

A SAMPLE LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION - Shown with permission of student.

Jan 15, 2002

Dear Committee Members:

This letter of recommendation is in support of X's application to your Master of Arts Degree Program in Behavior Analysis. I highly recommend X for your program.

I always find it reinforcing to see a student develop a good behavioral repertoire in their undergraduate program. However, once in a while a student comes along who shows not only an interest in but, what some might call, a passion for behavior analysis. This is the type of student who looks beyond the current applications and searches for ways in which behavioral principles could be applied to a variety of individual and cultural problems. I believe X is such a student. I have known X for two years and during this time I have watched her develop her behavior analysis repertoire along with an insatiable curiosity about the applications of behavior analysis to many facets of life. I am sure that she will be an asset to the graduate program.

I have written many letters of recommendation for various purposes over my thirty-seven years of teaching at St. Cloud State University. In my effort to give you, the reader, a break from the usual repetitive nature of most traditional letters of recommendation, and in seeking a change of pace for myself, a number of years ago I developed a novel format for the letters of recommendation that I write. In each section of this letter, I have asked X to describe and evaluate her behavior related to the topic of that section. In each section are behaviors that I can respond to with my own observations and evaluation of X's performance. I believe that this format permits the inclusion of more detailed information about the applicant, such as the X's writing skills, self-assessment approach, behaviors selected as important by the student, and a comparison between the student's self-evaluation and my view of the student's performance.

My letters of recommendation may take a form that some readers may not like. This dislike of form should not reflect on the student, as I am the one who has proposed the following:

1. Informal Tone: An informal tone is used throughout this letter, even in X's descriptions.
2. Strengths and Weaknesses: I try to present the full range of the student's abilities. In doing so, I cover X's major strengths as well as some of her weaknesses. Thus, although I believe X has excellent potential as a graduate student in your program, her deficits are included along with her strengths.
3. Length of Letter: This style of letter is longer than most, and may NOT appeal to some readers. For those who prefer brevity, a summary is included in Section VI.
4. Outline of This Letter: In a discussion with X we agreed upon the following outline:

## OUTLINE

- I. General Nature and Length of Contact with X
- II. General Description of Relevant Courses Taken by X
  - A. Courses Taken From Jerry
  - B. Courses Taken From Other Behavioral Faculty
  - C. Other Psychology Courses with a Strong Science Component
  - D. Biology Courses Completed
  - E. English Courses Completed
- III. X's Professional Development
  - A. Professional Organization Membership
  - B. Professional Meetings
  - C. Awards/Other Professional Activities
  - D. A Sample of Topics We Have Discussed
- IV. X's Strengths and Weaknesses
- V. Activities Before Leaving St. Cloud for Western Michigan University
  - A. Class-related Work
  - B. General Knowledge
- VI. Jerry's General Recommendation for Melinda

### **I. General Nature and Length of Contact with X**

#### **X's Comments on Section I:**

My first contact with Jerry occurred two years ago, when I enrolled in his Psychology of Learning course. This was my first exposure to both Jerry and behavior analysis, and could be described by some of a different orientation as a "religious awakening". Since that first contact, I have had extensive contact with Jerry, both in and outside of class. Along with several courses and activities, I have had numerous conversations with Jerry about a vast number of issues related to behavior analysis, which has not only increased my knowledge, but also helped me to think more critically about a wide variety of issues.

#### **Jerry's Comments on Section I:**

I have known X for two years and in that time I have had the opportunity to watch her develop her behavioral repertoire. She received A's in all of my classes and we have had many interesting discussions on behavior analysis and related topics.

## II. General Description of Relevant Courses Taken by X

### *X's Comments on Section II*

#### A. Courses Taken from Jerry

1. **Psychology of Learning:** This course covered the principles of behavior, including rule-governed behavior, moral and legal control, career considerations, and single-case design. This was a fairly rigorous course with daily oral questions and written quizzes. The text used was Elementary Principles of Behavior by Malott, Malott and Trojan. I earned an A in this course.
2. **History of Psychology:** This course surveyed the history of psychology as a whole, with a specific focus on the historical development of behavior analysis. Daily oral questions and written quizzes were a large part of the grading for this course, along with several projects such as determining the pros and cons of studying history and writing to various individuals with interests in historical study. No text was used in this course, as Jerry furnished the readings. I earned an A in this course.
3. **Independent Study (Critical Analysis and Teaching Assistant):** This course included several teaching related tasks such as working with Jerry in recording oral and written test scores, writing oral and written test questions, and writing and revising class handouts. I developed repertoires in teaching course content as well as in the mechanical aspects of teaching a college level course using learning principles. Jerry also performs fake psychic demonstrations in his courses to increase his students' analytical and critical thinking skills, and I have assisted him with these demonstrations. I earned an A in this course.
4. **Independent Activities:** Because I came upon behavior analysis relatively late in my undergraduate program, I have only taken three courses from Jerry and three courses from other behavioral faculty. To help ameliorate this deficit, I am working independently with Jerry to increase my behavioral knowledge and teaching repertoires. Activities that I have done include reading works by B.F. Skinner including Walden Two, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, and Verbal Behavior, introducing speakers in his classes, revising old handouts, writing new handouts, lecturing, and asking oral questions in his classes. I plan to continue working with Jerry this semester to further increase my repertoires in behavior analysis and teaching techniques.

## **B. Courses Taken From Other Behavioral Faculty:**

1. **Principles of Behavior:** This course covered behavioral principles, with a focus on the use of behavior analysis in applied settings. The text used was Behavior Modification: Principles and Procedures by Miltenberger. Weekly quizzes and daily worksheets which involved designing possible interventions for hypothetical behavior problems were required. The professor for this course was Kevin Klatt, who received his doctorate from the Department of Human Development and Family Life at the University of Kansas. I earned an A in this course.
2. **Introduction to Applied Behavior Analysis I:** This was a graduate level course which presented principles of behavior analysis with a focus on the implementation of behavioral treatments in applied settings. No text was used – materials for the course consisted of an instructor designed internet course along with readings of “classic” articles in behavior analysis. The professor for this course was Eric Rudrud, who received his doctorate in the behavioral program at Utah State University. I earned an A in this course.
3. **Single-Case Design:** This was a graduate level course which presented various single-case designs. The text used was Single Case Experimental Designs: Strategies for Studying Behavior Change by Barlow and Hersen. The course covered the history of the single case approach, assessment strategies, A-B-A withdrawal designs, multiple baseline designs, alternating treatments designs, statistical analyses, replication procedures and ethical principles and considerations in research. Another requirement of this course included reading articles in behavior analysis with a focus on the research designs used. A final paper, which reviewed journal articles on a specific topic was also required. The professor for this course was Eric Rudrud. I earned an A in this course.

## **C. Other Psychology Courses with a Strong Science Component:**

I have taken several other psychology courses that were rigorous in their scientific approach and have contributed to my knowledge in areas of scientific inquiry. These courses include: Statistics, Research Methods, Experimental Psychology, and Physiological Psychology.

## **D. Biology Courses Completed:**

As part of my biology minor, I have taken several courses in biology. Among these are: Genetics, Human Anatomy and Physiology, Neurobiology and an independent study course on the genetics of alcoholism. This science training as part of a biological repertoire has strengthened my views on the value of

behavior analysis and my appreciation of Skinner's comments on physiological variables in his article, "Are Theories of Learning Necessary?"

#### **E. English Courses Completed:**

I briefly considered double-majoring in psychology and English. As a result, I have taken six English courses that have helped me to improve both my written communication skills.

#### **Jerry's Comments on Section II:**

X has done very well and received A's in all of the classes she has taken from me. She is a hard worker and does not shy away from tasks that are difficult and/or time-consuming. In the independent study course I could always count on her to produce quality work and have it done on time.

### **III. Professional Development (Memberships, Meetings, and Activities/Awards)**

#### **X's Comments on Section III:**

#### **A. Professional Organization Membership**

- 1. Association for Behavior Analysis – Student Member 2001**
- 2. St. Cloud State University's Sceptically Oriented Students (SOS) – Chairperson:** This is a campus/community organization, which seeks to inform students and community members about pseudoscientific/extraordinary claims. A major activity of this organization is to bring in speakers on pseudoscientific issues. Some of my duties as the chairperson included programming some of the activities, introducing speakers, and talking about our group in some classes.

#### **B. Professional Meetings**

- 1. Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) Conference, May 25-29, 2001 in New Orleans:** This was my first ABA conference, and I found it to be both informative and fun. The variety of presentation topics increased my knowledge of the extent of behavior analysis applications, and vastly improved my repertoire in behavior analysis. It also sparked an even greater interest in the area of behavior analysis and its applications.
- 2. Midwest Association for Behavior Analysis and Therapy (MABAT) Fall 2000 Conference in Minneapolis (Nov. 3, 2000):** This was my first experience attending a professional conference of any sort, and I found it to be an exciting and useful learning experience. A wide variety of research studies were

presented, including students who presented their master's theses. This allowed me to not only see the types of research being conducted, but also to gain knowledge on what a thesis entails, how to present a research study, and to generate ideas for my own future research.

3. **Minnesota Psychological Association (MPA) Distinguished Scholar Lecture: "Non-Drug Incentives for the Prediction, Prevention, and Treatment of Drug Abuse" Presenter: Marilyn E. Carrol, PhD, University of Minnesota Behavioral Pharmacology Department, October 10, 2001, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN:** This presentation covered behavioral research done on the risk factors of drug abuse, prevention, and behavioral treatments of abuse, based on animal and human studies. It was an interesting lecture, both because of the nature and findings of the research, and because I became more familiar with what a large behavioral research study entails.
4. **Minnesota Psychological Association (MPA) Conference on Sleep and Insomnia, January 11, 2002, Metropolitan State University, St. Paul, MN:** This conference included presentations by Mayo Clinic staff on sleep physiology, a discussion of sleep disorders with an emphasis on insomnia, and treatments for insomnia. The presentation was very informative and the information was both interesting and useful. The presentations included both behavioral treatments, and chemical interventions.
5. **Behavioral Analysis Association of Michigan Spring 2002 Convention in Ypsilanti, Michigan, March 14 and 15, 2002:** I have made plans to attend this conference in March. This conference falls during St. Cloud State University's spring break, and therefore the time away from campus will not interfere with any class activities that I am currently committed to.
6. **Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) Conference in Toronto, May 2002:** I hope to attend the 2002 ABA Conference.

### C. Other Professional Activities/Awards

1. **Joint Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA) Faculty Journal Subscription Scholarship Award:** I appreciate my being given a JABA subscription.
2. **Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura Volunteer Recognition Award:** I received this award for volunteer work in the behavior analysis/skeptical academic area at St. Cloud State University.
3. **Class Coordinator:** While Jerry was away at a conference, I was responsible for overseeing the other teaching assistants who conducted his classes in his absence. My duties included making sure everything was done and taking care of any problems if they arose.

4. **Mental Magician Assistant:** Besides Jerry's 37 year career as a behavioral psychology teacher, he is also an accomplished magician. His specialty is fake psychic type tricks. I have assisted Jerry with fake psychic demonstrations in his classes and other community magic shows. I have also performed a trick and then taught that trick to a group of children. This experience has increased my repertoires in public speaking, working in front of a group, and working with children.

#### 5. **Conversations:**

I have had many opportunities to talk with Jerry on a vast array of topics, both in and out of class. Although there are too many discussions to list all of them here, some of these topics included Walden Two and planned communities, debunking extraordinary claims, Skinner's and Jerry's views on the survival value of music, art and literature, and behavior analytic views of religion and sexuality. We also had countless conversations on daily life issues and analyzed the possible contingencies involved.

#### *Jerry's Comments on Section III:*

X is a very high energy student who has taken advantage of a variety of learning opportunities during her time here in St Cloud. She is always excited about speakers and conferences, and strives to get as much from them as possible. I have thoroughly enjoyed discussing issues with her. Discussing these issues with X has been productive, intellectually stimulating and positively reinforcing. She has been able to critically analyze situations and problems discussed, and shows independence in critical thinking.

In my absence, I was able to feel confident that my classes were running smoothly with her in charge. In her working with the grading book, I have never had any occasion to question her professional confidentiality or honesty.

#### IV. **Strengths and Weaknesses**

#### *X's Comments on Section IV:*

##### A. **Strengths:**

1. **Written Communication Skills:** I believe that one of my strengths is in the area of written communication. I am able to convey ideas clearly and concisely, and my work has consistently received high grades and favorable comments from both faculty and other readers of my work.
2. **General Academic Ability, Interest and Curiosity Repertoires:** I have received high grades throughout high school and college, and I am usually able to readily understand new information and concepts. This academic ability is

combined with widespread interests and curiosity. This broad interest has occasionally resulted in some difficulties, such as indecision about my career choice. Because I found so many areas interesting, I wasn't sure what specific area I wanted to focus on. However, I do believe that my academic ability, interests and curiosity will help me in both graduate school and my chosen career.

## **B. Weaknesses:**

1. **Oral Communication Skills:** Although my written communication skills are strong, my oral communication skills leave something to be desired, particularly in speaking effectively to large groups. However, this is a deficit that I continue to work on. I have been trying to improve these skills by asking oral questions, lecturing, talking with students, and introducing speakers in Jerry's classes. I have become increasingly comfortable in front of the class and plan to continue working to improve these skills spring semester.
2. **Research and Work Experience:** Another deficit is my lack of active research and work experience in psychology. Although I have taken several research related courses, my actual research experience is limited to a single traditional, correlational study completed as part of the senior capstone course, and while I have worked throughout my undergraduate program, this work was not directly related to psychology. However, I am confident that I will be able to gain skills in these areas in my graduate school training.

### **Jerry's Comments on Section IV:**

X has demonstrated excellence in learning new concepts in my classes, and in our conversations I have seen her skill in pushing the concepts to new levels. She shows interests in a wide variety of issues related to behavior analysis. Her writing skills have been apparent in several papers she has written and revised with me, and although there are deficits in her public speaking skills, she has worked hard on improving them. There has been a steady improvement in her speaking ability throughout the semester, and we have made plans for her to speak to my classes this semester as well. I believe that she is a very capable student and will be able to gain the research and work related skills she now lacks in her graduate program.

I also see one of X's outside activities as a strength. X has a strong interest in and a talent for music. With the musical aspect of many of Dick Malott's presentations, I believe she would do well, and have fun working on adding music to these presentations.

**V. Activities I Plan to Accomplish Before Leaving For Western Michigan University in June:**

**X's Comments on Section V:**

**A. Class-related work:**

1. **Lectures:** Next semester I plan to speak to Jerry's classes on various behavioral topics. All of Jerry's courses have a behavioral emphasis, and we have selected some topics that I will lecture on. This activity serves three purposes: to help me become more familiar with behavior analysis concepts, to keep me updated on current research, and to improve my public speaking skills.
2. **Oral quizzes:** I plan to continue working with the oral quiz procedure in Jerry's classes. This will improve my knowledge of the content areas, my speaking skills, and my skill in creating good test questions. In addition to asking questions, this procedure involves discussing the context of the answer and then linking the student's answer to the next issue in the material to be discussed.
3. **Homework Mastery Demonstration:** I am currently working with Jerry and another student on developing an open book test for Elementary Principles of Behavior that his students will complete as homework. I plan to continue working on this cooperative project spring semester.
4. **Diagrams in Elementary Principles of Behavior:** Jerry made this request of me: "I do NOT believe I personally use fully the excellent contingency diagramming suggested in the text and the instructional manual for Elementary Principles of Behavior. Would you push me to use this diagramming system more extensively this coming semester?" Working with Jerry and students I hope to use the contingency diagrams throughout the entire text for the course. We both see this diagramming repertoire as a valuable aid to students in his behavior analysis course.

**B. General Knowledge in Behavior Analysis**

1. **Readings and Research Interests:** I plan to continue reading and discussing works by B.F. Skinner and other behavioral materials with Jerry. I also plan to research several topics related to behavior analysis. I am currently working on several projects, including a class handout on functional analysis, behavioral treatments for insomnia, and physiological versus behavioral treatments for disorders such as ADHD. I also plan to study moral and legal control and religious behavior this semester.
2. **Conferences:** I have made preliminary plans to attend the Behavioral Analysis

Association of Michigan Spring 2002 Convention in Ypsilanti, March 14 and 15, 2002, and hope to attend the ABA 2002 conference in Toronto. I plan to spend March 13, the day prior to the Michigan Conference, in Kalamazoo, and become increasingly excited about the day as plans develop.

**Jerry's Comments on Section V:**

X has made plans to do several activities during the upcoming semester to improve both her public speaking ability and increase her behavior analysis repertoire. I believe that this shows her commitment to both improving her deficits and increasing her repertoire in behavior analysis. She is also working on a group project to develop homework study questions, and doing a great job. She is able to work with others cooperatively and effectively.

**VI. Items That Were Specifically Asked For In #2 On The Application Form**

**Jerry's Comments on Section VI.**

Since the application form asks for an evaluation of some specific items, I have cited those specifically here. I do believe it important to evaluate students on the behaviors the graduate school wants evaluated. You will find those specific items in the sections listed.

- A. Accomplishments: Section III (page 5, 6 and 7), Section V (page 8)
- B. Intellectual Independence: Section 11. A. 4. (page 3), Section III (page 7)
- C. Research Interest: Section V (page 9)
- D. Capacity for Analytical Thinking: Section III (page 7)
- E. Ability to Work with Others: Section V. A. 3. (page 9)
- F. Ability to Organize and Express Ideas Clearly: Section IV. A. 1. (page 7), Section III. C. 5. (page 7)
- G. Teaching Ability and Experience: Section II. A. 3 and 4. (page 3)  
Section IV Jerry's Comments (page 8), Section V. A. 1 and 2. (page 8)

**VII. Summary - Jerry's General Recommendation for X**

I believe that X has great potential as a graduate student in your behavior analysis program. In the last two years I have come to know her as a hard worker, who shows a strong interest in and commitment to behavior analysis. She is the type of student who regularly strives to improve her knowledge and skill.

X is a student that I have thoroughly enjoyed working with, not only because of her hard work and dedication, but also because she is a fun and interesting person. She has accomplished a great deal during her undergraduate program, and I have no doubt that she will succeed in graduate school. Conversations with her are intellectually stimulating: she is able to apply principles to novel situations and examples, and to critically analyze a variety of issues. She raises interesting questions and comments on topics being discussed.

While she has demonstrated good written communication skills, I expressed some concern about her oral communications skills. However, X has been continually improving and is scheduled to speak to and work with my classes this semester. I don't feel that this will be a major impediment to her success in graduate school. She has certainly gained teaching related skills and has become more spontaneous and better able to communicate information verbally.

Overall, I believe that X will do well in your graduate program. She is dedicated and hard working while remaining fun and interesting. I believe that you will enjoy her not only as a student, but as a person as well.

I welcome the opportunity to answer any questions regarding X's letter of recommendation.

Peace,

Gerald C. Mertens  
Psychology Faculty