

Please, Mr. Postman...

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

This year will most likely be a busy one for letter carriers. We are slowly entering an economic recovery zone. If this recovery bears any semblance to prior recessions, firms ultimately will resume hiring, and people will start to look for jobs that seem to offer more opportunities. “Real” projects offered sincerely by owners and developers will pick up. And, with more certainty about their situation, people will also have more confidence and resources to seek awards and honors.

This optimistic situation brings us to the topic of this column: letters of reference or support. Included in this category are letters that introduce you for a new position, bolster your firm’s candidacy for an assignment, or proclaim that you (or someone in your firm) are the best candidate for a specific honor.

But, alas, not every letter does its job and puts you over the top. On the other side of the equation, some people—even normally good writers—find this genre difficult or simply don’t know how to proceed.

Here are ground rules for both the letter writer and the subject of the letter, drawn from my experience as a contender, jury member, consultant, employer, and coach. I’ll discuss what to include in a letter, provide suggestions for letter writers and letter seekers, discuss format, and raise the one point that many forget. So I’ll mention it here as well: **You will need the right people to write for you.**

Content and context

An effective letter starts with why you are writing. I’ve adapted some language from various components of an application to the AIA College of Fellows to demonstrate. Use your opening statement to focus on the interest of the recipient:

“Since you seek the best exemplars to become Fellows, I write to tell you that [name] is one of our profession’s most effective leaders, pure and simple.”

In that same paragraph or the next, tell how you know the candidate:

“For over 20 years I’ve worked shoulder-to-shoulder with him on many consequential undertakings involving [that particular enterprise].”

And also explain your own stature and occupation that qualify you to write:

“The organization I lead has for a half century been the hub of the entire building industry in the region, with a constituency of [more information].”

An aside: The quality of your source—as pertinent as possible to this situation—speaks volumes about your connections. One impressive recent nomination letter came from someone who identified himself as a colleague, former partner, and now competitor. How’s that for perspective on a candidate’s career!

“You need the right people to write for you.”

The subsequent paragraph of your letter contains specific details that tell the best possible story about the subject’s skill, growth, influence, results, whatever will appeal to the recipient. Anecdotes work well, since nowadays people want personal insights that only you can provide:

“I remember well how, at our very first meeting...”

And then close with a statement that rings true, not something pat or overstated. In fact, go back to the mission of the letter:

“[Name’s] elevation to Fellowship would underscore the College’s commitment to excellence in this category and signal that...”

Hints for letter writers

- If you're writing about an economic relationship, focus on *recent* examples of proficiency and achievements in business. However, letters for honors must emphasize and explain *lifelong* accomplishment, legacy, and consequence.
- Don't regurgitate the candidate's resume—that's sure death.
- This is serious stuff, and besides, humor is relative. True story: In the eyes of a very offended jury, one reference letter writer entirely killed a colleague's inconclusive honors application with this single, cocky comment: "He'd make a jolly good Fellow."
- In a business reference letter, try to avoid corporate doublespeak. Employers and even some juries will check references further—or disregard an ambiguous letter entirely.
- Recipients certainly know that most of the time, the letters will be positive. What they really want from you is information that will open their eyes, make a choice inevitable, and justify their selection.
- If it's called for, indicate how to reach you for further information.
- Have someone else proofread your letter—and ask them to edit for the hackneyed or implausible adjectives that somehow sneak in. This is too important to trust to spell-check.

Hints for letter seekers

At the very least, you'll need to provide the letter writer with the following.

- **Pertinent Background:** For example, the job being pursued and a statement about your suitability for that kind of work; a description of the project being sought and the firm's related experience; or the nominator's essay and your curriculum vitae, if it's for honors/awards.
- Specific information about how to reach the designated recipient, and what title to use.
- The due date (no harm in moving it up a week or two).
- Instructions about whether it's hard or electronic copy. It's a no-no to embed the letter in an e-mail; it can't be substantiated. (How about providing both? "Today I sent you via USPS the attached letter requested by...")

Tips you'll thank me for

- Letter writers really need to know the candidate. It may be flattering that a starchitect or your governor agrees to write a reference letter, but don't expect much—and the content will focus. Keep your eye on what you need to achieve.

- Follow up with the letter writer. Glitches occur. Better to be sure that your instructions arrived or, later, that the reference remembers the letter is due in a week. Some people finally admit that they need you to draft the letter for them; if you suspect that, it's best not to wait until the deadline is in sight.
- If the letter is a nomination for an honor, be certain that the letter writer is available to write for you (some organizations request exclusivity).
- Whether or not the campaign for which the letter was solicited has been successful, inform your reference. There'll surely be another time.

Appearance matters

These are the courtesies for formatting:

- one page—even if they allow more!
- typewritten (Older references don't do this automatically. And if the letter must travel electronically, be sure that the letter writer can do this or offer assistance.)
- name of the subject of the letter right up front
- legible font, large enough for middle-aged eyes to read easily
- generous white space
- "official" letterhead; personal, if you cannot appropriately use the organization's

And finally: Some people who write letters—even if the letters are confidential and will just be put on file against future situations—can feel pressured to write something flattering. Writers could even be concerned about legalities, especially if there are "issues." If the person you've asked has any reservations about meeting this important commitment—and that could be as simple as meeting the deadline—she or he needs to be realistic, candid, and also tactful about why, and then decline to serve as a reference. ■

About the Author



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