

MEMORANDUM

To: Columbia Law School Faculty
From: Faculty Clerkships and Judicial Relations Committee
Date: April 6, 2026
Re: Writing Effective Letters of Recommendation for Clerkship Applicants

We know that the spring semester is an especially busy time for writing letters of recommendation for clerkship applicants. Thank you in advance for supporting our students and graduates.

From research our committee conducted in the fall of 2025, we confirmed that letters of recommendation are a critical part of a clerkship application. We also learned about the kind of information many judges want in a letter of recommendation. We summarize that information below and provide several anonymized examples of effective letters written by our colleagues.

Agreeing to write a letter

- Clerkship applications usually require three letters of recommendation. We advise applicants that at least two of these letters should come from full-time faculty members.
- Ideally, recommenders know an applicant well and can speak to aspects of the applicant's candidacy beyond what is apparent from the written record, such as grades or summer experiences.
- If you feel that you cannot write a strong letter of recommendation, encourage the student to consider other potential options and speak with their advisor in the Office of Judicial Careers (OJC).

Obtaining information from the applicant

- After you agree to write a letter, the applicant should send you a [Clerkship Recommendation Memo](#), which follows a template from OJC. The memo asks the applicant to provide details about themselves, their clerkship goals, and their interactions with you.
- You may also ask the applicant for a resume, transcript, writing sample, or other materials that would assist you.

Elements of a strong letter

When you write a letter, please touch on the following points:

- **A hook at the start of the letter.** Judges and clerks may have limited time to review applications. Start the letter off with a clear, strong description of the candidate.
- **A description of your relationship to the applicant.** Explain how you know the applicant and why you feel qualified to recommend them for the job of a law clerk. Details help. For example, if the applicant served as a research assistant for you, describe how often you interacted with the

applicant. If the applicant enrolled in your seminar, explain that the class was small and provided ample opportunity for discussion and interaction.

- **Detailed examples of the applicant's strengths, tied to clerking.** Most judges want clerks with excellent legal analysis, legal research, and writing skills. Your letter should discuss these skills, illustrated with concrete examples. Explain, for example, how the applicant distinguished themselves in your course, clinic, or RA/TA position. Perhaps the applicant is a particularly fast, accurate writer; perhaps they were consistently ahead of any request and demonstrated initiative; perhaps they demonstrated intellectual curiosity about the law in class and on their exams. If you supervised their substantive writing, such as a Note, this is a good opportunity to discuss the applicant's research and drafting skills. Judges are looking for evidence that the applicant is ready to hit the ground running. Avoid focusing on accomplishments that are not related to your work together.
- **An assessment of the applicant's professionalism, with concrete examples.** Speak about the applicant's collegiality, professionalism, and the qualities they show in working with others. It is especially useful to address the applicant's responsiveness, timeliness, discretion, and professional judgment. Again, please provide examples of these characteristics.
- **A portrait of the applicant as a person.** If the applicant has shared personal information with you for use in the letter, it can humanize the applicant to talk about their background, personal qualities, and other relevant information. What brought them to law school? What are their career aspirations? Have they faced any challenges along the way, and if so, how have they overcome those obstacles? Chambers are small, intimate settings, and judges want to know the kind of person they are hiring.
- **Comparative judgments with other students, if this helps the applicant.** It helps the judge to know how the applicant might compare with other students you have taught. Judges are repeat players, so resist hyperbole, but if an applicant is outstanding, it is useful to provide a benchmark for that judgment. If the applicant falls in the middle of your students, then it may be better to omit a comparative judgement.
- **Length.** Letters should be two or three pages long and as detailed as possible.

Tips from colleagues

- Emphasize the importance of the applicant tailoring the [Clerkship Recommendation Memo](#) to their interactions with you and providing ample detail.
- Encourage students not to be overly modest in the Clerkship Recommendation Memo. Remind them that it is our job to brag about them.
- Prod students to tell you interesting things about themselves not obvious from their resume that a judge might want to know. For example, many judges understandably believe journalism work, in school or out, indicates a valuable ability to write a quick order.

- Add a question to your course evaluation asking the students to comment on the TA(s) for the course. You can then paraphrase or quote from these comments in your letter. To keep these comments confidential, we recommend using language such as the following in your evaluation form: “Please leave a comment about the TA program or a particular TA if you would like to. Your response will be kept confidential, but (unless you request otherwise) I may use a response about a particular TA to help me write recommendation letters.” Then ask the Registrar’s Office to omit these comments from the publicly posted version of the evaluation forms. The Office usually does so as a regular practice, but it would be helpful to confirm.

Examples of effective letters

- We provide several anonymized examples [here](#).
- The examples are from a range of contexts, including clinical and doctrinal courses and note supervision. We also provide examples for the range of letters faculty members write. For instance, we have a sample letter for a student with a strong academic record and multiple points of contact with the faculty member as well as a sample letter for a student who took only a large doctrinal course with the faculty member and has not earned honors.

Submitting a completed letter

- Judges receive letters of recommendation in one of three ways: online via the OSCAR platform, email, or paper (via FedEx or USPS).
- If you are a full-time faculty member, please send a Word document version of your letter to your faculty assistant. Faculty support will submit the letter on your behalf in whatever manner the relevant judges prefer.
- Adjunct and visiting faculty may either work with OJC or process their letters on their own. You may email judicialcareers@law.columbia.edu for assistance.

Confidentiality

- All applicants working with OJC complete a form that waives their rights to read letters of recommendation. OJC does not share letters with applicants under any circumstances.

Questions

- OJC is an excellent resource for questions. Please contact Dianisbeth Acquie, OJC’s Director, at da3086@columbia.edu.
- Additionally, you are welcome to ask questions of any faculty member on our committee: Jessica Bulman-Pozen, Alex Carter, Dennis Fan, Jamal Greene, Clare Huntington (chair), Kate Judge, Lev Menand, Gillian Metzger, Kerrel Murray, Dan Richman, Tom Schmidt, and Rebecca Wexler.