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Rhetorical Cues and Cultural Clues: An Analysis of the Recommendation Letter in English Studies

Analysis of a collection of contemporary recommendation letters for admission to a PhD program in English studies revealed differences in length, level of specificity, and rhetorical appeals that applied much more strongly to candidates’ acceptance status than to gender. Across both status and gender groupings, however, candidates were frequently appraised through economic metaphors, indicating a disciplinary culture that dually approaches graduate students as immediate sources of labor and as the future of the profession. Findings from these letters should promote continued conversation about disciplinary culture and clearer guidelines for those writing and requesting recommendation letters.

Letter-writing represents an enormous and long literary tradition tracing back to the Ars Dictaminis manuals of the Middle Ages and before; the academic letter of recommendation as a specific subgenre, however, has been explored by only a handful of scholars. These studies have focused most frequently on cross-cultural differences (Bouton; Precht) and gender coding (Lunneborg and Lillie; Bell et al.; Cowan and Kasen; Trix et al.; and Watson). Collections of letters under study have tended to come from the social sciences (Lunneborg and Lillie; Watson), law (Precht), and medicine (Trix and Psenka). What makes an analysis of recommendation letters from English studies particularly promising is that the recommenders, who by and large also come from departments of English, are themselves students of language. While authorial intention is impossible (and perhaps unproductive) to prove, it
is arguable that a body of recommendation letters authored by and for English professors would exhibit more carefully theorized and intentional uses of language than letters from another field.

Furthermore, a study of recommendation letters from departments of English—which have well-documented histories of fraught relations between contingencies from literary studies and rhetoric and composition (see Miller and Crowley)—enhances the portraits of the profession of rhetoric and composition begun by David Chapman and Gary Tate in 1987 and continued through a 2007 iteration by Stuart Brown, Theresa Enos, David Reamer, and Jason Thompson. As these portraits have been primarily based upon such characteristics as applicant numbers, dissertation types, student demographics, working conditions of teaching assistants, and job placement rates, an investigation of a less-public barometer of the field carries new possibilities. In “Occluded Genres in the Academy: The Case of the Submission Letter,” John Swales includes the letter of recommendation in his list of nine “occluded genres,” which he characterizes in the following terms:

On the one hand, they are typically formal documents which remain on file; on the other, they are part of the public record. They are written for specific individual or small-group audiences, and yet may also be seriously invested with demonstrated scholarship and seriously concerned with representing their authors in a favorable professional light. More importantly, however, exemplars of these genres are typically hidden, “out of sight” or “occluded” from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality. (46)

While writing aimed at publication is standardized by the peer-review process to conform to codes of political correctness, in forms of discourse protected by “a veil of confidentiality,” authors may more readily and unreflectively display biases or assume subject positions they might otherwise self-censor. Part of what makes occluded genres such as the letter of recommendation so important to study are the clues they reveal about a professional culture.

This study examines a subset of letters of recommendation to a western land-grant university’s PhD program in English for their formal, stylistic, and rhetorical properties. The letters under analysis came from a recent year in which this institution received forty-two applications and accepted thirteen. The subset for analysis was chosen according to a stratified random sampling design: Letters were selected for six accepted candidates (including three males and three females) and six declined candidates (including three males
and three females). Of the twelve applicant files under investigation, ten included three letters each, while two of the candidates’ files included four letters each for a total of thirty-eight letters. All letters were written by college or university professors associated with programs in English or creative writing. Twenty-four of the letters were written by male recommenders and fourteen by females. Letters came from the continental United States (thirty-one), Hawai‘i (three), Taiwan (three), and Australia (one). Eleven of the letters came from private institutions and twenty-seven from public; furthermore, thirty-one came from PhD-granting institutions, three from MA-granting institutions, and four from BA-granting institutions. Given the privacy issues and politics involved in accessing such letters, this study underwent a formal approval process by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Dean of the Graduate Division.

While some differences existed between the letters for male and female applicants, the strongest differences emerged between the sets of letters for accepted and declined candidates. Although it would be fallacious to insist that any particular writing practice on the part of a recommender is wholly responsible for the ultimate decision about a candidate, the more successful applicants were, in large part, represented by letters with particular kinds of appeals in four main categories: (1) the visual rhetoric of the letter’s layout and length; (2) the speech acts and appeals to ethos in the letter’s introduction; (3) the relative treatments of scholarship, teaching, and service in the letter’s body; (4) and the stylistic and pathetic displays in the letter’s closing appeals. Across the entire set of letters, prospective doctoral students were repeatedly described through capitalist economic metaphors as assets, benefits, and credits. This trend implies a dual stance toward graduate students on the part of the profession: Prospective candidates are framed not only as the future of the discipline but also as immediate sources of (cheap) labor. I will conclude with recommendations for letter-writers and applicants, as it is my hope that this research will reduce some of the mystery surrounding this occult genre and prompt continued discussions of how the discipline can best promote and least exploit its members.

**Visual Rhetoric: Layout and Length**

The selected letters ranged from 139 to 1,023 words, six to forty-one sentences, three to seven paragraphs, and 0.5 to 2.5 total pages. In fact, the most pronounced difference between those letters about candidates who were accepted and declined was length. The table below shows the breakdown of letters in terms of words, sentences, paragraphs, and total pages:
In a cross-cultural comparison of letters of recommendation written in 1996 for law school applicants, Kristen Precht found that her ten letters of study originating in the United States had an average of 454 words and a range of 1,006 words; similarly, the thirty-eight letters in this study had an average of 484 words and a range of 884 words. Even though my study included twenty-eight more American-based letters than Precht’s study, the difference between my shortest and longest letters was 122 words fewer, perhaps indicating a higher shared degree of professional culture among English professors than among recommenders for law school.

Because many factors beyond the recommendation letter influence a candidate’s acceptance or rejection, it is impossible to argue that a letter in general, and its length in particular, has any particular causative force. In fact, the “2007 Survey of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition” ranked the letter of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Declined</th>
<th>Accepted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average***</td>
<td>377a</td>
<td>630b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>1026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average***</td>
<td>15.9a</td>
<td>25.7b</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraphs</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average*</td>
<td>4.4a</td>
<td>5.1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Pages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average***</td>
<td>1.0a</td>
<td>1.4b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.5</td>
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<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Averages followed by letters are significantly different at the 95% confidence level (*) and the 99.9% confidence level (***).
recommendation fourth overall on its list of admissions criteria behind statement of purpose/goals (first), writing sample (second), and perceived fit of applicant with program’s goals (third) (Brown et al. 336). The Graduate Admissions Committee reading this collection of letters evaluated applicants’ materials holistically, in one sitting, and in whatever order each member preferred. Furthermore, the letters’ reception is due, in part, to the committee members’ disciplinary allegiances, interests, interpretive practices, interpersonal dynamics, and idiosyncrasies.

However, the differences between the average lengths of accepted and rejected candidates’ letters are statistically and rhetorically significant. For example, thirteen of the nineteen letters representing rejected candidates were one page or less, whereas fifteen of the nineteen letters representing admitted candidates were longer than one page. In some cases, even when the word count was similar for a declined and accepted candidate’s letter, the accepted candidate’s letter was formatted to reach a second page, even if only by a sentence. The fields of postmodern geography and contemporary rhetoric have pushed us to see space itself as rhetorical in nature (Payne), and in the case of significantly shorter letters, the blank space communicates a persuasive message: A void exists both in the recommender’s support and in the candidate’s substance. Furthermore, in almost every case, longer letters corresponded with stronger terms of support; this conclusion was also drawn in studies of letters from the social sciences (Watson) and medicine (Trix and Psenka; Greenberg et al.).

Another finding in this set of letters is the correlation between length and gender. Trix and Psenka’s 2003 study of three hundred letters of recommendation written for accepted candidates to medical faculty positions found that letters for female applicants were, on average, twenty-six words shorter than those for males (198). Conversely, letters for female applicants in this study were eighty-eight words longer on average than those for their male counterparts. Whereas in Trix and Psenka’s study, 85% of the recommenders were male and addressed their letters to “a male gatekeeper” (197) 96% of the time, in this study 63% of the recommenders were male, and they wrote to a mixed-gender committee. Such differences may also reflect a professional culture that has been informed by various critical theories, including feminism, which interrogates the concept of gender. Trix and Psenka found that 15% of female applicants versus 6% of males were represented by a subgenre they coined “the letter of minimal assurance”: These letters were exceptionally short (seventy to one hundred words) and lacking in one or more of three key components of the letter of recommendation: (1) “commitment and relationship of the recommender with the applicant,” (2) “some specificity of focus and record of the applicant,” and (3) “some evaluation or comparison of traits and accomplishments of the applicant” (199). While all
letters from the English studies applicant pool were longer than one hundred words, three lacked any mention of the applicant’s record, and all of these represented female applicants.

The Letters’ Introductions: Formal Framing, Appeals to *Ethos*, and Systems of Ranking

Informal interviews with members of the Graduate Admissions Committee revealed that the most careful attention was paid to the letter’s opening and closing sentences as locations containing key rhetorical cues. Almost all letters were framed by one to two sentences, which stood apart from the body, introducing the candidate by name and intended degree, announcing the letter’s purpose, and qualifying the writer’s intensity of support. The letter’s formal purpose was frequently conveyed through an overt speech act using some variant of the words *recommend* (eighteen letters), *support* (thirteen letters), *reference* (one letter), or *letter on behalf* (one letter). Given this norm, introductory sentences such as “[Name] was a student in the fiction-writing workshop I teach for the [name] program in Creative Writing at [institution]” may read as though the author is reporting on the student rather than supporting her candidacy.

Twenty-three of the letters contained at least one positive qualifier in the first sentence, creating a kind of “praise inflation” that may be the recommender’s equivalent to grade inflation. In this context, the fifteen letters (twelve representing unsuccessful applicants) with otherwise neutral opening sentences were cast in a somewhat negative light. Superlatives were frequent, as in the examples below:

- [Name] is applying for admissions to your doctoral program, and I want to give her my highest recommendation.
- I am writing to recommend [name] in the strongest possible terms to the [name of university’s] Ph.D. program.

Another fairly common (eleven letters) opening gesture was for letter-writers to describe their own pleasure in recommending a particular student, as in the following examples:

- It gives me great pleasure to recommend [name] for doctoral work in English.
- I am delighted to write a reference for [name], who is just about finished with his MA at [institution].
Although the largely unrecognized and thankless task of writing a letter of recommendation is a burden on an already-busy professor during the busiest times of year, by portraying the writing act as pleasurable the recommender may imply that certain candidates can make even the most burdensome tasks enjoyable. Such a move also underscores the recommender’s good will, which Aristotle regarded as central to establishing *ethos*. Some opening sentences included both positive descriptors and claims to personal pleasure:

- It is my pleasure to write this letter of strongest recommendation on behalf of [name].
- It is my great pleasure to write this letter of recommendation in strong support of [name] who is applying for the PhD program in your esteemed institution.
- [Name] is the most clearly talented, disciplined, and accomplished student I have yet encountered in a twenty-three year career, and naturally I offer this recommendation with great pleasure.

While elsewhere such sentences would likely be read as over-the-top, in this epideictic genre, they seem to indicate high praise. The third example departs from generic conventions by offering an immediate reason for the recommender’s pleasure; furthermore, this opening sentence establishes a narrative style that the writer maintains throughout the letter.

The letters’ second and/or third sentences usually (twenty-eight of thirty-eight) described the terms of the recommenders’ relationship with the applicant. In a handful of the longer narrative-style letters (five), all of which were from the accepted group, the relationship was not enumerated succinctly but woven throughout. Thirty letters directly mentioned the recommender serving as the applicant’s instructor in a graduate-level workshop, seminar, or independent study, and in eight of these cases, the instructor had taught the candidate at least twice. Four of the six candidates from the accepted group solicited recommendations from professors who had personally observed their tutoring or teaching whereas none of the candidates in the declined group included a teaching reference. Furthermore, unsuccessful applicants relied more regularly upon undergraduate professors for references, perhaps implying that these candidates had not made positive-enough impressions on graduate instructors in their current programs. Twenty-nine letters noted the specific years and semesters in which the recommender had worked with the candidate. In most cases, due to the brief nature of MA and MFA programs, the recommender could only claim to have known the candidate for one or two years; in fact, only three recommenders claimed to have known the applicant for five years or more. Despite the brevity
of most relationships, however, letters on behalf of accepted candidates often established multiple contexts for knowing and evaluating the candidate, as in the example below:

- I have known [name] since he entered the MA program in Creative Writing at [institution] in the Fall of 2005, when he took a [special topics] class with me. This semester I am directing an independent study course with [name] on [topic]. I am also serving on his Master’s thesis committee. I have come to know him well by working together in these different contexts, and I can say without hesitation that he is one of the top three graduate students I have worked with in twelve years of graduate teaching.

In this case, the author used these multiple contexts, combined with his own twelve years of teaching, to justify his top-three ranking of the candidate. These ethos-enhancing moves served, in part, to establish what Aristotle may have called “good sense,” or the rhetor’s qualification to judge the candidate accurately.

Ten letters situated the candidate within a ranking system. These rankings ranged from “the very best” (three letters) to “top 2,” “top 3,” “top 5,” “one of the strongest,” “one of the very best,” and “among the most.” In addition to listing their own professional rank at the end of the letter, recommenders generally cited the total number of years they had been teaching and/or an approximation of the total number of graduate students they had taught as a means of bolstering their ethos and enabling them to make a more specific assessment. Below are three such examples, with my emphasis in bold:

- [Name], who is now completing her MFA in Creative Writing at [institution] is among the most talented and ambitious young poets I have worked with in twenty-nine years of teaching, and I know she will be a wonderful addition to the Ph.D. program lucky enough to offer her admission and support.
- In the past 11 years of teaching, I have worked closely with about 50 graduate students. Out of that group, if asked to judge their skills and aptitude for graduate work, I would put [name] in the top 5.
- I rank [name] as one of the two best graduate students at the M.A. level I have taught in the past.

Although the final example contains the highest numerical ranking of the three, it may not carry as much persuasive weight as the previous two ranking statements because it makes no reference to how long the recommender has been teaching or
how many students he has taught. Furthermore, the letter-writer restricts his compliment to “students at the MA level.” While such a qualification may simply indicate that the recommender has not worked with doctoral students, given that the recommender teaches graduate courses at an institution with a doctoral program, it may also indicate a less enthusiastic endorsement of the candidate. This observation does not necessarily suggest a rhetorical failure on the recommender’s part, as the recommender may well have intended to undermine his ranking.

The Body of the Letter: Treatments of Scholarship, Teaching, and Service

In the body paragraphs, recommenders relied primarily upon logical appeals, framing their discussions around the academy’s professional values of scholarship, teaching, and service. Using these three categories, I coded the body of each letter, sentence-by-sentence. Sentences coded as scholarship included descriptions of the candidate’s coursework, thesis, conference presentations, and publication record—as well as judgments of the candidate’s scholarly potential. Teaching included observations from writing-center tutorials and classroom lessons, descriptions of syllabi and writing assignments, and predictions of aptitude for and commitment to working with students. Service included work on committees, efforts to organize departmental and community events, and assessments of classroom citizenship, collegiality, and character. Sentences that did not fit under any of the three topics were classified as “Other”: These included autobiographical digressions (about the letter-writer’s background, expertise, advising ability, and so forth), extended descriptions of the texts and assignments in the recommender’s course, displays of the recommender’s knowledge about the institution to which the candidate was applying, and revelations of personal information about the candidate. Table 2 summarizes my findings about the percentage of sentences devoted to each professional category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grouping of Letters by Subjects</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Service and Citizenship</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Group</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Percentages of Sentences Devoted to Different Professional Categories by Acceptance Status
As a combined group, the letters focused primarily on scholarship (45%), followed by service/citizenship (33%), other topics (12%), and teaching (10%). While the distributions of categories in the accepted and declined sets of letters were virtually the same in terms of the candidate’s service and “other” topics discussed, they varied most dramatically in the increased attention paid to teaching (4% to 13%) for accepted candidates.

Across descriptions of scholarship, the level of specificity varied widely. While some recommenders spent the majority of their letters praising a student’s written work and intellectual ability, they did not support such assertions with evidence. Figure 1 maps the degree of specificity across accepted and declined letters.

The group of accepted letters tended to include detailed summaries of the candidate’s written work (thirteen of eighteen) and specific references to the work’s titles (nine of eighteen). Given the conditions of my IRB agreement, I could have included many letters from the declined group within this paper simply by removing the names of recommenders, candidates, and institutions—all without the letter being traceable to individuals. On the other hand, for many of the letters in the accepted group, a simple redaction of names would not have been sufficient to protect individuals’ identities, as many of the letters go into such detail that their content could lead only to one unique applicant, which is in part the mark of a successful letter.

The most pronounced differences in percentages of topics emerged according to gender: Female candidates were described almost twice as frequently in terms of teaching as males (13% to 7%) but far less in terms of service (27% to 41%); furthermore, letters for female candidates contained higher percentages of digressions (15% to 10%). In their 2003 analysis of letters for medical faculty,
Trix and Psenka found that “letters for successful females were indeed systematically different from those for successful male applicants” (216–17), stressing teaching and service over scholarly accomplishments and containing more frequent “doubt raisers” in the forms of negative language, hedges, unexplained language, faint praise, and irrelevancies (202). In this study, too, letters about female applicants contained more digressions and references to teaching, but these references may function as strategic campaigns for competitive teaching assistantships rather than as sexist stereotyping. As opposed to Trix and Psenka’s findings, letters in this study on behalf of female PhD applicants had a slightly higher percentage of written attention paid to scholarship than did letters for their male counterparts (a 3% difference) and significantly lower amounts of attention paid to service (a 14% difference).

To better understand these gender-based findings, I have broken down the categories further, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Percentages of Sentences Devoted to Different Professional Categories by Gender of Applicant and Recommender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of Recommender and Applicant</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Service and Citizenship</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Recommenders for Female Applicants</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Recommenders for Male Applicants</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Recommenders for Female Applicants</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Recommenders for Male Applicants</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Female recommenders exhibited very different patterns when writing for male versus female candidates, often emphasizing males’ roles as teachers and females’ work as scholars, perhaps as a means of exerting agency against the stereotypical positioning of men as brilliant scholars and women as self-sacrificing, caring teachers, a pattern that has been documented more thoroughly by Susan Miller. It would be interesting to investigate how these trends would hold up against a larger sample of letters.

**The Letters’ Closing Appeals: Stylistic and Pathetic Displays**

In most cases (twenty-seven letters), the letter’s concluding paragraph consisted of three or fewer sentences, but these sentences could well serve as
Illustrations for rhetorical handbook entries illustrating prose rhythm and figures of speech. In terms of content, closing paragraphs tended to follow a highly predictable structure, including a summative recommendation of the candidate (thirty-one), a prediction of the candidate’s success in the program and/or profession (twenty), and an offer on the part of the recommender to be of further service (twenty-one). Twenty-six of the letters used some variant of the words recommend (twenty-one), support (two) or endorse (one) in their closing paragraphs, and most letters also included some amplification of terms of recommendation, such as “with enthusiasm/absolute confidence” (eleven), “without reservation/doubt/hesitation/qualification” (eleven), “highest/strongest recommendation” (eight), “wholehearted recommendation” (two). The group of letters for accepted candidates included six closing paragraphs that balanced an affirmation with a denial whereas only two of the letters for declined candidates displayed such a balance:

- I recommend her enthusiastically and without reservation.
- I believe that she would make an exceptional addition to [your] Ph.D. program; she has my unqualified endorsement.

This pairing of affirmation with denial covers broadened rhetorical territory, signaling that the recommender can summon reasons for praise without summoning reasons for censure or doubt. This negation of reservation, hesitation, or qualification brings closure to the letter by indicating that the author has left nothing unsaid, which is significant in an era of increasing lawsuits, when professors may feel confined to conveying any hesitations through a letter’s silences, or through what Greg Myers has termed “strategic vagueness.”

A few of the more glowing letters ended with admissions of rhetorical failure, as in the following two conclusions, both in reference to the same admitted candidate:

- I could not be more enthusiastic than I am in recommending [name] for admission to you [sic] program. . . . She is modest about her achievements and would never use the phrase “rising star” to describe herself, but I think it is an appropriate phrase to characterize her potential as a poet and a scholar.
- I can recommend her to you without reservation. I can claim the somewhat dubious distinction of having now taught in [high number] graduate writing programs and some of the students with whom I have worked have gone on to have successful careers; certain of them have published well, winning competitions such as the [name of award], the [name of more prestigious award] and [name of even more prestigious award]; they’ve won [name of grant], [name of grant], and [name of grant]. Yet of this group I can think of only a handful who I would regard as highly as [name of applicant]. She is the genuine article.
These examples demonstrate a more complex form of praise. In the first excerpt, language proves incapable of expressing the intensity of the recommender’s feeling, as he claims, “I could not be more enthusiastic.” Thus he must resort to comparison in order to demonstrate the appropriate degree of praise; while his metaphor of a “rising star” could be interpreted as cliché, the recommender is able to invest it with genuineness by undercutting the image, claiming that this characterization would never be the modest candidate’s choice. The letter-writer from the second excerpt begins by decreasing his own professional stock with the “dubious distinction” of his institutional transience. From there he shifts the attention from himself to his other students and then exclusively to the candidate. His auxesis begins with “some” of his students going on to successful careers; it narrows to “certain” of his students publishing well with a list of three prizes in increasing level of prestige; from there the author crescendos into a list of three highly coveted grants. However, the former students’ prestigious honors seem mundane compared to the present candidate. After a highly balanced sentence of sixty-two words with three independent clauses, each separated by a semicolon, the author ends with an elegantly simple proclamation of five words: “She is the genuine article.” Once again, however, language comes up short in endowing the recommender with original terms of praise befitting such a candidate, and he must resort to a borrowed metaphor.

These closing lines were not only locations for stylistic flourishes but also for appeals to *pathos* as letter-writers attempted to describe their personal feelings for the candidate. As Aristotle theorizes, *ethos* and *pathos* overlap when expressions of authorial good will can serve to move an audience to “friendliness of disposition” (214). Such a display of good will is present in this closing statement: “To be frank, I would love for him to do his doctoral work with me in the program here, but I recognize that he can and should enter a more prestigious program.” This was the only use of the word *love* observed in the body of letters, and it precedes a kind of self-sacrifice. As the letter of recommendation in some ways represents the candidate’s imminent departure, some authors anticipate the emotional impact of such a loss: “It’s hard to believe he’s only been with us for eighteen months, and that we need to brace ourselves for his loss of good energy and brain in another six. He has been a tremendous asset to [name of program], and he will be sorely missed.” Other recommenders admit outright their feelings for the candidate, as in the following: “But [name] is special”; “[I]t is also exciting for the teacher who gets to watch these changes taking place”; “It has been the greatest pleasure and most welcome challenge for me to have such as student as [name]”; “I envy her future teachers”; and “I like him personally, as well, and he is popular among his peers.” An expression of affection is a sensitive balancing act, for if a recommender appears to be too personally enamored with a
candidate, this display could damage his or her professional *ethos*. Thus, in the
last example, we see the recommender quickly follow his personal feelings with
the consensus of the applicant’s peers, making the candidate look less like a
favorite or a flatterer than a universally likeable individual. (In one letter it
becomes clear that the recommender is a close friend of the applicant’s father,
making the letter read more as a personal favor than a professional assessment.)

A handful of concluding paragraphs also contained disclosures of difference,
as in the following examples:

- I don’t know if this is necessary, but for the record, he has perfect com-
  mand of written and spoken English (he grew up in [Place]; also speaks
  [Language] and [Language]).
- I wish to stress this ability to self-manage because it is hard won. [Name]
  is a single parent, commutes from [#] miles away, and also teaches in our
department. . . . She must grab library time when she can, be efficient in
her writing, never fall behind. So she is; and she doesn’t. In the last two
years, she has gone out of her way to seize opportunities to present papers
and take part in professional conferences and occasions. Impressively, she
has two presentations accepted for regional and national conferences in
the spring of [year].

In the second example, the author’s careful balancing and sparse prose—“So she
is; and she doesn’t”—both reflects and reinforces the candidate’s careful managing
of her limited time. Lest the audience be left with the impression of an over-
worked single parent (and he uses the term *parent* rather than *mother*, perhaps to
avoid the negative connotations in some conservative circles associated with the
term *single mother*), the author shifts back to discussing the candidate’s aca-
demic prowess, highlighting her “impressive” record of conference presenta-
tions. In the best cases, such personal details may serve as the coda on a list of the
candidate’s accomplishments, combining *pathos* with *logos* and positioning the
audience as co-admirers of the candidate’s struggles and victories. Although both
of the examples above come from letters for accepted candidates, it is important
to note that even the most well-meaning disclosures of difference may combine
to form a portrait that serves to stigmatize the candidate and thus to restrict
access, an argument that Amy Vidali illustrates in her recent study of disability
disclosure in recommendation letters.

In their closing lines, five letters (three from the accepted group and two
from the declined group) shifted from a speech act to a direct address—or in
some cases, a command. Three authors voiced their “hopes” that the committee
“consider seriously,” “accept,” and “welcome” the candidate; one author “urged”
the committee to give the candidate “a chance to shine in your program”; and one recommender, in what may be reflective of letter-writing practices in his home culture of Taiwan wrote, “Therefore, your most favorable consideration of his application would be greatly appreciated.”

**Economic Metaphors: The Commodification of Graduate Student Labor**

Throughout the collection of letters, recommenders’ closing predictions about candidates’ success were often made through economic metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors are more pervasive in our everyday lives than the occasional poetic flourish of which we may be consciously aware; instead, metaphors make up our conceptual systems, and in turn “our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people” (3). The letters reveal a pattern of recommenders describing candidates in terms of economic resources; the bold words represent my emphasis:

- [Name] would make a fine **addition** to your graduate program.
- I am most certain that the **benefits** will be mutual.
- He would be a tremendous **credit** to your institution.
- He has been a tremendous **asset** to the program . . .
- I think she would **contribute** a great deal to [your] PhD program even as she would **benefit** from it.
- [Name] . . . is prepared to **give full value**.
- He’s a **gem**.

Following a similar logic to Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphorical concept of “time is money,” this language of commodities points to a culture that often regards graduate students as expendable resources who are ideally positioned to supply departments with a steady influx of cheap labor, given minimal training. Such a pervasive, though often unspoken, cultural perception may contribute to the low salaries accompanying most graduate assistantships. Furthermore, these frequent descriptions of graduate students according to the language of neoliberal market capitalism underscore the ubiquity of higher education’s corporatization, as critiqued by Henry Giroux.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

While writing and reading letters of recommendation occupy some portion of virtually every English instructor’s professional life, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication websites offer no explicit professional guidance for would-be recommenders or
applicants. This relative silence is problematic if we as a field desire, as we avow, to become more inclusive of new members from underrepresented backgrounds. John Swales argues that genres such as the letter of recommendation pose “extra hazards for writers when their writing has to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries,” forcing the uninitiated to invent their audience’s unknown and carefully guarded expectations (47). In the case of the recommendation letter, the uninitiated could include instructors faced with their first requests or prospective candidates trying to determine whom to ask for letters.

Although this study helps to make the genre less of a mystery to outsiders, future research should take into account not only the letters themselves but also the entire grammar of dramatic elements, in a Burkean sense, surrounding the scenes in which letters are written and received. Future studies would benefit from analyzing multiple letters by the same faculty members in order to determine the degree to which the content of any single letter reflects the applicant’s quality and/or identity versus the recommender’s standard discursive practices. Future studies might also consider how various rhetorical cues are interpreted by different members of a committee, how the other components of a candidate’s file correlate with their letters of recommendation, and how committee dynamics and departmental emphases factor into decisions.

Based upon my qualitative and quantitative analysis of a collection of contemporary letters, however, I can claim that letters for successful applicants tended to share these characteristics:

- **Length:** These letters gave an appearance of substance by usually overflowing onto a second page. Their median length of 1.5 pages and 657 words was approximately double that of the declined group of letters at 0.8 pages and 318 words.
- **Introduction:** The letters’ framing sentences tended to include an overt speech act accompanied by superlatives (“my highest recommendation”) and/or terms of pleasure (“with great delight”), creating a context of praise inflation that could cause an unadorned speech act, such as “I am writing in support of [name],” to be read as negative. Recommenders often noted the number of years and/or graduate students they had taught, both in order to rank the applicant and establish their own expertise. The strongest letters established multiple contexts for evaluating the candidate.
- **Body:** The bodies of letters focused primarily upon the key criteria for permanent membership in the academic community: the candidate’s scholarship, teaching, and service. Letters from accepted candidates’ files were much more likely to include discussions of teaching ability and to contain detailed descriptions of the student’s written work.
• Conclusion: Many of the more positive letters concluded by balancing an affirmation of support with a denial of reservation. A handful of the most-glowing letters concluded with the recommender’s admission of rhetorical failure, noting that the letter’s conventions were inadequate to represent the candidate’s fullness as an intellectual and an individual.

Based upon the shared characteristics of accepted letters, I would recommend the following guidelines to candidates who are applying to graduate programs in English:

1. Supply recommenders with copies of your best work from their classes so that they can refer more specifically to its content and title.
2. Develop relationships with professors beyond a single course, enabling them to address various facets of your scholarship and service.
3. If you would like to be considered for teaching fellowships, mention your interest and qualifications to your recommenders, and invite them to observe a teaching or tutoring session.

I am by no means arguing that we standardize the letter of recommendation as a form or that we substitute letters of recommendation with a tidy checklist of attributes that would be much faster and easier to complete, as some other disciplines have done. The letter of recommendation continues to be of value to our discipline because it gives voice to multiple perspectives on an individual and reaffirms that there are, indeed, some things The College Board cannot represent or predict. Furthermore, nothing is more appropriate than to advance new members into a community that studies the power of reading and writing through the avenues of reading and writing themselves. Given their importance, the rhetorical cues and cultural clues surrounding these letters should be the subject of continued conversation.

Notes

1 My own work on the contemporary letter of recommendation has benefited from the helpful feedback of RR peer reviewers Duane Roen and Janice Lauer, and most especially from the generous mentoring of Professor Jeff Carroll. As Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg explain in their introduction to the Ars Dictaminis, an anonymous manuscript on the principles of letter-writing dating back to ca. 1135 Florence, in medieval universities “instruction in ‘rhetoric’ came to be exclusively instruction in the art of letter writing” (494). For additional historical scholarship on epistolary theory and practice, see the work of James Murphy, Martin Camargo, Carol Poster, and Linda Mitchell.

2 In 1991 Henrik Eger from the University of Illinois at Chicago’s English Department wrote a dissertation on the recommendation letter; Egar’s dissertation, however, focused on letter-writing practices within American business culture rather than within the profession of English.
3Prior to my viewing these letters, a member of the Graduate Admissions Committee redacted all identifying information, including names of candidates, recommenders, and institutions. For each letter the redactor noted the acceptance status, gender of recommender and candidate, country of origin, and institutional classification (private/public and highest degree granted).

4Some sentences addressed more than one category, and in these cases, I credited both topics equally.

5A sentence ostensibly about scholarship, teaching, or citizenship may also serve as a doubt raiser, as in the following examples of faint praise: “In all her work, [name] can be counted on to come to class prepared to participate in class discussions” and “To my knowledge, she has never missed one of our optional professional development workshops, which range across topics like CV-building, preparing conference abstracts, and identifying suitable journals and organizations in your field.” A majority of Graduate Admissions Committee members noted that they tended to read descriptions of an applicant doing what any graduate student would be expected to do as code for the candidate being rather pedestrian.

6There are some parallels between these stylistic flourishes and the British models studied by Kristen Precht (256).

7The Modern Language Association (MLA) website notes that advisers should be prepared to write their graduate students “honest and constructive” letters of recommendation and that those who “doubt their ability to evaluate a student fairly should decline the task.” For academic job seekers in need of recommendation letters, the MLA website provides a useful checklist of questions: “Have you requested letters from three to five faculty members who feel positively about you and who know your coursework, dissertation, and teaching? Have you given your referees sufficient information about your record and the kinds of institutions you are applying to? Have you given referees at least several weeks to prepare their letters of recommendation?”

Works Cited


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