



Lending a Hand

Suggestions for writing better letters of recommendation for AALL Annual Meeting/workshop grants

By Pauline Afuso

As a law librarian, there is a very good chance that someone you know will ask you to write a letter of recommendation for an AALL grant. The Grants Committee is especially interested in the letters of recommendation included with applications because they offer a different perspective on applicants.

The grant application for an AALL Annual Meeting or workshop requires the applicant to submit two letters of recommendation that describe the benefit the applicant will receive from attending this particular meeting or workshop. Additionally, the Grants Committee requests that the letters comment on the applicant's potential to contribute to AALL, a chapter, and the field of law librarianship. A good letter that addresses these requirements is impressive and will distinguish an individual from the pool of applicants.

Some General Suggestions

- **Read the directions.** The application form has a brief paragraph describing what the committee would like to see addressed in a letter of recommendation. Make it easier for the committee to see why this applicant deserves a grant by following the directions. Tell the committee why this particular Annual Meeting or workshop is beneficial to the applicant or why you think this person has potential to contribute to a chapter, AALL, or the profession at large.
- **Be selective.** Concentrate on what you really know about the applicant. Focus on one or two activities or experiences about this person that make him or her unique.

- **Everyone is nice.** You can say that a person is nice—it doesn't hurt. To be effective, however, the "niceness" of the applicant should substantively tie in to one of the elements requested for the letter of recommendation.
- **Everyone has financial need for a grant.** These days, every institution is cutting back on funding and every person has expenses. Simply saying that there is a lack of funding, alone is not going to be a convincing reason to award a grant to an applicant. However, if you know of a compelling need or some special circumstances regarding the applicant's finances that could distinguish him or her from other applicants, then share that information with the committee.
- **Follow up general statements with specific examples.** If you know a person well enough to write a recommendation letter, then you know that person pretty well. Just remember that the Grants Committee doesn't know the applicant at all, so when you write a statement about the person's creativity, persistence, or leadership ability, you need to back that statement up with specific examples. The details and explanations will allow the committee to get to know the applicant, perhaps not as well as you, but enough to make that person memorable.
- **Specific examples should lead to a conclusion.** Once you have stated your premise and have followed up with specific examples, you must finish with a strong conclusion. That conclusion should be the statement that will convince the committee that this applicant deserves a grant.

- **The goal of the letter is to distinguish the applicant from the rest of the pack.** Once you are done, read your letter. What do you think? If you were on the committee, would this applicant receive a grant?

Writing the Letter

While it might be obvious, it bears repeating that everything the Grants Committee will learn about the applicant will come from the application form, resume, personal statement, and, of course, the letters of recommendation. The letters of recommendation are especially interesting because they are the only documents that are not written by the applicant.

Consequently, it is important to explain why you, the advocate, are in a unique position to write this recommendation. Did you supervise this person on a project? Advise the student during school? Work with this person on a committee? If you are going to recommend this person for a grant, it helps the committee to know a little bit about you as well. Not only does it give the committee an understanding of why the applicant asked you to write the letter, it gives additional information about the applicant that will hopefully bolster his or her case for receiving a grant.

Once you have introduced yourself, it is time to decide what to write about in the rest of the letter. Specific topics are best when they come from your personal interaction with the applicant. Will she be speaking at AALL? Is he chairing a committee or being given an award? Why does this applicant want to attend this particular meeting? Did this

person work on a project or write a paper? Is she active in the local chapter? What has this person done that leads you to believe that he can actively contribute to the profession? Answers to these questions can help you focus on what you want to write.

Next, transcribe your personal knowledge and experiences with this person from your head to the letter. As you write about the applicant, make it very easy for the committee to see that the applicant is exactly the kind of person who should be awarded a grant. One way to do so is to lead the reader through your thought process so that the reader comes to the same conclusion as you. This process takes three simple steps:

- State a premise
- Explain how the applicant's actions illustrate your premise, and
- Describe the outcome of the applicant's work and state a conclusion

For example, imagine that you are writing a letter for Liam, who directly reports to you in your library. As his supervisor, you have ample opportunity to observe him in his professional duties and can see from his enthusiasm with his job and his involvement with the local chapter and AALL that he does have a keen interest in law librarianship. What should you write?

One possible way to express your enthusiasm for this candidate is to start with this statement: *Over the past several years, I have supervised Liam and I believe that his hard work shows his potential to contribute to AALL and the profession.*

As a starter sentence, this is pretty good, but left on its own, this statement is lacking. It tells the committee that the applicant has potential but stops short of telling or showing the reader *why* you think Liam has potential. What projects or activities has he been involved with that make you so sure of his dedication? What interests or activities does this applicant exhibit to merit your praise? Adding some more information supports your premise: *Over the past several years, I have supervised Liam and I believe that his hard work shows his potential to contribute to AALL and the profession. Recently, he expressed an interest in the organization of our library's intranet and two months ago spearheaded an inventory and update of the library's web pages.*

The additional sentence supports the initial premise. The reader now knows

a little bit more about Liam's dedication to his work, but does this enthusiasm mean he is excited about his job or his profession? Just a little more clarification will improve this paragraph even more:

.....
It is important to explain why you, the advocate, are in a unique position to write this recommendation.
.....

Over the past several years, I have supervised Liam and I believe that his hard work shows his potential to contribute to AALL and the profession. Recently, he has expressed an interest in the organization of our library's intranet, and two months ago, spearheaded an inventory and update of the library's web pages. In completing the inventory, he developed two tools that proved to be extremely useful. The first was a unique method for the library to track user activity. The second tool helped the library dynamically maintain and update the links on our website. The result of these improvements is that the library has been able to cut its web page maintenance time in half, enabling us to better use that time to create content for the patrons who use our library website the most.

Because Liam's work was so inventive and beneficial for the library, I encouraged him to write an article about his experiences, the process, and the steps he took to complete this project. He did, and his article was recently published in our chapter newsletter. This experience was such a positive one for Liam that he has already started research on a new project in our library. His enthusiasm, initiative, and persistence to finish this task illustrate just

one reason why I believe that Liam will be an active and productive member of AALL and our profession.

The resulting paragraphs tell the Grants Committee much more about

the applicant than just a bare assertion that the applicant has potential. These paragraphs lead the reader through your thought process, starting with your assertion, then followed by a description of the applicant's activities, and then the consequences of his actions. You have made it very easy for everyone reading the letter to follow your thinking and come to the same conclusion that you did—that this person deserves an AALL grant.

Finally, conclude the letter on a positive note. Let your enthusiasm for the applicant show, and reiterate the reasons why you think this applicant deserves a grant. Offer to be available for further questions. Then, proofread your letter. Don't let a typo detract from your message.

There is no question that someone you know will apply for an AALL grant. When this colleague, coworker, or student asks you to write a letter of recommendation, be confident that your letter will ensure a positive outcome. ■

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