This advice is for a model for someone who did significant research with us. As time goes on I add things and delete early things.

My outline:

I try hard not to have typos/word proc errors.

My opening sentence always states the exact program/university to indicate that the letter is not generic.

I always start with full name (it’s not for a pal) and then go to first or nickname as appropriate (I know them personally).

I describe CCS if appropriate.

I give details as to coursework with me and indicate, if it seems helpful, their rank in the class (sometimes I guess).  That usually leads to how I knew of them and how I recommended them to our lab. I always ask them to provide the names/grades and year they took which of my courses (so I dont have to look that up).

I then describe work they did with us, slanting it to their participation - I usually give them more credit for independence than they may have contributed (e.g., i minimize coequal roles of others).

I list any honors, indicate publications, realized, planned or possible.

If there is a personal story that is important, or if grades or GREs are not good I tell a version of that story to support what they have said or sometimes say what they do not say, but frankly should be said.  I note any diversity/poverty/cultural cluelessness, health aspect (e.g., field research on a prosthetic leg, blind microscopist) that they may hide - sometimes they or their parents to not want them to appeal to this issue, so i do it for them. i dont do this if i think it might be damaging (e.g., annoying speech defect).

I talk about their goals - specific to where they are applying – in addition to the sample Lor targeted for Enviro Studies, there was also an MPH letter and a basic ecology letter with a few relevant additions and deletions. If it’s geared to a specific prof. For example, I note some specific link like their interest in frogs if for Pieter J.

Works and plays well with others - I indicate how well they did with PIs, techs, grad students and their peers. Some exaggeration here, since i dont always know some of the details.

A summary paragraph where I indicate my support with enthusiasm, giving their strongest points again. I indicate top % if I’m writing for NSF or something that wants that sort of direct comparison.  I never go lower than to 10%. I usually repeat their full name and I always again indicate the actually program/university they are applying to, reminding the reader that the letter is specific, not generic.

i never overtly lie.  I do not put in negatives - even minor ones are killers. If my views are negative, then I desperately try to not have to write the LoR. If they insist I do so I write briefly and do not put in superlatives (e.g., “strongly support”, “with enthusiasm”.

That’s what I do, I stick as close to this format as reasonable. Including variants I write 50-70/yr. I consider it a very important part of my job.

EXAMPLE

Date

Address of Program

Dear Colleagues:

I am pleased to strongly support Ms XXXX for acceptance to the XXXX PhD program of the University of XXXX. “*1st Name* YYY” is a senior Biology Major student in the College of Creative Studies (CCS) Biology Program at UCSB. This is an undergraduate intensity program for those students with the motivation and ability to include research as a core aspect of their curriculum. Students in the College are permitted to take courses without pre-requisites or requirements to speed their way to the Upper Division courses needed to provide the background to begin research. This intellectually aggressive Major is obviously not for everybody, and includes less than 3% of the 2600 undergraduate biology majors at UCSB.

I am her CCS Faculty Advisor and was also her instructor in Invertebrate Zoology in the fall of 2011. This is a 5-unit Upper Division lecture/laboratory course in which she made an A, ranking fourth in a class of 63 students. I am also her research mentor. She joined our lab with a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship from CCS last summer. Even though she has not yet taken the Parasitology course, the usual point of entry for undergraduates to our research group, being aware of her academic potential I was eager to have her join us as an undergraduate researcher. She began to work under the guidance of a very capable graduate student. YYY’s progress has been rapid and she is now very independently planning observations and experiments. She has gathered considerable data and which she presented in a very professional manner at a major regional meeting, the Western Society of Naturalists a few weeks ago. *Description of the context and the work she did/is doing.*

YYY plans graduate studies of environmental science with an emphasis on disease ecology. While her undergraduate studies have had a strong focus on basic ecological science, her goal has always been to apply thia knowledge to environmental issues such as conservation, wildlife diseases and invasive species.

YYY has a mature attitude and strong communicative and social skills, working well with her peers and instructors. Compared to other graduate applicants from UCSB she ranks very high, in the top 1%, a student who comes along but once every couple of years. She is also quite interactive with a diversity of students and clearly will include others as she gains experience. Based on her maturity, her outstanding academic attributes, her field experience and her motivation, I support her acceptance to the XXX PhD program at “*school colloquial name, e.g., Cal*” with considerable enthusiasm.

Sincerely,

Armand Kuris

Professor of Zoology, Dept of Ecology, Evolution and Marine Biology

and

Biology Faculty

College of Creative Studies