

# Case Study on Letters of Recommendation

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Geoff House is in his senior year of college, majoring in physics. He is an above average student and is well known in the department. He is in the process of applying to graduate programs and has begun asking people for letters of reference.

In the summer between his junior and senior years, Geoff worked as a summer researcher at major research institution, Bigstate University. The work that Geoff did at BU was good, but didn't ultimately give any results that directly led to any publications. Nonetheless, he decides that in addition to asking his professors his own school for letters, he will also ask his research advisor, Prof. Weiner, at BU for one.

He contacts Weiner via email. Several days later, he gets a response from Dr. Weiner telling him that he'd be happy to sign a letter. Dr. Weiner requests that Geoff write a letter and to send it to him. Geoff is very excited. He writes a glowing letter and sends it to Weiner.

Who did what wrong in this situation?

## Author's Notes

This is a case that is fairly straight forward, but has the potential to be very tempting for Mr. House. We have no idea what Dr. Weiner has in mind for the letter that he's asked for: whether it is something as simple as just signing the letter or whether he's looking for Mr. House's self analysis. There is fault in both cases here – Dr. Weiner should be faulted for not making himself clear, but Mr. House should not have so enthusiastically taken the bait. As sad as a situation as this it, it happens all of the time. [As a side note: I've spoken with industry managers who see this rather commonly. They've said that in some parts of the "business world," it is almost expected that you write the letter, and it's the signer's responsibility to ensure that he agrees with what's been written. I personally find this very repulsive.] What happens when Mr. House gets to grad school and the faculty there realizes that he's perhaps not the person they expected to admit? What are his prospects for finding a research group?