So you need a reference letter:
Some thoughts from the other side

Lawrence J. Appel, MD, MPH

Director, Welch Center for Prevention, Epidemiology and Clinical Research
C. David Molina, M.D., M.P.H., Professor of Medicine
with Joint Appointments in Epidemiology, International Health, and Nursing

Feb 15, 2023
• **Submitter (me)**
  - Busy
    - Writing a (good) letter from scratch takes 2+ hours
  - Might not know the candidate really well

• **Selection process for the candidate**
  - Evaluators, also really busy
  - Large number of candidates, often with similar strengths (e.g. ‘outstanding candidate’, ‘hard-working’, ‘bright’)

• How to make the candidate stand out? even memorable?
What about ChatGPT?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-32oITcyHpQ

ChatGPT is at capacity right now

Get notified when we're back

Write an inspirational speech about the status of ChatGPT.
To: Students and faculty who request references

From: Lawrence J. Appel, MD, MPH

Date: February 15, 2023

RE: Information needed to prepare reference letters

I am delighted to provide reference letters in support of applications and awards. To do so, I request the following:

1) Provide the due date and time, and the address
2) Ask me no later than 2 weeks before the due date.
3) I will email you that I have completed the letter. If you do not receive this email by 1 week before the due date, remind me.
4) Provide me a copy of your CV.
5) Complete a full draft of the letter. This is the order:

1st paragraph – two sentences. Example: I am delighted to write this letter in strong support for <insert your name>’s application for a XXX. I have known XXX for XX years and worked closely with her for XX years (<insert dates>), while she was XXX.
What I ask students

- Provide the specifications, including how to submit (e.g. online, hard copy)
- Provide the due date and time, and submission information
- Ask me at least 2 weeks before the due date
- Provide a CV
- Complete a full draft of the letter
1st Paragraph

- Brief, high level

- Example: “I am delighted to write this letter in strong support for <insert your name>’s application for a XXX. I have known XXX for XX years and worked closely with her for XX years (<insert dates>), while she was XXX.”
• Narrative history on education, training, employment, inc awards and honors

• Make it interesting, “Given my passion to ..., I sought
• Describe why you are qualified for this award/grant/position

• “XX has several qualities which make her an extremely appealing candidate for a XX. First, she has expressed a sustained commitment to XXX conducting a study, analyzing data, and publishing results. Specifically, she used data from the XX study to determine XX. In contrast to prevailing opinion, her analyses provide strong evidence that XX.”

• If there are specific criteria, use ‘sign posts’, e.g. Community Service ..., Mentoring ... that match those criteria
• Conclusion, 2 – 3 sentences

• Example: “In summary, XX is a very strong candidate for a XXX. Without question, she is similar in caliber to other XX. Naturally, I hope that you agree with my assessment and offer her XX.”
How to make a good letter even better and ‘memorable’

• Add very personal elements that highlight your strengths
• Use 5 sentence rule for paragraphs, with strong lead and concluding sentences
• For emphasis,
  • use **bold** and *underline* (but sparingly)
  • use call out boxes, direct quotes, e.g. text from evaluations
• IMPORTANT: Drop all pretenses of modesty