

Writing Mentor Letters

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You may be asked to draft letters about you from your mentor. Think of this as an opportunity and not a shirked responsibility. This is your mentor telling you that they want the letter to look exactly as you'd like it to, because they like and trust you that much.

Take care as you draft these letters. The letters are a big part of reviewers' determination of your mentors' belief in you.

Hints:

- Do not be modest – your mentors should know you, be enthusiastic about you and your project.
- Chris Martin has used the following sections in his letters:
 - Involvement with mentee
 - Summary of mentee background
 - Mentee's appropriateness for whatever they are applying for
 - Correspondence of career trajectory and research program
- The NIMH guidelines for a career award reference letter state that the letter involves an evaluation of the candidate with special reference to:
 - potential for conducting research
 - evidence of originality
 - adequacy of scientific background
 - quality of research endeavors or publications to date
 - commitment to health oriented research
 - need for further research experience and training
- Other hints:
 - The mentor letter is the place to put anything important about you that you'd like to have said that you didn't get a chance to say in the rest of your text
 - When competing in a tight field, it's often good to have a few, but not too many superlatives. You should be something unusual and special, but not so much that reviewers doubt the veracity of the letter.
 - I appreciate it when mentors spend most of the letter on professional qualities. It's great if they have something at the end about how you're a nice person too. This should be 1-2 sentences.
 - If you have a glaring limitation or problem that you did not talk about in the application that reviewers will notice (e.g., a year off of grad school), your mentor letter can tactfully dismiss it as irrelevant.