

Guide to “Support Letters” for O-1 Visas

O-1 Visas

The O-1 visa is for highly accomplished individuals, such as scientists, professors, physicians, executives, managers, designers, architects, artists, entertainers, and others in non-traditional or special occupations who can show sustained national or international acclaim or a demonstrated record of extraordinary achievement in the field and are coming to the U.S. to continue working in their field of expertise.

Expert/support opinion letters are very important for these cases. To make the most effective, they must be directed towards meeting very specific USCIS (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services) regulatory requirements and are very different from general support or recommendation letters.

These letters provide the contextual framework to support the applicant's O-1 specific criteria including:

- Original scientific, scholarly, or business-related contributions of major significance in the field
- Employment in a critical or essential capacity for organizations and establishments that have a distinguished reputation.

Who Should These Letters Come From?

This collection of letters comes from a variety of authoritative, senior, well-established, and highly regarded leaders/experts in the field attesting to the applicant's meeting the qualifying criteria.

These experts may include a combination of distinguished individuals in the field (about 6-8 people). Some of them are related to the applicant such as past employers, professors, colleagues, clients, editors, critics, curators, etc. And, very importantly, some of these experts know the applicant from his / her reputation in the field.

Letters should come from people who are, themselves, nationally or internationally recognized as experts in the field.

The Content of Support Letters

These letters are not conventional letters of recommendation. Rather, they specifically highlight and explain the applicant's past and present accomplishments, critical roles, and past and future contributions. They should describe how these contributions are nationally or internationally recognized as extraordinary, exceptional, and unique and make a significant impact on the field/industry.

***This material is not intended to substitute as legal advice.**

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The letters are reviewed by an immigration officer who might not have any knowledge of the subject matter. Thus, the letters serve to educate the officer in simple but convincing terms.

- The letters should support, as applicable, the following:
- Outstanding nature of original contributions where the applicant has a key role
- International sustained recognition of the applicant's work
- Ground-breaking research, projects, patents, investigations, publications, procedures, designs important to the field, and/or cutting edge
- Employment in a critical or essential capacity for an organization that has a distinguished reputation

The letter should explain with clear examples of the applicant's unique work and contributions to the specific field. The letters should support his/her scarce skills, and achievements, and explain in simple language the importance and impact of their complex work.

Comparative descriptions are excellent, as USCIS needs demonstration that the applicant has "risen to the top of his/her field". USCIS officers look for buzzwords like "talent", "ability", "aptitude", and "skill", in combination with adjectives such as "extraordinary", "superb", "unique", "worthy of the distinction" or "distinguished". The writer should be specific in regard to what about the beneficiary's work makes him or her so talented.

What to avoid in the content of the letters?

Avoid the future promise of research, innovation, and leadership: phrases such as "most promising young designer", or "is sure to have a major impact in the future" should be avoided.

It is also best not to include language relating to personality traits such as "hard-working", "productive", "efficient", "competent," "well-trained" and/or "has potential" as it could lead USCIS to think that the applicant has not yet risen to the top of his/her field.

Background of the Signer

The letters should be conceptualized as "expert opinion letters" from the vantage point of the industry/community to which both the signer and applicant belong in order to support that the applicant is recognized within his/her professional community at large, beyond the immediate circle of collaborators and colleagues.

To that end, letters from disinterested neutral third parties are of enormous value, wherever possible. Certain letters should come from experts who know the applicant because of his/her contributions to the field and not because they have worked or collaborated with the applicant.

The connection between the signer and the applicant should be stated. Including a summary of the signer's credentials, degrees/licenses, and professional experience is needed to demonstrate being qualified to evaluate and give an opinion about the applicant and his/her work. The letter might be accompanied by a copy of the signer's curriculum vitae (CV), web page, or another biographical reference.

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