

Writing Useful Law School Recommendations

Through your letter, law schools hope to gain insight into a candidate's promise in the study of law. They value your honesty and candor. Letters that reflect your knowledge of an applicant's performance and character are the most useful to committees and to candidates. A couple of paragraphs recapping a student's résumé with generalities may be complimentary, but it isn't useful. Providing a student's grade isn't useful since schools already have that and it is against FERPA laws to release it in a letter without signed documentation from the student.

Structure Your Letter Well

- Ask the applicant to provide information that will help you write the letter: personal statement, résumé, papers, assignments, etc. Your letter should dovetail with—not duplicate—the rest of the application. Try to write a letter with details not available elsewhere.
- Briefly describe how you know the applicant (e.g. class, research, club/organization, other).
- Choose 2-3 qualities (maybe some of those below) that you have observed in the applicant. Discuss these and support your statements by describing specific instances where you saw these qualities demonstrated. Be as concrete and detailed as possible.
- Avoid generalities or platitudes.
- It is fine to include some criticism and discussion of what the student needs to work on.
- If you have knowledge of special circumstances that impacted the student's performance, describe the circumstance and your assessment of their true ability. Ask the applicant for permission if you plan to include any information considered private or sensitive.
- Consider including unique contributions that an applicant would bring to an incoming class, such as obstacles the applicant had to overcome or how they would contribute to the diversity of the class (broadly defined in terms of background, attributes, experiences, etc).
- Admissions committees find comparison information helpful. If you make comparisons, provide context such as the comparison group (such as other students in your class) or the rationale for the comparison.
- Discuss the applicant's potential for success in rigorous graduate work.

Competencies to Address

Law schools generally look for information on the following characteristics and abilities. You are unlikely to have direct knowledge of the applicant's abilities in all of these areas and are certainly not limited to these.

- Intelligence (analytical skills, rigor of thought, reasoning abilities): Discuss the student's ability to handle complex or abstract ideas. Also address any special circumstances that may have impacted the applicant's academic record.
- Independence of thought (originality, imagination, creativity): Provide an assessment of the applicant's ability to conceptualize information in new ways.
- Communication skills (oral and written): Does the student have clear and articulate communication abilities?
- Motivation and industry (persistence, efficiency, self-discipline): Is there any reason to doubt the applicant's commitment to the study of law? Is this a diligent student?
- Judgment and maturity (conscientiousness, common sense): Has the applicant demonstrated the ability to assess when to push arguments forward and when to back away? Does the student follow through with assignments?
- Leadership skills: Provide an assessment of the applicant's willingness to lead others. Can the student engage, motivate, and persuade while also encouraging input from others?
- Character: Is the applicant someone who you would choose as an attorney? Does the student enjoy the respect and trust of professors, fellow students, or colleagues?

Adapted from University of Utah [Writing a Letter of Recommendation for Law School Admissions](https://advising.utah.edu/preprofessional/pre-law/Writing%20a%20Law%20School%20Recommendation.pdf) <https://advising.utah.edu/preprofessional/pre-law/Writing%20a%20Law%20School%20Recommendation.pdf>