

Letters of Recommendation

The end of semester is a harried time for students and teachers alike, and, adding to the workload, the spring semester inevitably brings with it an additional rush of requests for letters of recommendation. Although not faculty members, TAs are, for various reasons, often asked to write many such letters. For some undergraduates, recitation sessions or introductory course sections taught by TAs are their best opportunities to get to know instructors. Don't be surprised, then, if you are asked to write several recommendations during your TA career at Rutgers — in fact, it helps to be prepared. What follows are suggestions for writing successful letters of recommendation; some of the material has been modified from an online document provided by the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning at Harvard University (http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~bok_cen/docs/Verba-recs.html).

A successful letter of recommendation begins long before the letter is actually written. As a Teaching Assistant, your first step when asked to write a letter is to inform the student of your qualifications and professional standing. Undergraduate students are not always aware of university hierarchies, so you should inform students of your TA/graduate student status, and let them know that a letter from a full-time faculty member might better serve their application. It may be, in the end, that a supportive, informed, and well-written letter from a teaching assistant will be just as helpful to the student, but he or she should still be aware of your status. Second, you need to be honest with students about the kind of letter you can write; if you cannot recommend them to a school or for a position, let them know this in a kind but straightforward manner, and offer them whatever constructive advice that may allow them to improve their future prospects.

There are three likely recommendation scenarios: a) you know the student very well and she or he has consistently produced excellent work; b) you have a favorable impression of a student, but you lack sufficient information or exposure to be confident about writing a strong letter; c) the student did not perform well in your class and you are certain that you will not be able to write a strong letter. While the first and last cases are relatively easy to handle, the

TAP is looking for
creative people

Have you ever felt the desire to rail against the hypocrisies of the modern world? Have you ever wanted to make great films? Well, you might have to look elsewhere to fulfill these desires. But if you've ever wanted to write about your teaching experiences, or improve your videotaping skills, TAP might have opportunities you.

Beginning next fall, *TapTalk* will publish an ongoing series of guest columns by Rutgers TAs. Columns will be 600-700 words in length and should address topics dealing specifically with the pedagogical aspects of working as a teaching assistant. While individual opinions and writing styles will be respected, final decisions about column style and content will be made at the editorial level. If you are interested in contributing a column or would like more information, please contact John Scanlon at 932-7747 or scanlonj@rci.rutgers.edu.

TAP is also looking for part-time videotape technicians. Applicants must have a basic knowledge of video camera operation and a flexible schedule. If you are interested, please contact Amber Carpenter at 932-7747 or acarpent@eden.rutgers.edu.

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middle case presents special difficulties that can probably best be addressed in a face-to-face meeting. Whenever you are asked to write a letter of recommendation, no matter which of the above scenarios you find yourself in, it is important to meet with the student. During this meeting you should discuss the student's goals and acquire specific information about the destination of the letter. The more details you can find out, the better position you are in to benefit the student's application. The meeting is also a good opportunity to obtain any pertinent documents that you will need to write the letter. These may include: a resume or curriculum vitae, papers or exams submitted for your class, copies of application letters or statements of purpose, transcripts, and literature describing the organization to which the student is applying. If the student is applying to graduate or professional schools, a final important document is a waiver form indicating whether or not the student waives his or her right to see the letter of recommendation. Inform the student that waiving one's right is usually

beneficial, since confidential recommendations tend to be more convincing to application committees.

When it comes to writing the letter itself, there are several useful guidelines to follow:

- The letter should be 1-2 pages long. Anything longer will lose the attention of the reader, and anything shorter may imply a lack of interest or enthusiasm. If possible, the letter should be on departmental letterhead.
- You should begin the letter by identifying yourself and indicating your relationship to and familiarity with the student. What class, or classes, did he/she take with you. What kind of class was it: what material did it cover, what were the course goals, how many students were in the class, etc.
- The letter should address the specific purpose and audience for which it is written. If the student is applying to graduate school, for instance, the letter should stress scholarly accomplishments. If, on the other hand, the recommendation is for a non-academic position, the letter should have a broader scope and, ideally, discuss the applicability of the student's skills for the specific position.
- Avoid hyperbole and embellishment; students are better

served by honest and acute assessments of their abilities than by superlative-laden but ultimately generic or impersonal letters. It is often helpful if you can provide a comparative ranking; if the applicant was unambiguously the best student in the class, for instance, indicate as much in your letter. Many committees and employers are impressed by figures specifying the student's percentile rank (e.g. "top 10% of the class"), so offer this information if it is available. Never, however, compromise your credibility by making assertions that are untrue or that you are not in a position to affirm.

- The letter of recommendation is a good place to explain a weakness or ambiguity in a student's record or transcript, if such an explanation is possible and appropriate.
- End the letter by offering a brief summation and a restatement of your support for the student.

Writing letters of recommendation is not simply a favor that you provide to your students; it is a professional responsibility, and thus a key professional skill

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TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by the Teaching Assistant Project (TAP), Graduate School–New Brunswick.

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Letters, responses to *Tapped In*, and suggestions for articles should be directed to the Editor.

TapTalk

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Tapped In – The Diary of a Practicing TA

by Rupert Peals*

This is my last column for *TapTalk*; there are only so many witty comments, inane jokes and mock insights you can summon on the topic of teaching before you begin to pontificate, and since I began pontificating the first moment I set pen to paper my days have always been numbered. So, for my last hurrah I want to address that highly charged space known as “the real world.” I’m not referring to the MTV program of that name (which, as an aside, is highly entertaining in a guilty “I-know-it’s-awful-but-I-can’t-help-myself” way), although by a fortuitous coincidence two Rutgers students have appeared on the series. The real world to which I’m referring is the one offered up by students as a standard against which they evaluate the material presented to them in class: “this is all very interesting, but how will this help me in the real world” or “how is this relevant to the real world?” I’m always tempted to brush aside such questions, largely because of my disciplinary blind spot: to me, the material is usually inherently interesting, and thus its relevance is self-evident. The frequency and

earnestness of such requests for “reality,” however, requires me to take notice of them, to think about what produces them, and to consider my responsibility towards them.

Demands for “real world” accountability seem to be issuing from two separate but related sources. On the one hand, universities are under increasing pressure to operate more like businesses, and on the other hand students and parents are demanding a more explicit correlation between skyrocketing tuition fees and the utility of the degree for which such fees are paid. The issue, then, seems to be one of instrumentality: what is the “use” of a college education, and how can we put it to work for us? At this stage it would be irresponsible to take an apocalyptic stance and suggest that even bringing up the issue of instrumentality signals “the end of education as we know it,” or something like that. A college education has *always* been instrumental, a mechanism for upward social and economic mobility and intellectual expansion. Furthermore, anyone concerned about the ongoing effects of class and racial stratifications in this country wouldn’t want to argue against the opening up of universities to wider, more diverse populations, populations that want to make use of the very instrumentality the degree can provide. Where the sea-change might be occurring is in the degree to which

instrumentality has penetrated curricula and pedagogies. Certain older notions of higher education, particularly in the liberal arts, had faith in what we might call the “mystery effect;” you went to college, learned a lot that was not directly related to any potential profession or occupation, and emerged a “well-rounded” person. I think that what’s coming under fire in the current “real world” impulse is this sense of mystery; people don’t want nebulous well-roundedness but clear employability, and they want demonstrable skills to accompany the interesting ideas they absorb. For better or for worse, these demands are becoming the standard in many academic settings.

While I’m wary of some of the implications of this transition, I also understand the desire and applaud many of its results. Having said all this is not, however, simply to accede to some new pedagogical status quo. In practice, the mysterious notion of a “well-rounded” education has been replaced by a call for “excellence” in education that is no less mysterious; neither option is particularly attractive from a professional standpoint, and neither seems to have much connection to any reality that might benefit contemporary students. As academics our job is to take hold of a piece of the real world and rip it to shreds, and as teachers our job is to make sense of those shreds for our students. Very often this process also

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shows us that the real world didn't quite fit together seamlessly in the first place. One doesn't need to be a denizen of the ivory tower to recognize that there are multiple "real worlds" out there, and that as university instructors we have both the opportunity (i.e. an audience of willing, enthusiastic minds) and the obligation to explore this multiplicity. If university teaching means, from this point on, little more than preparing students, in cookie-cutter style, to enter into the corporate workplace, then it is not something I want to do. If it means giving them the tools and inspiration to choose from a variety of ways of taking on and expanding the real world, then sign me up.

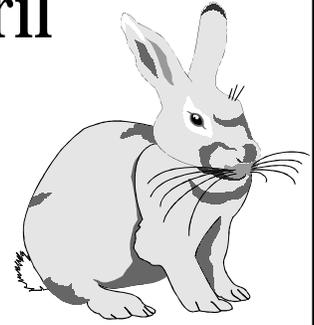
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to master. This is not to say that you are obligated to grant all requests for recommendations; you should, however, be in a position to explain to students why you can or cannot write letters for them, as well as the degree to which you will be able to endorse them if you have agreed to write recommendations.

Finally, it's a good policy to follow up on the results of your recommendations by having students keep you apprised of the success of their applications. This demonstrates ongoing support for your students, as well as providing a tangible measure of the work you have done.

April



19	Passover (begins at sundown)
22	Earth Day
23	Easter
27	Freedom Day (South Africa)

COMING IN MAY

1	Classes End
14	Mother's Day
23	Commencement
29	Memorial Day
30	Summer Session begins

Teaching Assistant Project

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