

Outlook

Study Abroad: How To Write A Good Letter Of Reference?

According to the professors at foreign universities, a LOR is considered as a reflection of academic performance, participation in internal and external activities, extra-curricular work revealing a slice of the candidate.



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Jeevan Prakash Sharma 
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17-year-old Mayank, aspiring to get admission to a prominent US university, was disappointed when one of the reasons for rejection was the letter of reference (LOR) that his school had written for him.

Trouble was that the 'statement of purpose (SOP) written by the student and the LOR provided by the school were similar.

"My teacher asked me to write the LOR for myself and I did that. The school printed it on its letterhead and signed on it. When I was writing the SOP to describe myself, I reiterated the same stuff which I had written in the LOR. The college admission panel didn't like it," Mayank said.

Both Mayank and his school were not aware the critical role of LORs for admissions in most universities especially in the USA and UK.

Professors at foreign universities say that LOR should be a reflection of academic performance, participation in internal and external activities, extra-curricular work revealing a slice of the candidate.

"Instead of making it too sketchy or too braggy, the write-up should bring out the real personality of the candidate. Schools should be aware that a LOR can make or break a student's admission prospects. I have seen students with good academic performance suffer because of a poor LOR," Bina Shah, COO of an Ahmedabad-based global education consultant firm IAEC, said.

“Often schools lie about students’ academic and non-academic capabilities to make it more impressive but they forget that professors in-charge of the admission process can make out by analysing students’ mark-sheets and the statement of purpose.” An education counsellor, requesting anonymity, said.

A statement of purpose is an essay that every candidate needs to write and it describes the candidate’s purpose of taking admission to a particular university. Its a self-assessment.

Professors dealing with admissions overseas suggest that LOR should have a detailed and focused description of the student.

“What lacks in many LORs is teachers’ feedback. For instance, how does a student respond to a negative review or how does he or she reacts to feedback. A lot of times teachers use very flowery language with unnecessary details,” an admission in-charge in one of the US-based universities said requesting not to be quoted.

He adds, “You should write the way you talk. Even a very simple language can work provided it gives quality information about students.”

Ravneet Pawha, Deputy Vice President (Global) and CEO (South Asia), Deakin University says that in India, schools don’t give a lot of importance to such documents.

“We put so much emphasis on the academic scores in India but a reference letter is not valued as a representation of capability of the student. However, at the end of the day the university where the student is applying is looking for a good reference building his/her case for admission or for granting a scholarship,” Pawha said.

Some colleges, which haven’t made LOR a mandatory provision for giving admission, also say that LOR often brightens the selection prospects.

Adrian Artimov, Regional Director South Asia, Middle East & Sub-Saharan Africa at Sommet Education, says, “Providing a letter of reference is not compulsory to apply to Glion and Les Roches, schools part of the Sommet Education network. However, an application file nurtured with a letter of reference enriches our selection process, allowing our admission team to better assess the profile of the candidate.”

On the other hand, schools in India do admit that a good LOR should go beyond academics and give the university further insights into the unquantifiable traits to ensure that the university sees the student as a whole person and not just a set of scores.

“The only hitch that I perceive as an educator is that LORs for study abroad require data and facts about the students which are beyond their school life. This data is generally not available in school records, hence a gap in information,” Shikha Banerjee, Principal, Seth Anandram Jaipuria School, Kanpur, said.

She adds, “If the schools have the complete profile of their students, a LOR prepared internally would be much better than the outsourced one. It will be very pragmatic and beneficial for the students.”

Sonya Ghandy Mehta, Director, Pathways World School, Aravali, says, “A school must encourage students to keep details of all the activities and events they participate in through their school journey from Grade 9 onwards. This information makes it easy for a teacher to write a detailed LOR on the potential of a student.”

Vishnu Karthik Director, The Heritage Group of Schools and CEO Xperiential Learning Systems is of the view that writing authentic LORs (letters of recommendation) or reference letters needs a personal relationship between the educators, school counsellors and the student.

“They need to have witnessed the child’s journey closely and seen her as more than a unidimensional individual defined by her academic performance in high stake exams,” Karthik said.

“This kind of rapport building and in-depth understanding of a student, her strengths and weaknesses and her potential, needs an entire ecosystem that supports building deeper relationships and connections amongst the school community,” he adds.