Recommendation Letters (2019)

Many individuals ask me to write recommendation letters. Some ask me to recommend them for jobs or scholarships, and some ask me to recommend them for doctoral programs. I have some comments. The comments are made in the spirit of encouraging the growth of my students, particularly through greater self-awareness of a professional identity.

First: This is a serious part of my job. I only write recommendations for people I know quite well, and if I feel they are suited for a job or for a doctoral program. I may refuse to write or send a recommendation if one or both of those conditions are not met. It is my right to do so. I will also say “no” if I do not have anything special to say about you. In those circumstances, I would have to say, “So and so took my class but didn’t do anything special, and didn’t stand out in any way.” Or “So and so never really said anything in class unless a direct question was asked of him/her.” A letter like that will not get you a job, or a scholarship, or a spot in a doctoral program.

Second: In general, I will agree to write a recommendation only for learners who graduated three or fewer years ago. If I do agree, I will need to state in the letter that “It has been four years etc. since I last saw this student and I cannot account for what he or she has been doing during that time.” I suggest it is more constructive, and more appropriate, that you ask people who have direct, current knowledge of you, to recommend you.

Third: Recommendation letters for a doctoral program are quite different than the other two categories I mentioned. There is not only a letter, but often the school you are applying to requires me to provide detailed information about you, such as your maturity level, your intellectual ability, your ability to devise projects and carry them out, your ability to solve problems, your ability to write well in English, your ability to express yourself verbally, etc. A recommendation letter submission procedure takes on average twenty minutes to complete.

Third: In order for me to write a letter of recommendation for a job, scholarship, or a doctoral program, and for me to answer positively the kinds of questions committee members ask me, you have to plan ahead and do the following by your second semester of study. If you have no data on these points when you ask me for a recommendation, I probably will not agree to recommend you. If this sounds harsh, consider the alternative: I provide a brief and mediocre recommendation based on the scant evidence you give me, which will not look good to committee members for a job, scholarship, or doctoral program.

Here are some constructive suggestions:

1. Send a proposal to a language teaching and learning conference and present at a conference. Questions to ask yourself: For example, did you send a proposal to the Graduate Student Humanities conference at Texas Tech? To a local, regional, or national conference such as Caliche, Georgia TESOL or TexTESOL, AAAL, MLA, or TESOL? Have you presented at any conferences during your time in our M.A. program?

2. Define a special issue in a course you took with me, and put together a voluntary presentation for your classmates.

3. Give your classmates an annotated bibliography about a problem you are interested in.
4. Tutor language students, and then turn your experience into an opportunity for research or a class assignment.

5. Go beyond doing a proposal in a course with me, by collecting data and actually doing the research.

6. Come up with your own ideas about projects to do for class assignments, and then propose those ideas to me. Questions to ask yourself: Did I have to give you a topic? Or were you unable to decide until a deadline when I pressured you to decide?

7. Send a manuscript to a regional or national journal for publication consideration. This can be a manuscript are you writing with a classmate, or another faculty member.

8. Are your visits to my office hours productive? In other words, do you come with specific questions? Or are your questions consistently general, as in “I don’t know how to do this assignment.” Or “I don’t know what topic to choose.”

9. Important: If you don’t talk in class unless you are asked a direct question, I cannot say that your ability to express yourself is good. You can’t just sit there and expect that report to look good in a recommendation letter.

Fourth: If I agree to write a letter for you, you need to provide me with some key information in a timely fashion. Here follows information from an actual student. He or she just put it in an e-mail, which I kept on file. This helped me write a great recommendation for this person. I was able to use the titles from his or her work and projects in my courses to write an honest and positive letter of recommendation.

2017 Fall

- LING 5328 Teaching English in International Context

- LING 5382 Second Language Materials Design: I worked on a materials design project titled as “Developing Learners’ Cultural Literacy via Authentic Materials in XXXX Language”, in which I designed 3 class hour lesson plans based on XXXX authentic materials for undergraduate students to acquire beginning level of XXXX language.

2018 Spring

- CMLL 5301 Fundamentals of Research & Scholarship: Second Language Testing: I worked on a testing project titled as ”Pilot a Test on XXXX Language Authentic Materials”, in which I designed a CRT test based on the authentic materials from a XXXX film trailer.

2018 Fall


Presentations

XXX X. (2017). “An Introduction to XXXX Language and Culture.” Guest Lecture of the course CMLL2305 Culture and Language at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

XXX X. (2018) “Principals of Designing CALL Materials for Online XXXX Courses with a Course Module Demonstration.” The 4th Online XXXX Teaching Forum & Workshop (OCTFW). XXXX Institute at Michigan State University. East Lansing, MI. (Please see the attached proposal for more information.)

Fifth: I require three weeks’ notice during the semester, and five weeks’ during winter and summer breaks. The three weeks or five weeks includes not only writing the letter, but submitting them, which as I outlined above, is its own operation. Due to the nature of my research and outreach to rural public libraries, I may be gone during breaks, in places that do not have internet. This means you will need to plan ahead. If you have less than three weeks before a deadline, then don’t ask me to write and submit a recommendation. Be cognizant that I have many projects and responsibilities on my plate at the ends of semesters. I know the tough part is asking. If I don’t answer your initial request immediately, it means I have a lot going on. You can contact me again after 2 - 3 days if I haven’t answered. I will not mind.

Concerning the submission process: Before leaving on trips, etc., I will make a good faith effort in light of my other activities and responsibilities, to check my e-mail to see if any last-minute submission requests have come from schools. I will do my best to submit any outstanding recommendation submissions. But once I have left on a trip, I will not be able to submit recommendations. Hence, your need to make your requests to me, and to the schools who are asking for recommendation submissions very early on.

Sixth: I will limit the number of schools or scholarships or doctoral programs I will send letters to, to seven per semester, combined. I do not have clerical support, and I am juggling many projects and responsibilities, including recommendation letter requests for your classmates.

Seventh: I will send the recommendation letter directly to the school or committee once they have contacted me independently. I do not send letters to the student I am writing the recommendation letter for. Further, you must tell the school or committee that you waive the right to see the letter. If you have not waived this right, I will not send a recommendation letter. This involves trust on your part. You must trust that I agreed to write a recommendation letter, which means I thought you were qualified for a position or a spot in a program.

Finally: Many schools have a way to let you know whether I have sent in your recommendation. This is a recent development in our field, which is made possible by the online technology the schools use to collect applicants’ information. But just because it is technologically possible for applicants to check up on their recommenders, does not mean it is socially or professionally appropriate to do so. I do not want e-mail “reminders” and I do not want unwarranted questions as to when I plan to send letters out. I am not a machine, nor am I a secretary. If you genuinely think that a school’s request for a recommendation has gone astray, let me know in a short, factual e-mail. Make sure you re-request a link to be sent me from the school. This puts the request afresh in my inbox and makes it easier for me to send the recommendation. It also keeps you from being in the socially awkward, to-be-avoided situation of telling your teacher what to do. I agree this is a slender line to walk on. But think on this: I trust my students to understand what a deadline is. Pestering them and reminding them will not work. Please do me the courtesy of trusting me in the same way.