

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR WRITING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

by Joe Schall

I. *Thou shalt influence thy students to waive access privileges.* Students who waive access should recognize that selectors naturally trust a confidential letter more readily. Some faculty share letters with students, but on their own terms.

II. *Thou shalt not make graven images of thy school, thy program, or thyself.* Some recommenders shout irrelevancies in their letters, often to the detriment of the student. Context is necessary, but not to the point of inappropriate idolization.

III. *Thou shalt not take thy student's character in vain.* Respect for the student's character must be implicit in a letter of reference, fostered by examples that uplift and humanize, such as a personal interaction or a memorable moment.

IV. *Remember thy letter deadline, and meet it verily.* Just as we expect students to follow our protocol for recommendation letters, we must follow theirs.

V. *Honor thy student and thy reader both.* Strike a balance between your need to praise the student and your reader's need to trust your praise. Offer credible praise and even criticism, especially if invited to, and practice even-handed judgment.

VI. *Thou shalt not lessen thy student's chances with ambiguous, waffling, seemingly coded, or negative language.* Even phrases like "As far as I can tell" and "I assume" can suggest a lack of support. Affirm rather than equivocate.

VII. *Thou shalt not commit discrimination in thy letter.* It is legally risky, stupid, or both to make discriminatory comments about a student's race, gender, age, sexual orientation, appearance, nationality, parental or marital status, or disability.

VIII. *Thou shalt not steal the platitudes of others.* "This student is the best I've ever had!" you proclaim, and the audience wonders if you've ever taught before. Suspect praise, hyperbole, and clichés are tired melodies in reference letters.

IX. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy student.* Don't speak beyond your experience, and don't make malicious claims about one you're endorsing.

X. *Thou shalt not covet thy student's flattery, currency, or any other possession that is rightfully thy student's.* We write letters as a professional courtesy and because others wrote them for us, not because we need the student's gratitude.

The above is adapted from Joe Schall's *Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook*, with the author's permission. The second edition of this handbook is available on October 1, 2004, from Outernet Publishing (<http://www.outernetpublishing.com/writing.htm>). Questions and detailed ordering information requests can be directed to Joe Schall (schall@ems.psu.edu).