Better Letters of Recommendation

*a handout for faculty*

1. **Be sure you want to recommend this student.**
   - discuss a student's academic plans and preparation *before* agreeing to write a recommendation
   - help student choose grad programs that match interests, skill and preparation
   - consider declining some to do a better job on others

2. **Get enough data to do your job.**
   - transcript and/or list of classes in major
   - graded work sample: paper or lab
   - résumé or c.v. — list of honors and awards
   - some idea of what the student would like you to focus on
   - letter or recommendation form from the target grad school
   - note when student is going to apply, not the deadline

3. **Laundry list basic skills; assume nothing.**
   - E.g.: “________ has command of coherent wave optics, Fourier optics, laser physics, lens design, optical metrology, optics of thin films, paraxial optics, physical optics, and related areas of physics.”

4. **Describe a particularly successful project.**
   - find one or more “above and beyond” stories to focus on
   - candidate needs to be special, out of the ordinary
     (or, presumably, you shouldn’t be recommending him/her)
   - proctor, TA, RA, tutor, other forms of departmental service

5. **Get personal when appropriate.**
   - adversity overcome?
   - work, first generation, health or family, special challenges?
   - you can be candidate’s advocate rather than him/her on these issues, which is more sophisticated than having the student address them
   - also, do you enjoy having this student in your classes?

6. **Close by predicting success.**
   - “one of the top students I’ve worked with in recent years”
   - “razor-sharp mind”
   - “tremendous potential”
   - “more than adequately prepared”
   - “I am confident that ________ will be an outstanding graduate student and go on to make major contributions in the field through both research and teaching.”

7. **Abandon the form and customize.**
   - “See attached letter addressing these and other issues”
     i.e., fill out your and the student’s names, perhaps, but no more, then attach the form to your much superior letter

Adapted from *Graduate Admissions Essays*, © 2000 Donald Asher, available from 1-800-841-BOOK or Amazon.com