Include all elements of a formal business letter:

- Letterhead
- Date
- Inside Address
- Salutation:
- Body
- Closing, Signature Title
After the date, type the “inside address”

Repeats the same information that is on the envelope

Arrange in the following order:

[Title] [First name] [Middle Initial] [Surname]
Department or Division
Name of the Institution
Post Office Box or Street Address
City, State Postal Code Country

Professor Dale J. Van Harlingen
Department of Physics
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
1110 West Green Street
Urbana IL 61801-3080 USA
After the inside address comes the “salutation”

“Dear” [Title] [Surname]:

If the person works at a university, address him or her as
Dear Professor [Surname]:

If the person works at a national lab or a private company, address him or her as
Dear Dr. [Surname]:

Follow the salutation with a colon (:) 

Dear Professor Van Harlingen:
Dear Dr. Xu:
In the opening paragraph:

State that your remarks are confidential
“I write to provide a confidential assessment of Zhaoqi’s potential to be successful in graduate school.”

Briefly state your qualifications
“I am an associate professor of physics at the University of Illinois.”

Explain your relationship to the applicant
In what capacity you have known him/her
How long you have been acquainted
“Cassie has worked for three semesters as an undergraduate hourly employee in my materials characterization lab, where she prepares samples for STM imaging.”
Include specifics in the body of the letter

Describe general positive* traits backed up by examples

“Susan was extremely conscientious; she meticulously documented her new fabrication method so that anyone in the lab could reproduce her technique.”

Include specific, quantifiable measures of performance

“Ahmed completed 100 percent of his homework assignments within the time allotted.”

*If you cannot be positive and persuasive on the applicant’s behalf, decline to write the letter
Make it personal and memorable

Tell an anecdote about the person

“Jim had the misfortune of having the projector lamp burn out—no replacement to be found—in the middle of his final talk on his capstone project. He immediately moved to the blackboard, sketched his two important data plots, and finished his talk. Few full professors could handle a projector disaster with such aplomb.”

Use visual imagery to make the person come alive

“Observing Jorge as a TA might make you think you were at football practice instead of an undergrad physics class; he continually circulates through the room—making a suggestion here, offering encouragement there—as students work through the discussion questions.”
In the closing paragraph...

Rank the candidate in comparison with others in his/her cohort

“Of the undergraduate students that I have supervised in my 30-year career, Pedro easily ranks in the top 10 percent.”

Suggest other possible references

“Professor Warrens of our department is also well acquainted with Grace’s work.”
Use a standard closing

Use one of the following phrases:
  Very truly yours,
  Sincerely yours,
  Respectfully yours,

Follow the closing with a comma (,)

Leave four blank lines for your signature
  Sign the letter in blue ink
  Write neatly

After the blank lines, on one or two lines, print your name and title
Tips for asking for letters

Don’t wait until the last minute!

Provide the following information, in writing, to the letter writer:

- Addressee (name, title, complete address)
- How it is to be sent (electronically, on letterhead by mail, submitted via the Web)
- A copy of your CV and statement of purpose or project summary

*When the deadline is*
Give your writers a “cheat sheet”

Letters of Recommendation for Alicia B. Cantrousse

B.S. in Engineering Physics, expected May 2013

CV—attached
Basic statement of purpose (will be customized for each department)—attached

In one or two sentences, specify how the letter writer knows you give dates

Remind the writer of what your strong points are (no more than one line each)
- Selling point
- Selling point
- Selling point

Cornell University, Dept of Physic—DEADLINE: DECEMBER 1, 2015
- You will receive an email from the chair on how to submit your letter; prefer online submission
- Interested in working with Paul McEuen on nanotubular materials or Daniel Ralph on nanotransistor techniques

- MGF is submitted using online, you will receive an email from Stanford on how to submit your letter
- Interested in working with Harold Hwang on atomic scale synthesis and control of complex oxide heterostructures or Yael Suess on atomically precise heterostructures of complex oxides

Cornell University, Dept of Applied Physics, DEADLINE: JANUARY 5, 2016
- You will receive an email from Cornell with instructions on how to submit your letter online; prefer online submission
- Interested in working with Sandi /[ ]/ in applications and integrated microfluidic/optical devices

Give name as it will appear on your application*
Identify the dept as well as the school

Arrange by deadline date

*And make sure the name on your application matches the name on your GRE scores and transcript(s)
Celia’s Commandments

Never EVER address a letter “To Whom It May Concern”—dated and tacky in the extreme!
“Dear Colleagues:” “Dear Committee Members:”

Follow the salutation of a business letter with a colon (:), not a comma
“Dear Professor Rasputin:” “Dear Grandma:”

Provide a mechanism for follow-up
“Please call me at 555-400-1219 if you have any questions.”

Excellent resource for further reading and good advice: