

Writing Your Own Letter of Recommendation

Micah, a high school senior, was starting her college application process. The colleges Micah was applying to required three letters of recommendation. She asked three teachers who knew her skills, academic accomplishments, and personality to write her recommendations. Micah met with each teacher to discuss her intentions for college and supplied the teachers with written, detailed information about her achievements, specific examples of her academic work, and courses taken over the years. Micah made her request in August and her applications were due in the beginning of December—giving her teachers plenty of time to write a letter of recommendation.

Two teachers gladly agreed to write a recommendation. Another teacher, Mr. Rutinel—Micah's mentor—said he did not have time to write letters of recommendation. However, Mr. Rutinel told Micah that she could write her own letter which he would edit as needed and submit under his name.

Micah felt uncomfortable about Mr. Rutinel's proposition, but agreed to the plan. Micah talked with a close friend, Cameron, about her situation. Cameron believed Micah should be happy because she could write whatever she wanted, "If Mr. Rutinel is too busy, he probably won't *really* edit your letter." Even though Micah agreed with Cameron—that she had the opportunity to embellish her qualities and academic accomplishments if she wished to—she decided honesty was the best policy.

Micah finished her letter of recommendation for Mr. Rutinel in November. Micah was proud of what she wrote about herself. Mr. Rutinel told Micah it looked good, and said that he would sign the letter, and submit when needed.

Micah then met with another teacher, Ms. Shaw, who had also written her a recommendation. In conversation, Micah told Ms. Shaw about having to write her own letter for Mr. Rutinel. Ms. Shaw believed this situation was wrong and told Micah to take Mr. Rutinel off her list of recommendations. Micah told Ms. Shaw that she would withdraw Mr. Rutinel's letter, but knew this would leave her with only two letters of recommendation. Micah did not know what to do. There was no time to ask another teacher to write an adequate letter and she could not submit her college applications unless there were three letters of recommendation. Micah decided to keep Mr. Rutinel's letter on file.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In this situation, is it ethical for Micah to lie if she is not harming anyone? Would Micah's situation be different if she did exaggerate on her letter of recommendation?
2. Does a teacher have any obligations or duties to their students outside the classroom (such as writing letters of recommendation, providing career guidance, etc.)?
3. Ms. Shaw felt it was wrong to ask a student to write her own recommendation letter. If Micah had told Ms. Shaw about her decision to keep Mr. Rutinel's letter, would it be fair for Ms. Shaw to re-adjust her recommendation for Micah, calling her "ethically unconscientious?"
4. Under what conditions (if any) is it ethical to write one's own letter of recommendation?