

## Loose ends

### How do I rate? Sydney Brenner



I have spent a lot of time writing testimonials for my students and colleagues and evaluating candidates for grants, promotion and prizes. There are some individuals I have supported at all stages of their careers, lauding them for their

capacity to excel as research fellows, as assistant, associate and full professors, and even as heads of department, though the latter is quite tricky. It shouldn't be long before I start getting requests for the very last stage of all. I imagine they will start roughly as follows: "Dear Dr Brenner, Dr K has applied to be buried by our organization and has given your name as a reference. The Institute of Celestial Kinesis is interested in creative cadavers who have attained a high level of earthly accomplishment and who will continue to be creative and productive in future heavenly pursuits . . ."

In the course of my long career as a testimonial writer, I have learnt a number of important rules that should be followed. The letter must be of the correct length, not too short, which looks bad, or too long, which arouses suspicion in the reader. Just over one page is best. Much of the first page can be filled with the titles and address of the recipient: "Dr Ivor Paine, The A. Spirin Distinguished Professor of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Neurobiology, Chairman (sorry, Chairperson), Search Committee . . . etc." The text should overflow on to the second page with a sentence such as:

"Taking all factors into account, and weighing up all the pros and cons, I have come to the conclusion, that, on balance, Dr X may well have reached the demanding standards set by your Department; if not, he is certainly on the threshold and has the potential to do so in the near future."

More seriously, it is important to recount one event or a particular characteristic that singles out the individual from everybody else. This catches the attention of the reader who then remembers all the other things said about the candidate even though they are said about all candidates — they are outstanding experimentalists, have excellent backgrounds and show outstanding promise.

Another important rule is always to give your true opinion. If someone is second class, say so, even if you have to temper it by putting him in the top division of the second class. It may reflect on your ability to choose the right people, but if you say everybody is outstanding you will devalue your opinions.

All of this takes time and I often wonder whether a form letter could be composed for all occasions which only requires filling in the blanks and deleting the inapplicable. I have got as far as: "Dr . . . is in the top/bottom 100 % of all postdoctoral fellows I have known." This has the virtue of allowing the recipients to make their own decisions without being contaminated by your views. Another self-scaling sentence that could go into the form letter is: "I am certain that Dr . . . will not only contribute to, but will also gain from, the excellent scientific environment offered by your Department."

A new kind of letter is increasingly crossing my desk. This is the one requesting a performance evaluation. Common in industry, this letter has reached academe *via* administrators who have been to management schools or, at least, had a course or two. I thought I would complete one myself just to give you the flavour.

1. *For how long and in which capacities have you known the subject?* I have known him for nearly seventy years as friend, colleague and occasional confidant.

2. *How do you rate his management abilities? Comment on his teamwork and his capacity for multiplexing his activities.* He is very good in a team, especially if he is the leader and everybody does what he says. In some cases, he does let people go their own way and he will quickly adopt whatever turns out to be successful. He has always undertaken more than he can manage and multiplexes his activities only by the skin of his teeth. Over the past few years he has shown signs of forgetting what he needs to do and has been known to come to the wrong meeting on the wrong day in the wrong country.

3. *How do you rate his skills of communicating with other people?* These are excellent, except that some might say he talks too much. He is very good at persuading people to undertake projects — I hesitate to call it brainwashing — and these are frequently successful. He is a reasonably good listener, but he tends to be easily bored.

4. *What are his strengths and weaknesses that could affect his performance as a manager?* His strengths are an ability to think divergently, a sense of humour about the world and himself, and seriousness about his work. His weaknesses are procrastination and leaving everything until the last minute (and beyond), an inability to be firm with people and a tendency to spend more time inventing ingenious reasons and excuses for not doing things than getting down and doing them.

5. *Would you promote him if he worked in your institution?* If you mean increase his salary, then absolutely yes. If you mean increase his responsibility, then absolutely no.

6. *How would you rate him on the scales provided overleaf?* AAA (superbly outstanding).