

Reappointment, Tenure and Promotion (RT&P) Frequently Asked Questions

External letters of reference. *These letters are critical in cases involving tenure or promotion or both.* Their purpose is to provide independent, convincing appraisals – from outside the University – of a candidate’s national or international scholarly stature. Because they help us gauge our own institutional expectations against those of our sister institutions, external letters play a significant role in the deliberations associated with any tenure or promotion case. Yet they are the subject of more widespread confusion than perhaps any other aspect of RT&P.

1. *How many external letters should a packet contain?*

A tenure or promotion packet should contain *at least four external letters*. Many departments solicit six or more, both to make sure that the final packet contains at least four and to gain broad professional perspective. Department heads should exercise diligence in soliciting enough letters. Failure to do so jeopardizes the candidate’s case. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.*

2. *How are the outside reviewers selected?*

The candidate and department head each make a list of at least six possible reviewers. The candidate may delete up to one-third of the names from the department head’s list. The department head makes the final determination by selecting an *equal* number of reviewers from the candidate’s list and from the departments list (excluding the names removed by the candidate). *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.i.*

As a helpful measure, department heads should include in each tenure or promotion packet a short summary of how the external referees were selected, what their professional credentials are, and how their letters were solicited. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.v.*

3. *Who should be selected to serve as an outside reviewer?*

It is in UW’s clear long-range interest to insist on rigorous peer review by *nationally or internationally prominent referees*. College deans, faculty tenure and promotion committees, and administrators in Academic Affairs will insist on high standards in the evaluation of external letters. Department heads and candidates should do so as well. Cases have failed for want of enough high-caliber letters.

The packet should include at least four letters from referees who have *no personal connection to the candidate*. Examples of personal connections are serving as a dissertation advisor or advisee, previous or pending co-authorship, sharing of research funding, and family relationships.

It may be reasonable to have *additional* letters from referees who have some personal connection, so long as (1) these letters lend useful insights into the candidate’s work and (2) it is clear to all faculty committees and administrators who will review the packet that a personal connection exists. (A good way to do this is to include a rationale for inclusion of these letters in the summary of process provided by the department head.) This matter is one requiring good judgment: will the inclusion of such letters advance the University’s interests in promoting fair, rigorous academic standards? *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.*

4. *When should outside reviewers be invited to serve?*

In courtesy to referees, departments should solicit letters early and allow at least eight weeks for thorough evaluation of the candidate's portfolio. Failure to provide referees with sufficient review time can result in a superficial evaluation and in some cases may cause referees to miss the deadline for submitting their letters.

5. *What should a solicitation letter include?*

It is important that the letter of solicitation, along with all other communications with referees, maintain a neutral tone. The cover letter should indicate whether or not the candidate has waived the right to see the letters and it should address the degree of confidentiality of response (e.g., candidate may see texts of the letters but not any identifying features of the author). It should be clear that the reviewer is asked to evaluate the scholarly/creative contributions of the candidate but the reviewer is not asked to make a judgement about whether the candidate would receive tenure at the reviewer's institution. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.iv.*

The reviewer should be provided with the candidate's vita and representative examples of recent scholarly and/or creative contributions. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.ii.*

Click [here](#) for a sample invitation letter.

6. *How many external letters need to be included in the packet?*

Every external letter that a department solicits and receives in time for department level review must appear in the candidate's packet. Culling external letters is unacceptable.

7. *Are electronic copies of outside letters permitted?*

All faculty members who vote on a case and all administrators who make recommendations should have access to the original copies of the external letters.

E-mailed or faxed letters are acceptable, provided there is some mechanism for ensuring their authenticity. For example, the referee can follow an e-mailed or faxed version with a mailed, signed version that arrives later. Or the department can send a photocopy of the e-mail or fax back to the referee, via certified mail, to allow him or her to comment on its authenticity.

8. *Can candidates who waive the right to see the letters view the texts of the letters?*

When a candidate waives the right to see the letters, only voters and/or those who will make an administrative recommendation should have access to the original letters. Original letters (or copies thereof), along with the summary statement about process, should be stored in a confidential folder. This folder (often a large manila envelope) is forwarded on to the college and Academic Affairs along with the candidate's packet.

The candidate may see the text from the letters. However, care should be taken in removing any features from the letters, including institutional information in letter heads, in order to preclude identification of the authors. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-803, Section 2.b.3.iii.*

9. *Are outside letters required for extended term and promotion cases?*

While external letters are required by university regulations for tenure and promotion cases, they are not required for extended-term/promotion cases. Such letters may be appropriate in extended term and promotion cases and should be included in the packet when deemed relevant and appropriate by the appointing authority. There are some academic departments on campus that do require them as a matter of their unit protocol. If external letters are not required by your unit or college, then you do not need to solicit them. *Reference: UW Regulation 5-408, Section 3.I.A.7 (Extension Educators), Section 4.II.A.10 (Lecturers), Section 5.II.A.8 (Research Scientists).*