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# Writing Effective Letters

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# Overview

- Effective letters:
    - Know When (to agree)
    - Know What (to ask for and to include)
  
  - Specific Applications:
    - Faculty Reviews/Course Feedback
    - External Letters
    - Students
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# Know When

- Internal Letters/Reviews:
    - Identify the goal
    - Think about any bias and/or conflict
  
  - External Letters:
    - Is it work that you can/should review?
    - What are they asking you to do?
    - Anonymous? What does that really mean?
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# Sample Standards

- A contribution to the understanding and development of the law.
  - Demonstrating, through completed work, two things: (a) the capacity and commitment to participate meaningfully in scholarly activity; and (b) a wide and critical command of his or her field of study.
  - An original contribution to his or her field, revealing an active and inquiring mind and reflecting the author's attempt to impose his or her own views or sense of order on the existing materials.
  - Sufficiently ambitious to justify the substantial commitment of time that the candidate should have invested in the work.
  - Work that is informed, reflective, analytical, and in some substantial part a personal statement.
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# Know What: Peer Reviews

- **What form?**
    - Develop a uniform approach (standard template?)
  - **When?**
    - Often and have a schedule
    - Be timely
  - **How?**
    - Highlight strengths and weaknesses
    - Use specific examples
    - List next steps/recommendations
    - Atmosphere of trust
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# Know What: External Reviews

- Identify if you know the candidate and if so, how
  - Identify what you were asked to review and asked to do
  - Tie review to standards that you have been given
  - Be succinct but provide appropriate detail (most external letters are between five and ten pages)
  - Give a recommendation (?)
  - Thank for the opportunity and volunteer to receive follow-up
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# Helpful Concepts:

(Attributes)

- ability to communicate
  - intelligence
  - self-confidence
  - willingness to accept responsibility
  - initiative
  - leadership
  - energy level
  - imagination
  - flexibility
  - interpersonal skills
  - self-knowledge
  - ability to handle conflict
  - goal achievement
  - competitiveness
  - appropriate vocational skills
  - direction
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# More Helpful Concepts:

(Intangible Qualities)

- empathy
  - a divergent, abstract thinking style
  - a high level of commitment
  - the ability to be a "self-starter"
  - a high energy level
  - the recognition that excellence is a journey, not a destination
  - the potential ability to lead
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# Language

- Standout adjectives:
    - superb, outstanding, remarkable, topnotch
  - Other positive adjectives:
    - honest, articulate, effective, sophisticated, intelligent, observant, significant, expressive, creative, efficient, cooperative, imaginative, dependable, reliable, mature, innovative
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# Be aware when using:

- Wishy-washy words:
    - nice, good, fair, fairly, adequate, reasonable, decent, and satisfactory
  - Gender stereotypical words:
    - Affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, sensitive, nurturing, agreeable, tactful, interpersonal, warm, caring

(See Madera, Hebl, and Martin, *Gender and Letters of Recommendation for Academia*, 94 J. of Applied Psychology 1591 (2009))
  - References to race, religion, national origin, age, disability, gender, family status
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