholarship] in a young woman who is physically so slight and so pretty” (14). Such commentary, which baldly smacks of sexism and stereotypes, helps us see the obvious danger of discriminatory language and examples in letters of recommendation.

A successful lawsuit cited earlier involved reference letters and claims of race discrimination (7), and numerous studies have explored the issue of gender-biased practices in letters. An assessment of 300 letters written for medical faculty reinforced gender schema of women as teachers and students and men as researchers and professionals (15), and studies that have found no substantive evidence of sexism in letters have supported findings of content differences based on the writer’s gender and evidence of gender solidarity (16, 17). To generalize, then, there is an argument that not only do males and females write differently in letters of reference, they write *about* males and females differently. The bottom line emerging from such academic findings—not to mention from the employment of common sense—is that writers clearly must not make statements in letters that could serve as a basis for discrimination. And a good number of statutes define the various headings under which we must avoid discrimination: race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, politics, religion, age, appearance, marital or parental status, or any handicapping condition.

One candidate was described as a “tallish blue-eyed blond.”

But for the letter writer the issue is often highly nuanced: Suppose an African-American professor wants to comment on his student’s role as an officer in the campus Black Caucus? Suppose a professor of women’s studies wants to celebrate her female student’s paper on depictions of feminine stereotypes in 19th century paintings? Suppose a political science professor wants to cite her student bringing experience from his native third world country to classroom discussion? Should these writers avoid such commentary based on concerns of discrimination? The considered answer here is likely “no,” but neither can such comments be made in a way that race, gender, or certain personal characteristics are likely to become an inappropriate criterion in the decision-making process. As noted earlier on the subject of discrimination claims, the writer’s experiences and intentions are highly relevant, as is the letter’s context.

Avoiding Discriminatory Practices in Letters

To avoid discriminatory practices while still addressing appropriate personal characteristics of the candidate, consult the following list of questions:

Is there any good reason to reveal gender, race, or other potentially discriminatory characteristics within the context of the application as a whole? If not, strictly avoid doing so (other than by use of the appropriate gender pronoun, of course).

If race, gender, or other personal characteristics are relevant to the application context, is the student invited to comment in these areas? If so, are you specifically invited to do the same? Noteworthy examples include the Soros Fellowship for New Americans or a scholarship specifically for women in science. Here, effective commentary on nationality or gender within the context of a field might be considered relevant, though such commentary would still have to be concerned with tone and proportion.

Do you have a meaningful affiliation with the student which goes beyond the student/teacher relationship? Do you have personal information about the student that you think is highly useful to mention? Is it naturally relevant? Is a selector likely to find such information automatically helpful and benign or needlessly distracting? Does the personal information lift up and humanize the student or does it reinforce stereotype?

Even with this list of questions, getting near such matters feels like too much of a hot button issue for many writers. When in doubt, some writers actually ask the students their opinion of how such details might be addressed if at all, while others consult with colleagues or do some digging to find out their school's policy. Certainly all schools have considered this issue on some level, and some such as the University of Alabama in Huntsville—in its “Legal Implications of Letters of Recommendation” (18)—publish a policy. Amidst this school's policy, for instance, you will find this example of what a blundering discriminatory statement might sound like: “For a 55-year-old non-traditional student, she has a remarkable record, particularly in view of her inner city background.”

Perhaps the simplest rule of thumb is this: When writing letters, avoid comments that would make a person of sensibilities become distracted enough to *wince*.

excerpted from CHAPTER 3

MATTERS OF STYLE

Never offend people with style when you can offend them with substance.
—Sam Brown

Consider these two excerpts from letters of recommendation:

I am of the distinct opinion that his breadth and depth of knowledge and his intellectual capacity augur such a level of grandeur that he seems almost predisposed to high achievement.

He is smart and bound to succeed.

Both sentences say essentially the same thing, but in different styles—the first with the luxuriance of Faulkner; the second with the parsimony of Hemingway.

Most recommendation letter writers fall somewhere between these two extremes, making sure that their diction and tone reflect their attitude towards the student even as they reveal their stylistic talents and traits as a writer. One can say that letters of recommendation have a common style in that they have a common purpose and share common phrasings, but the best writers aim to produce a letter that is nearly as individual as the student.

This chapter explores some of the stylistic categories we can choose from as we polish our prose while recommending students. Of course, as one composes a letter the issues discussed are naturally and tightly interwoven. The best writers express themselves in a way that is not artificial nor formulaic, but fluid and intuitive, and the best letters of reference characterize the student clearly while remaining true to the author's style and standards. Most importantly, the goal is to write in a style that is natural both for you and for the circumstances of the letter, while ultimately uplifting and honoring the student you are recommending.

When ideas fail, words come in very handy.
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Common Stylistic Strategies

Formalities and Generic Phrases

Though some writers overuse them, formalities and generic phrases do have a place in the convention of letters of reference. Here are a few of the most popular:

Ms. Janet Lerner has asked for my recommendation, and I am most happy to give it.

I recommend him highly and without reservation.

Such phrases, often “bookending” the body of the letter, do no harm, but at the same time they are used so often that they become invisible and meaningless as well. A more creative and meaningful approach is to use sentences of more substance that fit the circumstances and the student directly. As examples, note two sentences that are used to end sample recommendation letters in chapter 4:

I think he would be an excellent REU candidate, and I enthusiastically endorse his application.

She will be a rare catch for any graduate school, and I will watch her career develop with great interest and high expectations.

Such personalized endorsements represent the student more emphatically, and perhaps more credibly, than any generic line can.

The Role of Jargon and Informalities

Specialized vocabulary in a letter—assuming it’s clear in context, not overused, and audience-appropriate—can boost a letter’s impact, enhancing the writer’s credibility and lending the student’s work more value. Often, proper context has to be created for the jargon, and it’s most likely to be used within sentences where examples are provided. Considering just the example letters in chapter 4, the recommendations written by scientists are more powerful because they comment

on a student's facility with nano-indentation techniques or mastery of quantitative RT-PCR, helping readers view the students being recommended as researchers.

Informal, anecdotal examples, colloquialisms, and even slang—used with discretion and restraint—can also help the reader feel a connection with both letter writer and the student. Again drawing from sample letters in chapter 4, we hear of a student's "excellent lab hands," we find a professor noting that she competes with her student on the squash court, we are given examples of a student's quirky and sardonic humor, and we even find a faculty member in a teaching job recommendation using an exclamation point. Such informal snapshots have the impact of helping us to know the student better, and prove that the writer knows well and genuinely admires the student.

Such informal snapshots have the impact of helping us to know the student better.

Using Narrative

Using narrative can help you organize and help bring forth the student's distinctiveness. Effective paragraphs often open with some narrative that sets a scene—"In the fall of 2005" or "I recall the time that William first came to my office to discuss. . . ." Likewise, you might use narrative to underscore a student's growth: "Our next contact was when Megan enrolled in my senior-level Logistics class, where I was delighted to discover her more matured perceptions on. . . ."

Some writers go so far as to open their letter with a brief narrative as a way to capture audience attention. Note this example excerpted from a letter in chapter 4:

Perhaps the most memorable discussion I've ever had with a student about his decision to switch majors was three years ago. The student was a first-year Polymer Science and Engineering major on a scholarship, taking my introductory film class as an elective, and he told me he was considering a switch to Film. Assuming that this student was simply running into typical academic problems in first-year chemistry and physics courses, I asked how those courses were going. "Oh, I'm getting As in those," he assured me with a calm wave of his hand. "But I long to study Film." That student was John Lerner.

Beware of overuse or digressive use of narrative. Use it selectively to enhance the letter's readability and show growth and change over the student's career.

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Striking the Right Tone

An ideal tone is one that suggests warm familiarity with and confidence in a student—the implication is that you approve of the student as a person and take the student seriously. Some ideas for fostering such a tone are:

- after the initial formal introduction, refer to the student by first name;
- narrate a personal interaction that took place in your office or elsewhere;
- recall your first impressions of the student, then contrast these with later ones;
- present intriguing asides such as spontaneous discussions or shared interests or backgrounds;
- describe the student's specific contribution to your relationship;
- supply information demonstrating that you and the student have discussed career plans or graduate school.

Avoid such tonal extremes as referring to the student by last name only or excessively glorifying the student. A letter that becomes too flattering about the student or too personal in detail might actually do more harm than good.

Managing Persona

A touchy subject, this. We all develop particular habits as writers and often cling to them tenaciously, and when writing a letter we might think that we should produce a document either stripped of personality or one that is so personal in voice that it's full of idiosyncrasy. Given that the persona one adopts in a letter can influence the reader's opinion of the candidate highly, the prudent choice is to think about the student's needs and the reader's needs as primary and directive.

The writer's persona should be a natural and subdued part of any professional letter of recommendation. In an effort to add flair, it may be tempting to make clever parenthetical comments, digress, or even provide so much nifty narration that the student's accomplishments get buried in a needlessly complex plot. Conversely, some writers make the mistake of adopting such a clinical or artificially genteel manner that the letter might have been written by a robot. Consider how dispassionate an employer or selection committee can become about a candidate when put off by the letter writer's stylistic idiosyncrasies. I've been on selection committees where the members were openly judgmental of and distracted by the letter writer's style, and thus the focus became on the writer's quirks rather than the candidate's strengths.

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The bottom line is that your voice should suit the situation first and you second. Write with a persona that will humanize both you and the student, but keep the focus positively on the student, not on yourself or on the letter itself.

excerpted from CHAPTER 5

NATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

*When the student is ready . . . the lesson appears.
—Gene Oliver*

A lot is at stake for students applying for national scholarships, which is why each recommendation letter for a scholarship candidate must be exceptionally strong, be written from an informed perspective, and exude a sincere tone. Simply put, to become a contender, a candidate needs every letter of reference to be excellent. It may be tempting to think that the academic records of top-shelf students speak for themselves and that their letters make little difference, but given the level of competition, exceptional students with ordinary letters of reference look unexceptional. As you review the sample letters in this chapter, note how often the writers invite us to imagine ourselves in the presence of the student—the narratives aim to help us know the candidate well, to in fact admire the student.

At the same time, you'll find cautions here about the need for a credible letter not given to hyperbole. In particular, evaluators from outside the US have long been clamoring for honest evaluations that aid selectors in the winnowing process, even asking writers specifically to comment on a student's weaknesses as testimony that the writer is indeed painting a complete picture. Thorough discussions of how to go about this are in chapter 1, with specific calls for criticism in this chapter from the Marshall, Rhodes, and Gates Cambridge scholarships.

The samples in this chapter come from my review of hundreds of recommendation letters for 10 national scholarships, with selections made to reflect skill and variety. The brief summary included here about each scholarship will help you to write a letter of maximum efficacy. Also, if you wish to learn more about the scholarship the student is applying for, you can go to the website provided for each scholarship or turn to the student's application materials.

The Udall Scholarship

The Udall Scholarship honors Morris K. Udall, an Arizona Congressman known for authoring legislation to protect wilderness areas and for his commitment to the Native American population. Sophomores and juniors are eligible for the scholarship money, which covers educational expenses for one year up to a maximum of \$5,000.

Candidates for the Udall scholarship supply three letters of reference and prepare extensive application materials, including biographical background, personal narrative, educational plans, and an essay of 600 words applying Congressman Udall's achievements to their own background. Ideally, references for the student should be highly familiar with the student's application, particularly the essay question responses.

Writing the Udall Scholarship Recommendation

The criteria you should address in a Udall Scholarship recommendation letter include:

- evidence of and continued potential for academic success;
- the student's level of interest in the environment;
- the student's communication skills, especially as they might be employed in relation to environmental public policy;
- the student's potential to have an impact on his or her field.

The best Udall Scholarship letters provide concrete evidence of the student's abilities and demonstrate a strong personal relationship between the student and the letter writer. The strongest letters emphasize the student's dedication to his or her field of study and stress the student's communication skills. In addition, the letter writer's ability to comment briefly on the student's 600-word essay or on the student's potential for making contributions to the field of environmental public policy can have a significant impact on the student's chances of winning a scholarship. In the second sample Udall letter provided, note how the writer addresses these issues with sentences such as the following: "As I'm sure you will note in her application materials, Janet is—especially for her age—a true stylist, and she will bring her respect and ability for both written and verbal expression to all of her work. She has spoken with me of a goal to become a scientist writer, and I am convinced of her ability to do so."

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When writing a Udall recommendation, beware of shortchanging the student by providing too little detail or by focusing too much on the nature of the scholarship itself. Perhaps because of the scholarship's link to Udall and the Congressman's indubitable impact on the nation's environmental policy, some letter writers in the past have spent considerable time discussing Udall and his work. Such a practice can become digressive, especially because it is the student's job to evaluate Udall's accomplishments in the application materials. Any discussion of Udall himself or the scholarship's goals should be done with efficiency, as in the final paragraph of the first sample letter on the next page, where the writer fluidly comments, "I cannot imagine a better student to meet your goals of 'educating a new generation of Americans to preserve and protect their national heritage.'"

Advice from a Udall Selection Committee Member

A selection committee member from 2002 notes that backgrounds of committee members vary widely: ". . . from professors of environmental policy and science, EPA officials, directors of scholarships and Honors programs, to representatives of Native American interests" (47). She also notes that evaluators had just 10 or 15 minutes to consider each application package, including the time needed to read the three letters of reference, and the selection committee read about 450 applications in two and a half days. Candidates who stood above the crowd were those who showed a commitment to activities, volunteerism, and leadership.

Given these evaluative constraints, letter writers should favor brevity (note how each sample letter is just one page) and not shy away from offering personal perspective about the student's activities and character.

A Few Concerns Specific to the Udall Scholarship

There are some special award categories for the Udall Scholarship. Specifically, The Udall Scholarship Foundation Board of Trustees awards scholarships to Native American and Alaska Native students who intend to pursue careers in health care or tribal public policy. In these circumstances, the candidate and the three references must tailor their materials accordingly, giving special attention to the student's background in ethics, public policy, or community service.

Further information about the Udall Scholarship resides at
http://www.udall.gov/p_scholarship.htm

SAMPLE UDALL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION



MU

MYTHIC
UNIVERSITY

123 Ivy Road, Mythic CA 99999 555-123-4567

October xx, 20xx

Dear Udall Scholarship Review Committee:

It is with great pleasure that I recommend Janet Lerner for the Morris K. Udall Scholarship. Ms. Lerner is an outstanding student and researcher. Additionally, she is a gifted writer and promises to make exceptional contributions to the field of environmental public policy.

I first began working with Ms. Lerner when she was a student in my seminar on Science, Technology, and Human Values. In this class, Ms. Lerner investigated the intersection of current issues in science and technology with the responsibilities of citizenship in a participatory democracy. Her work in this course was first-rate, and she contributed substantively to our discussions. Ms. Lerner is a careful scholar and thoughtful speaker, and quickly earned the respect and admiration of her peers.

Ms. Lerner went on to participate the following semester in a student-motivated research project to educate the public on current issues in science, technology, and society studies through a student-developed, student-run web page. During the course of her work on this project, I was consistently impressed with Ms. Lerner's ability to envision simple, powerful ways to communicate complicated issues to a general audience.

Ms. Lerner is actively engaged in research projects which will allow her to bring her knowledge of issues in the earth sciences to the attention of the general public. In addition to the project mentioned above, she has also been a participant in a selective undergraduate research course, has developed a short conservation documentary for a local television station, and has participated in the Department of Environmental Resource Management Externship Program.

Finally, I would like to emphasize Ms. Lerner's skills as part of a working research team. Ms. Lerner is conscientious, responsible, and imaginative. She is both a quick learner and an able teacher. She is a person of good conscience and, what is often equally important to the success of team projects, good humor. I cannot imagine a better student to meet your goals of "educating a new generation of Americans to preserve and protect their national heritage." If I can provide any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Janet Teacher

Janet Teacher

Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and Society

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SAMPLE UDALL SCHOLARSHIP RECOMMENDATION



MU

MYTHIC
UNIVERSITY

123 Ivy Road, Mythic CA 99999 555-123-4567

November xx, 20xx

Letter of Support for Janet Lerner's Application for the Morris K. Udall Scholarship

I first encountered Janet Lerner three years ago as a student in my freshman-level class in rhetoric and composition. In this class, Janet distinguished herself as a skillful writer, a hard worker, and a sensitive, caring individual. Among other reasons, she stood out for me in this group of students because she was one of only two students to receive an A.

My relationship with Janet has grown significantly in the last two years, and my admiration for her has deepened even further. As I consider the types of academic projects in which Janet has involved herself—from her work in a sediment sampling lab to her active participation in a specialized class in which she is studying coral reef demise—I am genuinely impressed by her motivation and clarity of vision for her future. Janet is not one to take courses or work with professors simply to make herself look good on paper; she genuinely follows her mind and heart in her academic choices.

Most importantly, I think highly of Janet as a writer. She is without a doubt a promising undergraduate science writer. Again, led by her own initiative and vision, Janet has consistently tackled demanding writing projects, from helping with the editing of a professor's textbook to writing a script for a short television documentary, which will be produced and filmed by her professor this spring. As I'm sure you will note in her application materials, Janet is—especially for her age—a true stylist, and she will bring her respect and ability for both written and verbal expression to all of her work. She has spoken with me of a goal to become a scientist writer, and I am convinced of her ability to do so.

Lastly, let me assure you of Janet's integrity and character. She is a person of discernment, intelligence, sensitivity, optimism, energy, and humility. She possesses a wealth of virtues that, in my opinion, make her highly deserving of a Udall Scholarship. Please do give her every consideration. If needed, I would be happy to provide further detail.

Sincerely,

John Student

John Student

Graduate Assistant in English, PhD candidate

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