



Matthew Paris, "Plato and Socrates" frontispiece of *Prognostica. Socratis basilei* (Oxford: Bodleian Library [c. 1250])

Helpful Hints for Those Requesting Letters of Reference from David L. Clark

Providing letters of reference is a crucially important part of the professional life of a university teacher and researcher. I am honoured that you have sought me out to provide you with such a reference. It goes without saying that these letters are a serious matter, and that they deserve detailed attention. Having written and read thousands of letters of recommendation, I can see the

material difference that they can make in the success of an application. A good letter of reference succinctly captures your strengths, abilities, and future potential. It says something quite specific about you as a person, your abilities, your curiosity, your commitments, and your capacity to grow. It discusses your future academic plans or projects, focusing on the importance and originality of that work, and why you in particular are uniquely suited to pursuing and developing this work. A good letter of reference paints a vividly realized picture of you, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

In order to make my letter of recommendation not only complete but also convincing, please make sure that you help me out in the following ways. (This is a general reference guide, so not all of these points will apply directly to you. But do take care to determine which ones do.)

As I've said, this memorandum is designed to help you compose your thoughts and to bring all the information that I need to write the most persuasive letter that I can. But there are some larger issues to consider first: how can you ensure that you are an applicant for whom I can write a very strong letter of reference? Good letters of reference start with memorable students. So the question you need to ask is: Were you a memorable student in my classes? I am happy to write letters of reference for memorable students.

What do I mean by memorable students? I mean students who not only have improving and strong grades...although improving and strong grades say a great deal about your intelligence, your organizational skills, and your commitment to doing well in school. But by memorable students I also mean students who are intellectually courageous, willing and able to work with difficult forms of knowledge, students who eschew the familiar in favour of pursuing the unfamiliar. I mean students who are fully active in their programs and in their classes, leading those classes rather than following them, students who make their sparkling and quizzical presence felt in and out of class. I mean students who have struggled with their school work and who may have run into trouble at certain points, but who have discovered ways to improve the quality of their academic work and who are *still* seeking to do better. In other words, students who are memorable aren't perfect, far from it. I don't give a rat's ass about perfection. What matters is putting real effort into your education. By memorable students, I mean students who participate, who share ideas, students who speak up and speak out, students who take notes, who come prepared for class, who craft well-written essays and hand them in on time, students who in myriad ways demonstrate that they are serious-minded and *alive* to their education, students who are curious, exploratory, searching, restless, and *present*. —Students who genuinely wrestle with the material at hand, giving it everything they've got. So by memorable, I mean students who are frank and mature, students who introduce themselves, students who engage their peers, students who resist the temptation to isolate themselves in private concerns and instead treat their education as the communal and public effort that it also is. Memorable students engage their classes rather than spend time in class retreating into the safety of Facebook, surfing the web, or sending and receiving texts in class. Memorable students attend *every* class. If you took my classes and said nothing or next to nothing in class, or if you were a student who rarely--if ever--

made contact with me during office hours, or if you were a student who never discussed the course material with me, then you were not a memorable student.

Bottom line: if you want a good letter of reference, seek ways to become a memorable student. Seek ways to make your education memorable. In the process, you make *yourself* memorable. Don't flee to the back of the classroom, thereby literally becoming a spectator to your own education. Instead, be up front and *all in* as the current, awful jargon puts it. Writing letters for memorable students is always a great pleasure. If you aren't quite the student that I'm describing here, then now is a great time to think about why that is the case, and what you can do to make yourself as a student and your own education more memorable. If you were my student some years ago, and did little to make yourself stand out then or since, then you are not a memorable student and probably not someone for whom I can write a persuasive letter of reference.

To recapitulate: A good letter of reference begins long before you ask a professor to write that letter. It begins with *you*. It begins with how you have chosen to undertake your education. It begins with you.

For me to craft a persuasive letter of reference, one that succinctly captures your strengths and future potential, as well communicating the importance of the work that you intend to do and why you are uniquely suitable to developing that work, I need lots of information presented in an orderly fashion. So I'm asking you to prepare a dossier of that information for me. Since time is off the essence, I'll be frank. Here are sixteen tips:

- 1) Give me the most lead time possible to prepare your letter. As a rule, I need at least three weeks notice before the letter is due. This tight timeline may well mean couriering materials to me (see below). In a single *regular sized* (i.e., not over-sized) file folder, with your name (last name first, then first name) written clearly on the tab at the right hand corner, provide me with the details described below.
- 2) The date that the letter of reference is due. If you are asking for more than one letter of reference, list the due dates of these letters and the names of the scholarships, fellowships, positions, or programmes for which you are applying on a separate sheet. Ensure that the first page of the material that you provide includes this information: i.e., a numbered list of each of the programmes, scholarships, fellowships or positions for which you are applying, the due date, and the address to which my letter of reference is to be sent. Highlight the due dates. If you are applying to a program that will be sending me a link to a web platform through which I can send my letter of reference, then indicate this fact here. That way I will know to await word from the program that I now have access to their web-platform. If you are applying to a program for which you already have a link for letters of reference, then provide that here. On this first page, also provide me with a phone number and working e-mail address where you can be easily reached if I have any questions.
- 3) The complete address to whom I am to send the reference. Double-check to make sure that the address is accurate, i.e. that you have the right postal/zip code, the correct building names and

room numbers, names of relevant departments and programmes, as well as cities, provinces, etc.. In rare circumstances in which you are expected to assemble all the application documents, including your letters of reference, I will send my letter to you in a sealed envelope. As a rule, I will send letters of reference directly to the programme or fellowship for which you are applying. Unless you can demonstrate that the program or fellowship for which you are applying will *not* accept letters of reference sent directly by me, I will not send them to you. More and more programs are requesting that letters of reference be sent through a web-platform. Indicate whether I need to await word from the program to gain access to that web-platform or provide the url for that platform to me.

4) Since I write many letters of reference every term, and since my department does not pay for postage, provide me with the appropriate stamps in a *separate* envelope if I am expected to mail my letter. Check with the post office for national and international rates. Do *not* affix stamps to envelopes or address envelopes for me since I will be using departmental stationary and my own printer.

5) It is crucial that I address your letter of recommendation to the right person. Provide me with the correctly spelled name and the correct title of the person to whom I addressing your letter of reference: for example, Professor Mary Shelly, Chair, Graduate Studies Committee, Department of English, University College 490, University of Northern British Columbia, etc.. Be up-to-date. Double-check the accuracy of the spelling, title, and address of this person. It does your application no good if I reproduce an error here for which you are in fact responsible. Remember that letters addressed simply, "To whom it may concern" do not have the same impact as letters addressed to specific people. So do find out to whom the letter is to be sent; this may mean phoning the university or funding body to which you are applying, and asking for the name and title of the addressee. In some cases there is no such person and letters are in fact addressed "To whom it may concern." But it is worth finding out for sure. Ensure that the specific name of the program for which you are applying matches the name as described in the program materials.

6) Provide me with any and all information that will help me write a letter that suggests that I have a detailed knowledge of your academic interests and history, and a good sense of your future plans. That means providing me with a brief statement which includes the following points of information:

a) What courses did you do with me, and when?

b) What kinds of work did you do in those courses? What were the titles of the essays or the subjects of the seminars that you did in that class? What grades were you assigned?

c) What other courses have you done, and what were the grades that you received in those courses? Here, transcripts can be helpful, but it is much more helpful to me if you simply list the course titles, numbers, and grades by year on a separate sheet. I need letter grades please. That way I can get a global grasp of the range of courses that you have taken, and of your intellectual

growth over the time of your degree. The more information I have about your academic performance, and the more clearly that information is presented, the better letter I can write.

d) Where did you do your previous degree or degrees? What programme were you in? Did you write a thesis or honours paper? If so, what was the topic?

e) What sorts of awards or honours did you receive in that degree programme? Give me the names of these honours and awards. What they were for, specifically (i.e., best average in a particular programme in graduating year; best essay in a certain year of a certain programme...)? Was there cash awarded as well? If so, how much? Where these scholarships awarded based on merit or bursaries for which you were eligible?

f) What kind of work have you done outside of your course work that you think might help your application? For example, if you are applying to a graduate school, have you been a research assistant before? Have you given or published academic papers? If you are applying to teacher's college, do you have any previous teaching experience? What sort of work experience is relevant to the programme or position for which you are applying? What sorts of volunteer work have you done? Again, be careful not simply to provide a list. Remember to add a sentence that briefly describes the nature of the work that you did, the nature of the organization for which you did that work.

g) Provide a brief statement of your future academic plans as they pertain to the programme or scholarship for which you are applying. What are your planned areas of specialization? If you are submitting a research project proposal or a Statement of Interest or an account of past, present, and future research plans, then I will need to see those materials. It's important to put lots of effort into your research project proposal or Statement of Interest. Seek assistance writing these documents, since admissions committees and adjudication boards put a lot of emphasis on them. I've devoted a separate memorandum to helping applicants craft persuasive project proposals and Statements of Interest, a memorandum that you can also find on my website.

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~dclark/documents/links/Grantspersonship.memo.pdf>

If you are asked to provide a program proposal (as is the case for SSHRC and OGS applications), make sure that the version that you send to me is the same as the one that will go in your application package. This is important because my letter of reference will refer to the merits and details of the proposal that you actually give me. You don't want me affirming the strengths of a project proposal that doesn't match the one that you actually submit.

h) Where applicable, provide me with a copy of the covering letter that you are sending along with your application. It's very important for me to see how you are describing yourself, so that I can key my own remarks to some of the things to which you are drawing attention.

i) Is there anything in particular in your c.v. to which you would like to draw my attention and

that you consider important in terms of your application--i.e., awards, experiences, projects, leadership, etc.?

7) What is the exact name and nature of the programme or scholarship for which you are applying? Consult the relevant brochures or application packages for this information. Provide me with a copy of this information, and highlight the sections that pertain to your application. It makes a difference if I can key my letter to the sorts of issues, themes, rhetoric, and questions that your prospective programme or position emphasizes. Do not simply refer me to a website. If there is relevant material on a website, then it is your responsibility to download, print, and highlight that material and to include it in the dossier that you are sending to me.

8) Many application forms include separate sections designed specifically to be given to your referee (in this case, me). This part of the application form is often made up of a space in which to put my own remarks, plus a series of categories asking for a more quantitative measurement of your abilities (i.e., "Check one of: Excellent / Good / Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory"). In some cases, I am allowed to attach a separate letter under letterhead rather than confine myself to the often very limited space provided by these forms. But these forms often also contain a section that you are expected to fill out, usually with your name, address, phone number, etc.. Do not forget to fill out this section before giving me the form or provide me with the information for which this section of the form asks. If you are printing these forms off the web, be sure to laser-print them on spotlessly white paper. Increasingly, these reference forms are available through on-line platforms. Provide me with the exact web address for these sorts of form, plus a printed copy.

9) There are some periods when I am on campus infrequently, so take this into account if time is of the essence and you are leaving materials for me with the Department of English and Cultural Studies. Sometimes it may be best to send or deliver your materials to my home address in Toronto:

35A Spruce St.
Toronto, Ontario,
Canada M5A 2H8

If you are hand delivering your materials, I am in Cabbagetown, one block south of the intersection of Parliament and Carlton. Drop your materials off in my mailbox. Let me know ahead of time that you are going to be doing this, so those materials don't sit in that mailbox overnight.

If you courier your materials to my home address, make sure that you check the box that says *No Signature Required*, if such a box exists. Couriered packages can be delayed by several days if I happen not to be home to sign for a couriered package, so it is best to use courier companies that give you this option. Not all of them do. The only exceptions to this rule are Purolator and FedEx, with whom I have pre-existing arrangements so that they can drop off material without a

signature from me.

10) As I've said, increasingly, letters of reference are now sent directly to programs through web-platforms. If your letter is to be uploaded to a website, ensure that you point to the *exact* location on the application website where my letter is to be uploaded. I.e., don't just give me the general url for a program or scholarship, and expect me to hunt down the location on the site where I am to upload your letter. Instead, give me the exact url for the area on the site where I am to upload the letter. Test that url to make sure that it works and that it is accurate. Some programs await your application and then send an email to me providing me with access to their web-platform for letters of reference. Remember to tell me if that is the case.

11) If you are a smoker, refrain from smoking anywhere around the materials you are preparing for me. Cigarette smoke easily gets into the paper of the application forms and may well be quite off-putting to those who might be reviewing the forms down the line, beginning with me.

12) If you have indicated to me that you are requesting letters to, say, four graduate programs, ensure that you follow up with the relevant information for all four programs. In other words, if, after contacting me, you decide to apply to only three programs, let me know right away. That way I can reconcile my reference letter records with your information.

13) It's important that I *only* write letters for those who actually need them. So, confirm with yourself that you are absolutely serious about the application that you are putting together. In other words, do not ask me to write a letter of reference for an application that you may not actually put together and submit, or about which you end up changing your mind. Do not ask me for a letter of reference for a position or program or fellowship that you don't intend on accepting or considering with the utmost seriousness. Act in good faith.

14) Ensure that you send your materials to me all at once, i.e., not in several batches, or with the promise that more is coming.

15) Don't forget to get back to me to let me know how you did! I am always curious to know how you fared in your application. And it's also good to get into the habit of such professional courtesies, i.e., following up with those who are supporting your endeavours. If you do not follow up to let me know how you fared in your application, I will not be willing to write another letter of reference at a future date.

16) Photocopy the dossier of materials that you send to me. If you request a letter of reference at a later point, you can then resend that dossier, with modifications and additions, of course.

Read this memo very carefully. Before handing all the relevant information and forms to me, make sure that you run through this memo a second time *in its entirety*, confirming i) that you have provided me with *all* the material asked for here and ii) that the information you have provided to me is *accurate* in every way and in the order that I have described here.

Thank you. Once again, let me say how honoured I am to be writing a letter on your behalf. Best of luck in your application!

David L. Clark
Professor
Department of English and Cultural Studies
McMaster University
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9

dclark@mcmaster.ca

Work: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23737

Home: (416) 929-0995

Fax: (416) 929-3450

E-mail: dclark@mcmaster.ca

Faculty webpage: <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/>