Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Writing a Tenure Letter But Were Afraid to Ask An Academic Administrator

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1. **Background**

Every year, a number of philosophers find themselves in the following situation. They have been asked to write an external review letter for someone's tenure file and they have relatively little experience writing such letters. They know plenty of more experienced philosophers they can turn to for advice, but they are also well aware that tenure cases are ultimately decided not at the department level but at higher levels of the campus that are overseen not by fellow philosophers, but by academic administrators. They would therefore like some advice about how to write an effective tenure letter from someone with administrative experience. But while they know plenty of philosophers, they (much to their credit) know few, if any, academic administrators.

If you fit this general description, this document is written especially for you, though I hope it will also be of some value to those who have more experience with such letters. I write here as a recovering academic administrator with five years of experience as a department chair and, more relevantly for these purposes, five years of experience as an associate dean for arts and humanities, during which I participated in all the arts and humanities tenure cases at the college level other than those in my own department, and during which I also observed many of the cases in the natural and social sciences as they were being evaluated at that level. My advice here is based primarily on my observations during this time about what kinds of tenure letters prove to be most effective once the case has moved on to the stage where none of the people making the decisions are philosophers and where many, and often most, are not humanists. My goal here is not to help you decide how to evaluate a tenure case but rather to help you most effectively communicate your evaluation to the people who will be reading and making use of the contents of your letter, keeping in mind in particular that this group will include a large number of non-philosophers.

2. **Responding to the Request**

When you receive a request to write a letter for someone's tenure file, you should respond quickly and ask for all the information that you will need in order to make an informed and responsible decision about whether you should agree to write the letter. It is particularly important that you act quickly because if you wait too long and then decline, you run the risk of making it considerably more difficult for the department to find a suitable alternative letter writer. If the following are not provided with the initial request that you receive, you should ask to see, at the very least: the candidate's CV, the candidate's research statement, a document that describes the campus's tenure

standards (and one from the department if they have a separate document), a clear and specific description of what the dossier that you will be asked to look at will contain (e.g., number of publications, total number of pages you will be expected to read), and a statement of the deadline for submitting your letter. If you have concerns about confidentiality, you should also ask for a clear explanation of who will be allowed to see the letters and under what circumstances, if any, the candidate would be allowed to see the letter. And if you know the candidate in any capacity other than by having read his/her work, you should explain right away, clearly and specifically, just what your connection to the candidate is (e.g., you have talked to them at a few conferences, you have written letters of recommendation for them before, you overlapped for a year at the same institution, you are Facebook friends, etc.) and ask whether your level of connection to the candidate would be considered a problem by the institution that is requesting the letter.

Assuming that you are in a sufficiently impartial position to offer to write a letter and are open to the possibility of doing so, you should do the following before making a final decision. First, look at the CV and ask whether you are confident that you are sufficiently qualified to assess the candidate's work. Generally speaking, you will only be asked to write a letter if you have done work in the candidate's area, but what counts as being in the same area is not always entirely clear, so you should ensure that you feel sufficiently qualified before saying yes. If the publication titles on the CV do not provide enough information for this purpose, look carefully at the candidate's research statement. Second, you should look carefully at the description of the dossier you will be asked to look at and the deadline for submitting the letter and ask whether you are confident that you will have enough time to do a careful job of reading the work and writing the letter. Assume, for purposes of making this decision, that the case will not strike you as an obvious one and that you may feel the need to read some or all of the publications more than once and to deliberate quite extensively before deciding just what you want to say. Assume that writing and revising the letter itself will also take several hours.

In addition, you should ask whether you feel sufficiently clear about the tenure standards that you are being asked to apply to the dossier. If you are unclear about this or about anything else relating to the assignment, you should ask for clarification promptly so that you can make a final decision in a timely manner. Finally, if you decide not to write the letter, you should explain the basis for your decision, even if it is simply that you are on sabbatical and have decided not to do any professional service during this period. Departments are often asked to keep track of how many people declined to write a letter in any particular case and if you do not provide a clear explanation of your decision to decline, you leave it open that some people will infer that you declined because you were not impressed by the CV and did not want to write a negative letter. It is also generally appreciated if you offer to suggest alternative letter writers if the department would find that useful, but only if you are confident that the people you would recommend are not simply people who are sufficiently accomplished in the appropriate area but also people who would do a careful and responsible job.

3. Elements of the Letter

Assuming that you have agreed to write the letter, you should begin by looking carefully at the guidelines provided by the candidate's institution. Some institutions will provide you with a list of fairly specific questions that you will be expected to answer. Others will simply provide you

with their statement of tenure standards. If you have received neither kind of document, you should make sure that you have some kind of written guidelines from the institution even if it is simply in the form of an e-mail from the person requesting the letter. The elements of a tenure letter that are outlined and discussed here are those that strike me as essential to an effective letter in a typical case. I present them here in the order in which it makes sense to me to include them in the letter, but this section is not intended as a one-case-fits-all template and there will clearly be a variety of circumstances under which it will make sense to diverge from what follows in various ways. With this proviso in mind, here are my suggestions for constructing an effective tenure letter in a more or less typical case.

a. Who You Are

Your letter should be addressed to the faculty member who asked you to evaluate the file and should begin by thanking them for the opportunity to participate in the review and by briefly summarizing the relevant elements of who you are: your academic position, your areas of specialization and a very brief summary of your CV (e.g., number of publications and number of talks). You should make clear the connection between your areas of specialization and those of the candidate, being explicit about which areas of the candidate's you have done work in and which, if any, you have not done work in. Your CV will almost certainly be included in the tenure dossier so there is no need to say more than this, but it helps the reader of the letter to have a brief reminder of who you are and your connection to the candidate's areas of expertise at the outset. You should also include here an explanation of the extent to which, if any, you know the candidate other than via reading the candidate's work. And if your letter ends up being on the long side, it may also prove useful to include a brief overview of the contents that follow.

b. Your Understanding of the Expectations for Tenure

Read the tenure standards document (or relevant wording from the initial request to write a letter) that you have been provided with carefully. There will almost certainly be a key term that is used to refer to the level of scholarly accomplishment that the institution treats as necessary and sufficient for tenure (provided that the candidate's teaching and service are consistent with its tenure standards). For example, the standards document may say that in order for the candidate to be awarded tenure, the candidate's research record must be judged to be "excellent." Or it might use a different word like "outstanding" or "distinguished." Before discussing the materials in the file, your letter should provide a brief summary of what you expect to see in a file that you consider to be worthy of tenure at an institution of the nature and stature of the one that is considering the candidate for tenure. In doing so, it is important that you adopt the terminology from the institution's tenure standards document (or other communication with you). Failure to do so can lead to confusion on the part of the letter's readers and to the contents of your letter being discounted by the relevant committees as the case makes its way through the process.

Suppose, for example, that as you yourself are inclined to use the terms, someone whose research record as a whole is "excellent" merits tenure and that calling a body of work "distinguished" is saying that it is even more impressive than simply "excellent." And suppose that the institution that requests a letter from you has used the term "distinguished" to characterize its tenure standards. If your considered view of the candidate you are writing about is that they merit tenure

at that institution, and if you refer to their work as "excellent" in your letter but do not explicitly label it as "distinguished," you are likely to be interpreted as saying that you do not think the candidate has met the institution's standards for tenure. Even if your letter includes a very clear statement to the effect that you recommend tenure, the fact that you have declined to call the research record "distinguished" may lead to doubts or confusion in the minds of at least some of the letter's readers. So regardless of how you yourself would use such terms as "excellent" or "distinguished" in other contexts, for purposes of the letter, you should take it that the institution in question has simply stipulated that the meaning of a particular term like "distinguished" just is "the level at which a research record merits tenure at this institution" and you should use the term in that way consistently throughout your letter.

With this consideration in mind, it is useful for your letter to include, immediately after your brief summary of who you are, a brief statement of what you typically expect to see in a research record that meets the relevant standard. For purposes of illustration here, I'll continue to suppose that the institution in question uses the word "distinguished" to mark the level of achievement it is looking for. In that case, you might begin by saying something to the effect that in terms of quantity of publications, you typically expect to see somewhere between X and Y publications in a research record that is "distinguished" at the time that a person comes up for tenure. You should give a sense of what kinds of venues you would expect the work to appear in, perhaps naming particular journals as examples, in cases of a "distinguished" research record. You should briefly describe the kinds of philosophical virtues that you put the most weight on in assessing the quality of work for yourself, and say something about how well the body of work as a whole must do according to those standards, and how consistently it must do so, in order to strike you as "distinguished." In cases in which the candidate has not published a book, it is important to be clear at the outset that philosophy is a largely article-driven discipline and that it differs from the rest of the humanities in that a book is not expected for tenure. In cases in which the candidate has published a book, you should make clear roughly how many additional publications you would expect to see in a distinguished research record at the time of a tenure decision from someone who has already published a book.

c. A Brief Preliminary Summary

Before providing a specific assessment of the publications in the file, it is often helpful if the letter first includes a brief summary of the letter's findings. This helps provide the reader with a context for what follows and makes it easier for them to connect the rest of your letter to the tenure standards themselves. For example, you might say something here like "Although the number of publications strikes me as on the lower end of what one looks for in a distinguished research record, the venues in which the works have appeared are particularly impressive and I found the quality of the work itself to be exceptionally high. As a result, despite some modest qualms about the number of publications to date, I judge the research record as a whole to be a distinguished one and recommend tenure and promotion." If you preface the substantive discussion in this way, you indicate to the reader that in what follows, they should be particularly alert to evidence that you provide that the venues really are particularly impressive ones and that the quality of the work is high enough to outweigh what might seem to be a potential shortcoming in terms of quantity. Relatedly, if there is a specific quality of the work that you find to be particularly important to your overall assessment – originality, say – it can be useful to highlight this in advance so that the

reader has an eye open to evidence for this particular claim in what follows. And if your overall assessment of the research record is less positive, it is important to highlight upfront what your most significant concerns are so that the reader can be alerted to these as they read the remainder of the letter.

d. Discussion of the Publications

The heart of the letter should consist in your assessment of the quality of the written work provided in the dossier. While this section should conclude with a general assessment of the body of work as a whole (including, where relevant, an assessment of the larger research project of which several of the pieces may be parts, ways in which the pieces fit together, have an impact that is larger than the sum of its parts, etc.), it is important that this part of the letter also contain an analysis that is broken down publication by publication. A letter lacking in such detail will most likely be viewed as having less credibility. How many publications should you discuss individually? That depends. In some cases, you will be provided with a selected subset of the candidate's writings, perhaps something like 4-5 pieces. In such cases, you should say at least something specific about each of them. In other cases, you will simply be provided with access to all of the candidate's writings. In such cases, I suggest that you ask the departmet that solicited your letter for guidelines about how many works you are expected to read and comment on. If they do not have specific guidelines, they can at least tell you what has been their typical experience in recent cases and you can use this as your guide.

For each piece that you discuss individually, I would suggest a paragraph (or perhaps two) in which you do the following: (a) briefly summarize the thesis of the work; (b) briefly comment on the significance of what the work is attempting to do (e.g., significance of the topic itself, significance of the particular claim about the topic, originality of the claim); (c) comment on the quality of the work in terms of the specific philosophical virtues that you will have identified earlier in the letter when you summarized your expectations for what counts as a tenure-worthy research record; (d) provide a summary judgment about the extent to which, on the whole, you find the particular work to be at the level one would expect in a "distinguished" (or whatever term the institution uses to mean tenure-worthy) research record. For example, you might say something like "although the topic itself is somewhat narrow, the quality of the paper is extremely high and thus the work as a whole is at the level that one looks for in a distinguished research record" or "this is a truly important paper that has striking implications for a number of issues in the area; in terms of originality and significance it greatly exceeds what one typically sees in even a solidly successful tenure case" or "although the paper was generally well argued, the thesis did not seem particularly significant or original, so while it exhibits strong philosophical abilities, it is not the kind of paper that contributes much to having a genuinely distinguished research record." It can also be useful to emphasize the various ways in which a philosophical publication can make a significant contribution to the literature even if it does not seem likely to count as the final word on the subject it discusses.

It is particularly important that this portion of the letter be written in a manner that will be accessible to non-philosophers and non-humanists. Avoid using technical jargon where you can and, where it seems necessary, include a clear explanation of the sort that you would use when introducing the term while teaching an introductory-level undergraduate course. Don't assume

that people will know what, say, "the problem of personal identity" is or who, say, Derek Parfit, is.

Perhaps the most important challenge you will encounter in writing this part of the letter, and in writing the letter as a whole, is determining how much criticism of the candidate's work to express and how best to do so. This ultimately depends, of course, on how good you think the work is and what your final recommendation is, a matter that is obviously beyond the scope of this document. But I can say a few things here to help ensure that your critical remarks, and their significance, are properly understood by your reader, especially when the letter gets beyond the department level.

It is unlikely that you will agree with everything the candidate says in their writings. So one kind of criticism you might want to express involves disagreeing with some of the author's claims or conclusions. This is perfectly appropriate in a tenure letter and the kind of thing that philosophers do all the time. But it is also the kind of thing that can easily lend itself to misinterpretation, especially by non-philosophers. So in each and every instance in which you express disagreement with something the author says, it is important that you make explicit your reason for making a point of doing so. For example, you might think the work is of excellent quality and want to emphasize that it's so good that you were impressed even though it's quite at odds with your own views. In that kind of case, you might say something like "the fact that I hold these writings in extremely high regard is made even more impressive once you consider the fact that it challenges views that I myself have defended in print." Or you may be giving a somewhat lukewarm assessment of a work and want to flag your disagreement with its conclusions as a potentially mitigating factor. In that kind of case, you might say something like "while I was not terribly impressed by this piece, it might be worth keeping in mind that its thesis is quite at odds with my own view and that while I have done my best to read it impartially it is possible that I have ended up overestimating some of its weaknesses and underestimating some of its strengths." In these kinds of cases, your intention in stating your disagreement is to highlight the high quality of the work or at least to suggest that the candidate might merit a kind of benefit of the doubt in deciding how much weight to put on your own assessment of its quality. In other kinds of cases, though, your reason for stating your disagreement may well be that you want to register a reservation about the quality of the work itself. In such cases, you might say something like this: "The central claim made by this paper strikes me as extremely implausible and the fact that the author does not seem to recognize or acknowledge this strikes me as worrisome" or "The central claim made by this paper strikes me as so implausible that it would require an especially powerful argument to justify it. Since there was nothing especially powerful about the argument of the paper, the implausibility of its central claim strikes me as a further mark against the paper itself."

In all of these cases, expressing disagreement with a claim or conclusion endorsed by the author can enhance the effectiveness of your letter. But, and this is the crucial point, it enhances the letter's effectiveness only if you make explicit to the reader precisely why you are noting your disagreement. If you simply state that you disagree with the author on a given point but do not clearly explain why you are mentioning this fact, you leave it to the reader to speculate and try to read between the lines and this may well result in your letter being misinterpreted and/or discounted when the file is evaluated.

I have focused here on cases in which you state disagreement with a claim made by the author. There are, of course, other forms of disagreement and criticism. You may think, for example, that the methodology used by the author is questionable or has been misapplied, that the author failed to define key terms with sufficient clarity, that there are problems with examples that the author's argument depends on, and so on. My advice in all of these cases is the same: it can be useful to note such concerns but in each instance you should be explicit about precisely what your purpose is in doing so. And in cases where your purpose is to provide a reason to think the work is less impressive than it would otherwise appear to be, it is important to be clear about whether you think the concerns you have raised are sufficient to warrant a judgment that the work is less than tenure-worthy or whether you are simply noting that it is not as consistently first-rate as it could be while still counting as tenure-worthy. Again, if you do not make this explicit, you invite others to speculate about why you are making the criticism and about what your considered overall judgment really is.

e. Other Elements of the Case

Before moving on to state your conclusion and recommendation, you should take time to address any other elements of the case that you think should be addressed. Some of these may appear as a response to specific questions contained in the instructions that you received and others may come from your own sense of what is relevant to evaluating a tenure case. In each instance, you should have said something briefly near the start of your letter about what you expect to see in a tenure-worthy research record in terms of this particular element of the case and you should then relate your findings here directly to what you identified as the appropriate tenure standards. I focus here on what seem to be the most common examples.

(i) quantity of publications. Here you should say something about the total number of publications the candidate has and the extent to which, just in terms of quantity, the candidate has a strong record. This is also the place to comment on the kinds of publications on the candidate's CV to the extent that you think this is relevant. For example, if the candidate has some journal articles and some invited papers in anthologies, you should comment here about the extent to which, if any, this distinction has an impact on your assessment. Similarly, if there is something about the temporal distribution of publications that strikes you as relevant (e.g., after a slow start they seem to have picked up the pace in the last few years), this is a good place to mention this and explain how it impacts your assessment.

(ii) quality of venues. You should say something about the quality of the venues in which the work has appeared. Are the journals of high caliber? Are the papers in edited volumes in works that appear with strong presses? Are any of the publications in venues that you consider to be subpar or suspect? It is useful to make a general comment about the overall distribution of publications in this respect (e.g., "two papers are in what I consider to be among the top three journals in the area and most but not quite all of the rest are in journals that I judge to be quite strong but not in the top tier") and then to state explicitly how this distribution compares to what you look for in what you take to be a tenure-worthy research record.

(iii) presented papers. Here you should say something about the total number of presented papers on the candidate's CV and how that compares to what you expect to see in a typical successful

tenure case. It is useful to break this down between talks at conferences and department talks and to say something about the quality and prestige of the venues. This is especially important in the case of conferences, where the difference between a major and minor event will not be clear to most committee members just from the CV, but it can also be useful in the case of department talks, especially if someone has given a talk at a highly regarded department that may be located at a university that is not, on the whole, as highly regarded.

(iv) impact. Many institutions will ask you to comment specifically on the impact of the candidate's work. Citation counts (via, e.g., Google Scholar), for example, are a routine metric across the natural and social sciences, but they have also become more common in recent years in the humanities, including philosophy. If you do not think citation counts are particularly useful for philosophy tenure cases, you should include a sentence or two explaining why you don't. If you do, you should look at the relevant numbers and provide a brief assessment. Some people also consider the number, and venues, of invited presentations on a candidate's CV as evidence of impact. If this seems reasonable to you, you should make a comment based on the candidate's record. The same goes for the number of invited papers in collected volumes and the presses with which they appear. You should also consider whether you know of other scholars who have made comments about the influence the candidate's work on their own thinking, assigned their works in their classes, etc. as possible forms of relevant evidence.

(v) future trajectory. Future productivity is a significant concern at every institution. Tenure is not viewed simply as a reward for past accomplishment but as an investment based on a justified expectation of future productivity. You should provide a distinct and explicit statement of your assessment of the candidate's record in these terms. Relevant things to look at may include the following. Does the candidate have a healthy number of works in progress? Does their pace of publication to this point provide evidence in favor of expecting good results in the future? Have their publications to date all been drawn from their dissertation or have they established that they can develop new projects and successfully bring them to completion? If their work mostly seems to be part of a single research program, does that program seem sufficiently robust to sustain a longer-term publication record? If their work is more varied, are there features of what they have achieved to date that you can use as a basis for making a prediction about future success?

f. Conclusion and Recommendation

Finally, you should wrap up the letter with a clear and explicit recommendation and relate it to the specific elements that you included in your assessment, making clear what the most important considerations are and what concerns, if any, raise doubts in your mind about the case. In general, you should try to be as straightforward as possible, keeping in mind that people may well have a tendency to try to read between the lines if you are not. If you think a case is solid, or think it is a real slam-dunk, for example, you should be explicit and say something like "the evidence as whole makes a solid case for a judgment of 'distinguished research record' and I therefore recommend tenure and promotion with no reservations" or "this case strikes me as a slam dunk, easily rising to and exceeding the level of accomplishment associated with a 'distinguished research record'. I enthusiastically recommend tenure and promotion."

If you are recommending tenure and promotion but have expressed any non-trivial reservations about the merits of the case, you should state this explicitly and try to be as clear as possible about how they impact your final decision. Consider, for example, this sentence: "Although I have expressed some significant doubts about the quality of some of the candidate's publications, and while I would have liked to see more by way of department talks and conference presentations, on the whole I do think that the body of work meets the standards for having a distinguished research record and so recommend tenure and promotion." You might think that this sentence straightforwardly conveys the view that while the case may be on the lower end of the tenure-worthy spectrum, it still meets the relevant standards. And some people will surely read it in just this way. But because letter writers are generally reluctant to come out and explicitly say that they recommend against tenure and promotion, a sentence like this may well be scrutinized by people wondering if you are trying to convey more serious doubts about the case without quite coming out and saying so. This is because the sentence identifies negatives and does not give a specific explanation of what positives or mitigating considerations outweigh the negatives and why.

If you really do mean to be writing a positive letter, then, even if not a particularly enthusiastic letter, it is important that you be aware of the way in which people might try to read between the lines in a case like this and that you try to be as explicit as possible about why the negatives do not strike you as sufficiently negative to undermine the case. For example, you might instead conclude with something like this: "I do have some significant doubts about the quality of some of the candidate's publications, but the doubts arise almost entirely in cases of the candidate's earliest publications or works that are on subjects more peripheral to the candidate's central concerns. All of the candidate's most recent works are consistently first-rate as is everything that is a part of their central research project. Since I put much more weight on these publications, the doubts that I have expressed, while not irrelevant, clearly do not suffice to bring the overall result down below the level of distinguished research. I also would have liked to see more by way of department talks and conference presentations as a way of helping to round out the case for a distinguished research record. However, I recognize that the main area the candidate works in is a highly specialized one and that there are relatively fewer speaking opportunities for scholars in this area, especially at the junior level. As a result, while more talks would have been a plus, I do not view the relatively small number of talks as a minus. Taking the totality of the evidence into account, my considered judgment is that the candidate's body of work does clearly meet the standards for having a distinguished research record and so I recommend tenure and promotion."

Finally, if you do not think that the candidate merits tenure, it is best that you come out and say so directly. But if for whatever reason you find yourself unwilling to do so, the second best option is not to say that you recommend tenure while at the same time trying to raise enough doubts to secretly signal your true intentions. Rather, it is to conclude by simply declining to make a specific recommendation. Something along the following lines will likely suffice: "There are clearly some significant positives in this case but also some significant negatives. I have tried to detail them and weigh them against each other here but, in the end, I find that the case is simply too close to call. If the candidate is sufficiently strong in teaching and service, then granting them tenure and promotion may well make sense all things considered. But depending on how the remainder of the evidence in the file is viewed, it may also be that the most justified decision is to decline to offer this candidate tenure and promotion." This will most likely be treated as a negative letter on the whole even if it does not explicitly come out and recommend against tenure and promotion.

To be clear: I do not recommend this as a best practice. If you think the candidate does not merit tenure, it is best to simply say so. But given the reality that some people will be unwilling to simply say so, this is probably the best alternative.

At the risk of concluding by stating the obvious: tenure letters are important and submitting them on time is important. If you agree to write one, you should start working on it well in advance of the deadline to ensure that you can do a responsible job with it and submit it on time. Your goal should be that after you have submitted the letter, you will feel not just that you did an adequate job, but that you produced a letter that will be genuinely helpful to those who will be involved in the case at all levels. In addition, giving yourself plenty of time to work on the letter will enable you to slow down and appreciate the opportunity to get to know the work of a young scholar whose research you may not currently be familiar with. Writing such letters can be a truly rewarding experience. Take your time and enjoy it!

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(I will attempt to revise this document periodically in response to suggestions and critical feedback. I can be contacted at david.boonin@colorado.edu).