

ALL RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR GRADUATE APPLICANTS ARE READ BY THE SAME COMMITTEE, THE DEPARTMENTAL GRADUATE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE. NO ONE FACULTY MEMBER HAS SPECIAL INFLUENCE OVER ADMISSIONS DECISIONS, AND THE COMMITTEE WILL WEIGH ALL THE PARTS OF EACH APPLICANT'S FILE. INTERNATIONAL APPLICANTS AND U.S. APPLICANTS ARE EVALUATED BY THE SAME OVERALL CRITERIA. (THERE ARE SOME DIFFERENCES IN DETAIL; VERBAL GRE SCORES ARE NOT DIRECTLY COMPARED UNLESS THE INTERNATIONAL APPLICANT IS A NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKER.)

THE FOLLOWING ARE ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT PIECES OF ADVICE FOR FACULTY WRITING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

(1) PLEASE BE SPECIFIC. AMERICAN RECOMMENDATION LETTERS ARE EXPECTED TO SHOW SPECIFIC PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE STUDENT'S ABILITIES, PERHAPS EVEN OF THEIR DEFICITS AS WELL (HONESTY IS IMPORTANT). ALTHOUGH USEFUL, IT IS NOT SUFFICIENT FOR A RECOMMENDER TO SAY "THIS IS AN EXCELLENT STUDENT, WHO WROTE A GOOD PAPER FOR MY SOCIO-LINGUISTICS COURSE." YOU SHOULD TRY TO EXPLAIN WHAT PARTICULAR INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES OR PERSONAL TRAITS MAKE THIS STUDENT A SPECIALLY GOOD CANDIDATE FOR OUR GRADUATE PROGRAM. IT IS HELPFUL TO CITE SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE BEYOND EXPECTATIONS (PERHAPS THE STUDENT RAN INTO SOME DIFFICULTY, BUT COMPLETED AN ASSIGNMENT SALIENTLY WELL DESPITE THE DIFFICULTY; PERHAPS YOU WERE PARTICULARLY IMPRESSED BY THIS STUDENT'S ANALYTIC ABILITIES IN A CERTAIN AREA). SPECIFIC DETAILS ARE USEFUL TO US BOTH IN GETTING TO KNOW THE APPLICANT, AND IN HELPING INSURE THAT RECOMMENDERS REALLY KNOW THE APPLICANT WELL AND ARE QUALIFIED TO GIVE AN OPINION.

(2) PLEASE GIVE US "CALIBRATION." GENERALLY, YOU SHOULD TRY TO HELP US UNDERSTAND YOUR UNIVERSITY'S GRADING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM – GRADING SYSTEMS VARY GREATLY AROUND THE WORLD, WHICH OFTEN HANDICAPS US IN EVALUATING THE GRADE RECORDS OF INTERNATIONAL APPLICANTS. IT IS THEREFORE HELPFUL IF AN INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDATION LETTER TELLS US WHAT PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN YOUR PROGRAM WOULD NORMALLY RECEIVE GRADES IN THE CANDIDATE'S RANGE OR HIGHER. MORE SPECIFIC DATA IS WELCOME TOO; ONE LETTER TOLD US THAT A PARTICULAR APPLICANT'S GRADES WERE IN FACT THE HIGHEST GRADES EVER AWARDED TO AN HONORS STUDENT IN THAT PROGRAM.

(3) PLEASE BE HONEST. WE ASSUME YOU WILL ONLY WRITE A RECOMMENDATION LETTER FOR A CANDIDATE OF WHOM YOU THINK HIGHLY. BUT A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT OF A CANDIDATE IS ULTIMATELY THE MOST USEFUL TO BOTH THE CANDIDATE AND THE PROGRAM. BESIDES, EXAGGERATED PRAISE OFTEN SOUNDS UNREALISTIC AND IS HARD FOR THE READER TO TAKE SERIOUSLY.

(4) TO THE EXTENT POSSIBLE, PLEASE ADDRESS BOTH THE CANDIDATE'S PERFORMANCE IN YOUR PROGRAM AND HIS OR HER GENERAL RESEARCH POTENTIAL. WE REALIZE THAT NOT EVERY RECOMMENDER WILL BE EQUALLY QUALIFIED TO EVALUATE FUTURE RESEARCH POTENTIAL OF A RECOMMENDED CANDIDATE – BUT EVERY CANDIDATE SHOULD HAVE RECOMMENDERS WHO SPEAK SPECIFICALLY TO THIS POINT.