

External Evaluation Letters Guidelines

Overview

The foundation of the academic specialist appointment system is that academic specialists, like other academics, are:

- **members of professional academic communities that extend outside their unit**, who advance knowledge in that discipline, field or practice; and
- **members of the community of scholarship within MSU**, with specific duties arising from their academic expertise and the expectation to contribute to the advancement and healthy functioning of the university as an academic institution.

Promotion is the mechanism by which an academic institution continuously renegotiates and refines its vision of what an academic should be to fulfill the mission of the institution and its role in society. Accordingly, promotion is based on **peer review** of the performance of each academic's achievements and contributions toward this vision.¹ Members of the relevant professional community, but outside the unit, provide evaluations through external review letters. External review letters are part of the dossier.

Unlike some other academic positions, the duties and expectations of an academic specialist may not span all areas of the academic mission. Such focused academic roles serve the institution well in many areas but may result in unique academic positions at MSU that are not found in our peer institutions. **Care must be taken** to ensure that external reviewers for academic specialist cases are well-informed by the unit about the academic specialist system and the specific academic duties of the position². They are asked to comment only on the level of excellence within the subset of academic functions that apply and for which the reviewer is qualified to evaluate.

Within the academic specialist system, the **award of continuing status** and the **promotion to senior specialist** are distinct personnel actions that require the use of external peer reviewers.² In contrast, the university-level review for reappointment of a

¹ [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), 4.3.3.5. Promotion to the Rank of Senior Academic Specialist: "...promotion ... is to be based on external peer review involving evaluation of performance of the specialist (within the scope of) their Specialist Position Description..."

² [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), 4.3.4. External Letters of Review and Letters of Support.

continuing system specialist to a second probationary period does not, as it does not confer a permanent rank or status.³

What do the letters address?

The purpose of external letters of review is to **evaluate** the quality, significance, and impact of the work^{4 5} from the perspective of knowledgeable individuals within their area of expertise, and to **calibrate** the evaluation of the work by reviewers at MSU against expectations for similar actions in similar roles at peer institutions. These are not letters of recommendation, which by design are biased toward supporting the applicant (see Table 1). Rather, external letter writers provide an objective and critical assessment of the candidate's performance as an academic based on the official Specialist Position description (SPD), the standards for the action sought, and the evidence presented, from their frame of reference as an expert in the relevant academic or professional community. **They base their evaluation only on the materials provided.** If they have personal knowledge of the individual, they are expected to refrain from considering it.

To minimize bias, external letters of review must be solicited and collected by the unit confidentially and are not shared with the applicant.⁶ In the solicitation letter from the unit, potential external letter writers must be directed to decline to review any applicant for whom there is a **conflict of interest** that prevents them from carrying out the objective review needed.⁷

Who are the external evaluators?

External letters serve their purpose best when they are from **distinguished members of the relevant professional community at peer institutions.**⁸ They must be professionally capable of evaluating the candidate's academic work in the relevant functional areas and job duties and capable of commenting on its significance in the discipline and professional community.⁹ External reviewers should have sufficient overlap in assigned responsibilities to provide an informed comparison of the candidate's work; while job titles and academic ranks may vary across institutions, especially when reviewers are external to the university,

³ MAUs or units may require external letters for these reappointment reviews in their bylaws or RPT/C policies.

⁴ [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), 4.3.4 External Letters of Review and Letters of Support: "The purpose of the external review is to be evaluative of the specialist's dossier..."

⁵ [Form on Progress and Excellence in Reappointment, Promotion or Tenure action \(Formerly Form D\) Instructions](#). 3rd para.

⁶ [External Letters of Reference](#), note items 7., 10.1. and 11.4.

⁷ [External Letters of Review Policy](#), note item 10.2.

⁸ [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), 4.3.4.

⁹ [External Letters of Reference](#).

similarity in functional areas is essential for meaningful evaluation. They must be external to the unit. Depending on the specific role, reviewers outside the unit but at MSU may be helpful.

Most, if not all, reviewers should not be collaborators; dissertation chairs, postdoctoral advisors, or those with similar close professional relationships should not be considered.¹⁰ Collaborators include individuals who have co-authored publications, co-directed projects, shared grant funding, or maintained a sustained supervisory or mentoring relationship with the candidate. External reviewers are expected to evaluate and comment on the promotion packet or portfolio itself, not prior knowledge about the individual. Independent evaluative letters carry greater weight than letters of recommendation, particularly in cases in which the promotion committee may be less familiar with the candidate's assigned job duties or functional areas.

Units invite applicants to provide a list of potential reviewers along with the materials to be reviewed. The unit administrator may add names to this list. Unit administrators may seek advice or suggestions from their MAU administration or FASA. While applicants can provide suggestions, they do not contact potential evaluators to request a letter. The unit administrator is responsible for determining which reviewers will be contacted and for conducting the solicitation of the letters.

The university will accept **three to six external letters**.¹¹ Within this range, the number of letters that must be included in the dossier, including any requirements about how many must be from outside the university, if any, is stipulated by unit policy.

Which materials and guidelines are provided to the external evaluators?

Unit administrators are responsible for the final assembly of the materials that external reviewers will evaluate, for selecting and providing clear instructions to reviewers, and for distributing those materials to the reviewers. Candidates must not discuss their case with prospective or actual reviewers at any stage, except as provided by unit procedures.

Some of the materials are provided by the candidate¹²:

- A **curriculum vitae (CV)**, in the applicant's desired format.

¹⁰ Faculty Handbook. [External Letters of Reference](#).

¹¹ Academic Specialists Memo from VP-FASA Theresa Mastin to MAUs, dated December 2, 2025, see p. 8. Not publicly available online.

¹² [External Letters of Reference](#).

- The **reflective essay**,^{13 14} of no more than five pages.
- A **representative sample of the candidate’s scholarly**¹⁵ work.

The process of soliciting external letters has many steps and may take several months. Units must obtain these materials, decide on the final list of individuals from whom reviews will be solicited, send out the materials, provide time to complete the review, ensure there is time for a second round of requests in the event any of those selected decline for any reason, and follow up with all late responses in time to supply the unit level review committee with a complete dossier that includes all external reviewer letters prior to their deliberations. **Deadlines** for candidates to submit their dossier to the unit must be established accordingly.

To the candidate’s materials, the unit adds:

- The unit’s **statement on confidentiality**, which must be consistent with [Confidentiality of Letters of Reference for Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Recommendations](#).
- A **request to disclose any potential conflict of interest**.
- A **description of the candidate’s position duties and expectations**¹⁶. The Specialist Position Description form, if an accurate reflection of the current academic duties, is a good way to do this, but a more detailed description may be required to fully capture the academic role and ensure appropriate review. If there were changes over time, include an addendum with a summary of those changes.
- A **request to assess the level of academic excellence of the candidate**, in comparison to others in similar positions. Supplying the candidate’s specific criteria for promotion may be of great help for those in unique positions or in positions not held to the same academic expectations at other institutions.
- A statement of **what can be considered in the evaluation**. Confining the review to only those items supplied with the request, and disregarding personal knowledge of the candidate or information obtained through an independent search, is most equitable.
- A statement of **the appropriate use of generative AI** in the review, in alignment with [MSU Guidelines for the Use of Generative AI](#).

¹³ "Guiding Policies on Academic Specialist Reappointment, Promotion, and Continuing (RPC)" Memo from Laura Lee McIntyre, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, to Academic Specialists, distributed October 20, 2025, see p. 5-6. Not publicly available online.

¹⁴ See, for example, [Faculty Guide for Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure Review](#) – The Reflective Essay.

¹⁵ For a definition of “scholarship” from within the MSU context, see [FormD_instructions.pdf](#).

¹⁶ [Academic Specialist Handbook](#), 4.3.4.

- The expectations for **the format of the final letter**: on institutional letterhead and with the reviewer's signature¹⁷.
- A request to **provide or confirm these details about themselves**:
 - Name, rank and institutional affiliation; position title if that would help establish the reviewer's qualifications or appropriateness as a reviewer for the candidate.
 - The extent of their knowledge of or relationship to the candidate.

What happens next?

Unit administrators will provide in the dossier forwarded to the unit peer review committee the following details about each reviewer¹⁸:

- Name, rank, institutional affiliation.
- A summary of the reviewer's **qualifications** to serve as an external reviewer for this candidate.
- An assessment of the reviewer's **relationship to the candidate**, including potential conflicts of interest.
- The individual who originally suggested the reviewer (e.g., candidate, unit administrator).

The review materials must include all external letters solicited and received as well as a list of any solicited referees who decline or fail to submit a letter.

In accordance with the unit's policies on confidentiality, the candidate does not have access to the identity of the reviewers, nor the letters obtained.

¹⁷ [External Letters of Reference.](#)

¹⁸ [External Letters of Reference.](#)

Table 1. Comparison of External Review Letters and Letters of Support

Feature	External Review Letter (Evaluative Letter)	Letter of Support (Recommendation Letter)
Primary Purpose	Provide an objective, critical evaluation of the candidate's dossier for continuing status and/or senior promotion; serve the standards of the professional community.	Advocate for the candidate and highlight strengths; serve the interests of the applicant.
Nature of the Letter	Evaluative; assesses quality, impact, and level of excellence, including strengths and weaknesses.	Supportive; primarily positive in tone and descriptive of strengths.
Focus of Evaluation	Materials provided in the promotion dossier.	Writer's personal experience with or knowledge of the candidate.
Expectation of Personal Knowledge	No expectation of personal knowledge; if present, reviewer focuses only on dossier materials.	Typically written by someone with personal knowledge of the candidate.
Who Solicits the Letter	Solicited and collected confidentially by the unit administrator.	Typically solicited by the candidate.
Confidentiality	Confidential; candidate does not have access to reviewer identities or letters.	Not confidential; candidate often knows who wrote the letter.
Conflict of Interest Restrictions	Must be free of conflicts of interest; collaborators, dissertation chairs, and postdoctoral advisors may not serve.	No formal conflict-of-interest restrictions beyond general appropriateness.
Required or Optional	Required for award of continuing status and/or promotion to senior specialist.	Optional; may be included but are not required and cannot replace external letters.
Comparison Standard	May include comparison to peers nationally and assessment of contribution to the discipline or professional field.	Typically does not include formal comparison to national or disciplinary peers.