



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## WRITING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION: ABC'S OF STUDENT ATTRIBUTES

All of us are asked to write letters of recommendation. Often the request comes at a time when we lack the time to give it the time and attention it requires. Several years ago, I started work on a list of student attributes that I could write about in a letter of recommendation. This list has now grown to 82 items! A valuable supplement to the list is a form I use to obtain information from students. Together, the two have allowed me to respond more quickly and to write better letters. Please feel free to adapt my work to fit your needs.

TO: My Students  
RE: Writing Letters of Recommendation

In these legalistic days, I have been cautioned to be very careful about what I say in a letter of recommendation. Consequently, if you ask me for a letter, I try to be as factual as possible when I write it. What does this mean? Let me give you two examples, using illustrations of what I once might have written and what I would now write.

**Then**— \_\_\_\_\_ seems to be a hardworking, conscientious student who can usually be counted on to perform at or above expectations.

**Now**— \_\_\_\_\_ occasionally turns in assignments late. However, when the work is eventually turned in, it usually meets expectations.

**Then**—relaxed, easy going.

**Now**—slept in class.

Please keep this in mind as you progress through the program. At some time in your career—either when you graduate or later—you may want me to write a letter for

you. I am anxious to help you and will always be happy to write a letter. But I must be very careful to tell the truth. So—help me help you, by:

1. Always coming to class prepared.
2. Always following the directions for assignments.
3. Always doing your **best** work.

Examples of observable behaviors with which I have enough experience with you to feel comfortable commenting include the following “ABC’s” of student attributes.

If you anticipate wanting a letter from me, ask for a copy of the outline of information from which I might write a letter of reference. Follow the directions, then give the information to me. I will write a letter, then let you review it. After we finalize the letter, give me the name and address, or email address, of the person to whom you are applying, and I will take it from there.

### The ABCs of Student Attributes

1. Ability—innate capacity to do graduate work
2. Achievement orientation
3. Analytical ability
4. Attitude—general disposition
5. Articulation of ideas
6. Attention to detail
7. Carries load in group activities
8. Clarity of goals
9. Commitment to profession
10. Commitment to self-improvement
11. Common sense
12. Communication skills—orals
13. Communication skills—written
14. Computer literacy
15. Conceptual ability
16. Conflict management skills
17. Conscientiousness
18. Cooperation
19. Contribution to class discussion
20. Constructive criticism—ability to take
21. Creativity
22. Cultural awareness
23. Decision-making
24. Desire to learn



25. Dress—appropriateness of
26. Empathy
27. Energy level
28. English—spoken
29. Enthusiasm
30. Flexibility
31. Follows directions
32. Humor—sense of
33. Information retrieval
34. Improvement—orientation toward
35. Initiative
36. Integrate—ability to
37. Integrity
38. Interest in class
39. Knowledge of field
40. Leadership skills exhibited
41. Lifelong learning—commitment to
42. Listening skills
43. Maturity
44. Motivation
45. Organizing ability
46. Openness
47. Planning ability
48. Perseverance
49. Punctuality
50. Preparation
51. Quality—interest in
52. Quality of work
53. Quantity of work
54. Preparation for class
55. Presentation skills
56. Problem solving skills
57. Professional promise
58. Professionalism—behavior
59. Professional organizations—involvement in
60. Punctuality
61. Rapport—ability to establish
62. Reading—involvement in professional reading
63. Relationship with colleagues
64. Reliability
65. Resourcefulness
66. Respect from others
67. Respect from faculty
68. Respect from fellow students
69. Responsibility—sense of
70. Scholarship—interest in
71. Self-analysis
72. Self-confidence
73. Social skills
74. Stress—performance under
75. Team member—able to work as one
76. Time management skills
77. Tolerance for others

78. Tolerance of others
79. Wellness—physical
80. Wellness—mental
81. Work habits
82. Writing ability

### Outline of Information

You have asked that I write a letter of recommendation for you, and I am delighted to do so *provided* that you furnish me with the following:

1. Name, address of the person(s) to whom I should write
2. Position for which you are applying
3. When we first met
4. Courses taken with me, when, and grades
5. Areas of strength, broken down into:
  - a. Knowledge
  - b. Skills
  - c. Attitudes (strong beliefs)
6. Areas of weaknesses that I should know about, divided into:
  - a. Knowledge
  - b. Skills
7. Anything specific about which you want me to comment
8. Finally, allow at least **one week** for me to write the letter and have it typed—**two weeks** if you want to see a draft before it is mailed (highly recommended).

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