

This is second sample of a letter of recommendation:

Graduate Training Office
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-3899

Dear Graduate Selection Committee Members:

This letter of recommendation is in support of X application for your Master of Arts Program in Applied Behavior Analysis. I highly recommend X to you as a candidate for this program.

During my twenty-nine years of teaching at St. Cloud State University, I have written quite a number of letters of recommendation for various purposes. In an effort to give you, the reader, a break from the usual repetitive nature of most letters of recommendation, and in seeking a change of pace for myself, I have developed a somewhat novel format, which I now use in most of my letters of recommendation. In each section of this letter, I have asked X to write his own description and assessment of his behavior. The topics selected for each section are behaviors that I can respond to with my observations and evaluation of his performance. This format permits the inclusion of more detailed information about the applicant, such as: the student's writing style, the self-assessment approach of the student, areas selected as important by the student, and a comparison of the student's self-evaluation with my views of the student's performance.

This longer style of letter may not appeal to some readers. For those who prefer brevity, Section VIII consists of a general recommendation, which is, in effect, a concise, self-contained or traditional-style letter of recommendation. If you are under time constraints, you may want to skim or disregard the other sections and go directly to Section VIII (page 9).

Below is a topic outline of this letter. This states briefly what is embodied in this letter, and where the various aspects of the recommendation will be presented:

Sections:

- I. General Nature and Length of Contact with X (page 2)
- II. General Description of Courses Taken by X (pages 2-5)
- III. Academic Activities and Accomplishments (pages 5-7)
 - IV. Research Interest and Experiences (page 7)
 - V. Early Academic Record (pages 7-8)
 - VI. Strengths (page 8)
 - VII. Weaknesses (page 8)
 - VIII. General Recommendation (page 9)

Section I. General Nature and Length of Contact

X's Comment: My first contact with the writer, Jerry Mertens, was in December of 1991, when I first had him as an instructor for his Research Design and Methodology course. Jerry is a faculty member whom I have had near daily contact with since then. I have recently finished my eighth course with him, covering a range of topics in psychology. These courses will be discussed more fully in Section II below. In addition to contact through formal course work, I have had a number of conversations on a one to one basis with him on a large variety of issues related to psychology. These conversations have been very rewarding to me and have done a great deal to increase my critical analysis of psychology related topics, and specifically my interest in the area of behavior analysis.

My Assessment: In the little over two years I have known X he has accomplished a considerable amount of work. X is a student who goes beyond the call of duty. He frequently puts out of class time to good use by attending lectures and participating in discussions on topics related to course work. I have had the opportunity to see him at many non-class academic functions. For example, X attended the ABA convention last year where he did work as a volunteer. From talking with X I believe he made good use of his time at ABA in Chicago, and plans to attend again this year. Another one of these events X has attended is P.O.E.T.S., a faculty and community late Friday afternoon

discussion group. This group is the longest standing campus discussion group. From my participation in this group I believe that X has been the student most active in the group in its approximately 20 years of existence.

Many students, unfortunately, shy away from contacts where only "professionals" are going to attend. I was happy to see X attend and actively participate in social events with campus speakers. He and I have spoken at events such as the 1993 Psi Chi annual banquet at South Dakota State University and the Science-By-Mail annual meeting at the Minnesota Science Museum. He has assisted in arranging get-togethers for behavioral alumni of Saint Cloud State University both locally and at the 1993 ABA convention, and he has been involved in a number of classroom presentations on career planning and other topics. I think this type of extra time and effort on his part reflects favorably on X's desire to learn in a variety of situations. Recently, St. Cloud State developed a Student Development Transcript, X is one of the first students to use this new service. Some of X's activities are outlined in this transcript which has been included with his Graduate School Application.

Section II. General Description of Courses Taken by Matthew

X's Comment: Courses Taken from Jerry Mertens

1. **Research Design and Methodology (PSY 317):** This course included a review of scientific methodologies, an introduction to the scientist-practitioner model, a discussion of single-subject vs. traditional group experimental designs, exposure to design elements, and a discussion of ethical research issues. The designs receiving the most attention were those which might be used in the experimental control of variables. This was a rigorous course which required daily oral responses, written assignments, and examinations. The text used in this course was Strategies and Tactics of Human Behavioral Research, 2nd Edition by James M. Johnston and H. S. Pennypacker (Jerry was using a pre-publication draft of a text published later). I received a grade of 'A' in this course.

2. **Teaching Assistant (PSY 399):** This course was an independent study based on Strategies and Tactics of Human Behavioral Research, 2nd Edition (the text used for PSY 317). Johnston had just sent the final draft to Jerry. Some tasks involved in this course were as follows: To write new and edit old test questions, to create and update study guide materials, to outline chapters, to gain familiarity with concepts in the text, send Johnston suggested changes, and to meet with Jerry at arranged times to discuss various issues in the text. My main objective in this course was to gain exposure to a variety of teaching related skills. I was pleased at the response I received when I approached Jerry with the idea of taking this course since my long term goals include teaching behavioral psychology in a university setting, and the tasks of the course were some of those I would like to use in my career. I received a grade of 'A' in this course.

3. **Senior Seminar on Elementary Principles of Behavior (PSY 430):** This seminar is designed to teach the principles of behavior that operate on humans and other animals in daily life. The text chosen for this course was Elementary Principles of Behavior, 2nd Edition by Richard W. Malott, Donald L. Whaley, and Maria E. Malott. A number of handouts were also used in this course. I achieved 100% of the total points possible in this course.

4. **Research Assistant (PSY 499):** When I proposed this course, the intent was to gain another set of teaching related skills. These skills, rather than being centered on a particular text, were oriented towards computer training and classroom mechanics. I designed and implemented a computer grade posting system for classroom use, in which students self-posted each class days performance, and I edited and managed an instructional computer program. I also compiled/co-authored Careers: What Are You Going To Be When You Behaviorally Grow Up? This is a booklet on career planning, specifically in behavioral psychology. Working on this booklet allowed me to gather various repertoires about my career plans. The grade I received was 'A'

5. **Psychology and Modern Life (PSY 325):** Psychology: A Behavioral

Overview, by Poling, Schlinger, Starin, and Blakely was the text used in this course. Issues raised in the text were discussed in class and supplemented with handouts. This course was designed to demonstrate the scope and practical value of a behavioral approach. I received a grade of 'A' in this course.

6. **Behavior Analysis Programming (PSY 499):** This was an independent study course built around the writing of programmed instructional materials and tests for Elementary Principles of Behavior, Second Edition. I wrote an introductory program on the topics of Establishing Operations and Rule-Governed Behavior. These programs and a set of tests were written to be used in conjunction with the text, Elementary Principles of Behavior, Second Edition. The objective of this course was to gain a better repertoire of establishing operations, rule-governed behavior, and programmed instruction; all of which were topics of interest, and to create programmed text and test materials which could be used in a class. To accomplish these objectives, I located and studied sources of information for each of the three topics and subsequently wrote the programmed materials. The materials and tests created were later used by Jerry in courses he taught. These were also shared with Richard Malott for possible use by others using the text. I received a grade of 'A' for the work I did in this course.

7. **Advanced Behavioral Issues (PSY 499):** The main task of this course was to co-author a book entitled, Science of Behavior: An Introduction to Scientific Methodology. This book is essentially designed to be used as a student's first exposure to a science of behavior. Science of Behavior: An Introduction to Scientific Methodology uses a programmed format to convey the importance of a non-inferential look at behavior and the necessity of objectivity in science. Also, since Jerry was using Elementary Principles of Behavior, Second Edition in class during the quarter, I had the opportunity to follow up on the tests I had previously written for the text. Included in the course work for this class was the updating of tests as use showed it to be necessary. I received an 'A' in this course.

8. **Senior Seminar on Works of Skinner (PSY 430):** Beyond Freedom and Dignity, by B. F. Skinner, and a number of handouts made up the required readings for the course. Such topics as cultural design, freedom and dignity, popular forms of control and counter control, etc. were discussed from the book. Handouts were used to add a behavioral look at traditionally covered topics such as creativity, instinct, and many behavioral considerations for resolution of social problems were part of the in class discussion. The grade I received in this course was 'A'.

My

Evaluation: X has demonstrated excellent work in all eight of the courses he has taken with me. During all of the courses written and oral reports were required, I found X's written and oral expression to be of the highest quality.

In addition, X's independent study courses have required him to do most of the work on computers; a task he has handled with excellence. X's independent research products are very well written and he has shown good writing skills during the projects (as well as an increasing scope of computer capabilities). One of the products of his work is an excellent booklet which will be useful to many students for career planning; X is a co-author of a career development book, Careers: What Are You Going To Be When You Behaviorally Grow Up? More recently, he co-authored Science of Behavior: An introduction to Scientific Methodology. His work on this introductory text has shown an increasing range of abilities. On these tasks X has shown that he could work independently and come up with a good product.

During the Research Design and Methodology Course I used a more difficult text by Johnston and Pennypacker. X demonstrated both eagerness and a superior ability to understand the complex material, and also did an outstanding job of orally contributing to the class. He also volunteered for an independent study on the Johnston text. He put a good effort into coming to grasp this more difficult text. Each of my courses requires daily oral responses to written material. X has demonstrated excellent repertoires in these areas.

X was well prepared for class. He maintains a professional and personable attitude toward others around him. This was tested in his second independent study course. He was both classmate/student and Instructor's Assistant for a computer application in the course. He had no

difficulty handling this double role. He is the kind of student who is well liked by other students.

Section III. Academic Activities and Accomplishments

X's Comment: I look upon the progression of my academic career as a focusing experience. In my early days at Saint Cloud State University I was a high school student and unsure of my direction; therefore, I took classes that were required, sounded interesting, and were still available when I was one of the last to register (see Section V). I continued along this path until I took PSY 115 (General Psychology), this attracted my attention in a way other courses had not. I received an 'A' in this course and was a teaching assistant for PSY 115 the following quarter. The decision was made to pursue psychology as my field of interest. Not long after this, I encountered PSY 317 (mentioned above) and was introduced to a behavioral orientation by Jerry Mertens. Since then I have been focusing on a career in behavioral psychology and have received 'A's in all behavioral courses taken. Below I have listed some other accomplishments I have made while attending Saint Cloud State University as an undergraduate student.

A. Chairperson of Skeptically Oriented Students: I served as chairperson of Skeptically Oriented Students, a psychology related student group for which Jerry Mertens serves as advisor. The main purpose of this group is to critically analyze extra-ordinary claims, and bring in speakers to discuss the issues involved, e.g. Doug Agustin, from a cult awareness group, spoke regarding the definition of a cult as well as some of their recruiting methods. As part of my function as chairperson I introduced lecturers and had the fortunate opportunity to accompany and talk directly with them at dinners and social functions. This has also taken place with various behavioral alumni S.O.S. has brought to campus.

B. Teaching Related Skills: As I mentioned above I have acquired considerable teaching related skills both in independent study courses with Jerry and as a teaching assistant. for PSY 115. In the aforementioned courses it was my responsibility to: write test questions, grade student writings, score tests, directly teach students on a regular basis, create study aides for students, design a course grading system, etc. All of these tasks were very rewarding and I feel that they have given a tremendous boost to my ability to teach and lead group discussions. I have considerable experience in front of groups as one of the jobs I have had while working my way through college was as a DJ and Karaoke host. I have also been involved with presentations in front of large audiences with Jerry.

C. Writing Skills: Throughout my undergraduate career one area I have always been proud of is my ability to write effectively. I have worked hard to continually improve upon these skills. I have received praise from various faculty for the clarity, creativity, and informative flair of my writing style. Recently, I had the opportunity to use these skills to help other students in their career planning ventures through the earlier cited booklet, Careers: What Are You Going To Be When You Behaviorally Grow Up? This booklet spans some seventy pages of information on prospective directions to take and sources of information for making career decisions and I believe demonstrates adequately my ability to write informatively and in a creative fashion.

D. P.O.E.T.S.: P.O.E.T.S. is a campus affiliated group consisting of faculty and a few students who meet to discuss topics of academic interest. I attended a reasonable share of their weekly meetings for over two years. My association with the group has afforded me the opportunity to hear speakers on a variety of subject matter and contribute to group discussion following the presentation. I believe this, like S.O.S., has been a strong influence on my critical analysis and communication skills.

E. Ellery Queen Award: As a non-grade related activity in Jerry's classes, students compete for the "Ellery Queen Award". Students are shown a stunt introduced as a supposed psychic event and are then asked to write their best critical analysis as to what happened, or how it was done. At the end of the term the student who has made the best overall analysis of these stunts receives the Ellery Queen Award. During the PSY 325 course I did win this award.

My

Comments: In addition to his course work X has taken advantage of other academic activities to add to his repertoire.

X also has shown well established organizational skills. Particularly, I would cite his work as co-author of Careers: What Are You Going To Be When You Behaviorally Grow Up? Along with writing original portions, X compiled a number of sources from various locations, which had been contributed by the other co-authors, into a ordered, coherent document via computer technology. He made great effort to create a consistency of text throughout the work, while editing it to make it more readable. He has shown this organizational skill in many areas during his undergraduate work with me.

X has demonstrated ability in both oral and written expression. He has addressed both formal and informal groups very effectively. He also has written instructional materials for classroom use which have served as an excellent resource for his fellow students.

X displayed a good level of analysis of complex problems in the Ellery Queen contest that he won.

Section IV. Research Interest and Experience

X's Comment: The area of research has been an area I have had interest in for some time. As mentioned earlier in this letter, I have received grades of 'A' in both Research Design and Methodology and an independent study in this area from Jerry Mertens. I have completed one behavioral research course in which I designed and conducted a single subject experiment and wrote a journal-style report of the experiment. I have also taken Descriptive and Inferential Statistics. Furthermore, two independent study courses in the research lab on campus have aided in developing my research repertoire. I also maintain a subscription to JABA, JEAB, and The Behavior Analyst which adds to my repertoire in the experimental research aspect of behavior analysis.

My

Comments: X has shown a distinct ability to grasp research concepts in class discussion. I have rarely seen him pass up a chance to take a more in depth look at or a more rigorous approach to subject matter. I believe he has the potential to conduct research.

Section V. Early Academic Record

This section could be subtitled, "Just in case you look at my early academic record, you may wonder..."

I completed the first two full years of college (86 credit hours) while in high school. During my junior and senior years of high school I was enrolled in the Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act (PSEOA) program at Saint Cloud State University. This program allows qualified students to take university courses during their last two years of high school instead of attending high school courses. Although this program does offer some advantages of time, it is not without its drawbacks. The thrust of the advice given by advisors to students in this program, myself included, was to just sample from available classes and not to attempt any sort of academic focus. Students in this program were the last group of students to enroll in classes each quarter, which left little selection of courses since most courses had filled prior to our enrollment. This, coupled with high school requirements of a certain number of English and History related courses, made setting any sort of academic goals both against the suggestions of advisors and logistically difficult. Fortunately, later in my time at Saint Cloud State University I did encounter contingencies that began to change my academic behaviors. Thus it can be seen that, since the Fall of 1992, my grades have improved dramatically and the classes I have taken became directed toward my goal of a career in behavior analysis. In hindsight, of course, I see that it would have been much better to focus on graduate school preparations earlier.

My

Position: At first glance this acceleration program appears noble, but, as one sees, its implementation leaves

something to be desired. Certainly, X has demonstrated in his course work from me that he has the ability and the repertoire to accomplish high grades in classes. X has a very high SAT, and respectable GRE scores.

Section VI. Strengths

X's Comment: I believe that my writing and verbal skills are a strong asset. I have worked hard at various forms of written communication and have had success in addressing small and large, formal and informal groups in a wide range of settings.

My

View: X has definitely shown his ability to communicate effectively both in oral and verbal expression and in the written form via a wide range of venues. In many instances of private conversations he has exhibited an ability to objectively analyze complex situations. Also, he has demonstrated good listening skills that enhance his ability to be taught difficult materials.

Section VII. Weaknesses

My

Introduction: The following section should not be construed as being negative, as I do believe X is an outstanding candidate for the graduate program in behavior analysis at WMU. However, as a matter of policy I do include this section in all the letters that I write. I believe it forces objectivity which could otherwise be missed. In X's case I believe these deficits are minimal.

X's Comment: One weakness I believe to be present in my education is a lack of courses dealing with the original writings of Skinner. I think it is important to have a strong understanding of the concepts addressed in his works to have solid repertoire of behavior analysis. In my senior year, noting this weakness allowed me to take steps to rectify this situation. I have taken one course which deals directly with Beyond Freedom and Dignity and other writings of Skinner (mentioned above). Also, as a benefit of some volunteer work I did at the 1993 ABA convention, I acquired a copy of The Behavior of Organisms, which I am currently reading. These books will become a base to which I will add, book by book, for many years. I believe that a steady rate of reading on my own, coupled with a few classes on particular works of Skinner will aid in developing my repertoire.

My

Remarks: Due to his relative late start in behavior analysis here at Saint Cloud State University, X has not taken some of the classes that many students from here have taken before going to WMU, i.e. Verbal Behavior, the Applied Behavior Analysis course and Experimental Analysis of Behavior course. Certainly he has taken a good collection of behavioral courses, and he has proven himself to be a very teachable student.

Section VIII. General Recommendation

I strongly recommend X to you as a candidate for the Applied Behavior Analysis program at WMU. He is the kind of student who I enjoyed teaching. He has made a great number of contributions at Saint Cloud State University, and I look forward to continued contact with him, and to hearing about his continued growth in graduate school at WMU. I believe his hard work and existing repertoire will make X a valuable addition to your program. We have had a long line of students who have migrated to Western. I believe X follows in this tradition.

Sincerely,

Gerald Mertens
Psychology Department Faculty

