

**COUNCIL ON ACADEMIC PERSONNEL (CAP)  
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)**

Revised November 1, 2008

**35. What mix of letters does CAP like to see, how can departments avoid potential conflict of interest in external letters, and what constitutes a good letter of evaluation?**

For *appointment at the Assistant Professor* level, there should be at least 3 external letters; “candidate” letters are acceptable; additional letters, including “department-nominated” letters may be helpful for appointments at the higher steps of the Assistant Professor rank (Steps V or VI).

For *promotion review*, and for *appointment at Associate Professor and higher*, there should generally be 5 to 7 external letters in the file that are analytical and from individuals who are independent of the candidate. “Candidate” letters should be carefully selected (not scattershot) and fewer in number than “department-nominated” letters. For advancement to *Professor VI and Professor Above Scale*, analytical letters from internationally recognized “department-nominated” senior colleagues are particularly helpful for assessing international recognition and acclaim.

It is especially important to receive advice from experts with sufficient professorial experience within the University of California system to evaluate appropriate placement of the candidate on the UC step scale or when the action involves a subtle knowledge of the UC step system, e.g., acceleration, or advancement to Professor VI or Professor Above Scale.

Because it is rare for a person closely associated with a candidate, such as a previous teacher, collaborator, former fellow student, old friend, or relative, to write in fully objective terms, CAP regards such letters as potentially less discriminating than letters from people selected by the department and independent of the candidate. However, “candidate” letters can sometimes be as useful as “department-nominated letters,” when letters from collaborators can explain the historical development of the collaboration and the role of each partner in it.

To preserve the integrity of the review process when soliciting external “department-nominated” letters of evaluation, potential conflicts of interest should be avoided whenever possible. A potential conflict of interest (COI) occurs when a person writing a letter of evaluation has a professional relationship or shared academic history with the candidate that might influence his/her judgment of the candidate’s performance and/or the suitability of the proposed action. (See also FAQ 34.) The revised form UCI-AP-11, “Identification and Qualifications of External Referees” has a checkbox to identify reviewers, e.g. former mentors and colleagues, who have a potential conflict of interest. When “department-nominated” letters have been solicited from individuals at the same or lower rank, or from former mentors or recent collaborators, this should be noted and explained in the “Qualifications” section of form.

The most useful letters provide both description of the candidate’s work and a thorough analysis of the candidate’s important and original contributions. A “thorough analysis” places the contribution in historical and contemporary context; it answers questions such as how a key contribution has advanced the field and addresses the originality and impact of that contribution. It may explain, for example, how the contribution elucidated a long-standing problem that has been difficult to resolve, or has opened a new area of inquiry or creative expression. An analytical letter often addresses the quality of scholarship of the candidate’s work and how the candidate’s contributions compare with the work of his/her peers. Since letters for promotions cover work over many years, evaluators should concentrate on the most significant past work but always comment on the most recent work.

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Least helpful are perfunctory "testimonial" letters, with no analysis of the scholarship or creative work, and with indications that the only thing actually reviewed has been the curriculum vitae; CAP give little consideration to such letters.

CAP is aware that departments cannot control the quality of letters received. However, the quality of the letter of solicitation has considerable impact on the quality of letters received. It is advisable to provide in the solicitation letter information that would help external reviewers write letters that are strongly analytical. Solicitation letters should include the rank and step of the action proposed by the department as well as a statement if the proposed action is an acceleration. It may be useful to begin the solicitation process early, so there is time to send a second solicitation if several "testimonial" letters are received. For examples of effective solicitation letters, see the Academic Personnel Procedures manual (APP 3-60).