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How to write a personal character reference for court

In Kentucky, sentences in criminal cases are determined by a judge. If you are found guilty of a crime by a jury or if you plead guilty to a criminal offense, a judge will look at the facts of the case as well as your criminal history in determining a sentence. One element that can often be helpful during a sentencing is a character letter. Character letters are written by friends, family, colleagues and others who know the defendant in criminal cases. During a sentencing, a judge will typically only allow a certain number of live witnesses to testify as to a defendant's character, but will accept almost any number of letters. Of course, a character letter is only effective if it is well-written and helps the judge understand a fuller picture of the defendant. These tips from an experienced Lexington criminal defense attorney can help your loved ones as they draft character letters in support of you. What Is the Goal of a Character Letter? A character letter is designed to show support for a defendant in a criminal case. These letters have the potential to influence the court, and may even impact the ultimate sentence in a criminal case. For this reason, character letters should be carefully drafted in order to maximize their utility. For individuals writing character letters, the goal should be to first establish your credibility as a reference for the defendant. Next, the letter should describe the defendant, in order to help the judge better understand him or her beyond the offense committed. Finally, the letter should be respectful, and should not undermine the defendant's case. The below guidelines can help in writing an influential character letter. Tips for an Effective Character Letter A good character letter can be incredibly helpful to a defendant's case. Writing such a letter can be a challenge, particularly for those who are inexperienced with the criminal justice system. Read on to learn more about how to write a top-notch letter of support. Tip One: Setting the Stage As an initial matter, a character letter should only come from people who actually know the defendant. Form character letters are not persuasive. Instead, each writer should start their character letter by discussing how long they have known the defendant and how they know the defendant. If the person knows the defendant in a professional capacity, the introductory paragraph can explain that relationship. Tip Two: Tell a Story The overarching message of a character message should be to tell a story about the defendant. Think about what makes your friend, family member or colleague more than just a "defendant," and how you can convey that to the court. Doing so can potentially influence the judge's decision — and help your loved one receive a more favorable sentence. When writing, avoid simply describing the defendant in terms like "he is loyal." Instead, tell a story about his loyalty, or how he has been an upstanding member of the community. A story will stand out in the judge's mind more than adjectives will, making your letter more effective. Tip Three: Avoid Undermining the Case It is often tempting for a person writing a character letter to discuss how the defendant isn't really guilty, how this "isn't like him," how the defendant only pleaded guilty to the crime to get a better sentence, or even how the jury got it wrong. Doing this will not help the defendant, and may even negatively impact his case. Instead, focus on telling a story about the defendant, as described above. Phrases that you can use include saying "I respect that a jury has found _____ guilty of _____ crime. I am writing this letter to offer a more complete picture of who _____ is as a person." In this way, you can show respect for the criminal justice system while demonstrating to the court that your loved one may deserve a reduced sentence. Tip Four: Check with the Lawyer Before writing a character letter, check in with your loved one's Lexington criminal defense attorney. He or she can provide you with basic information, such as how the letter should be formatted. All letters should be sent to the lawyer, and not to the court directly. Generally, the letters should be typed on 8.5 by 11-inch standard paper. Remember that the goal is to get the court to read your letter, and the easier that you make it for them to read, the better. The only exception is if the letter is written by a child. In that case, a handwritten letter may be more powerful. Character letters should include your name, mailing address, phone number and email address so that the court can verify your information. They should be addressed either to the Honorable [FIRST NAME] [LAST NAME] or Judge [FIRST NAME] [LAST NAME]. Although you can put the case number on the letter, it is not necessary, as it will be submitted by the lawyer. Tip Five: Understand a Realistic Outcome At the end of a character letter, most writers make an "ask" of the court. This can be as simple as requesting leniency, in consideration of the defendant's exemplary history. However, in some cases, a letter writer may make a sentencing request. If you plan to make a specific "ask" at the end of your letter, be sure that you understand the potential sentences for the crime in question. In Kentucky, there are mandatory minimums for certain crimes, such as for persistent felony offenders. Check with the attorney before making a request for a specific punishment, in order to maintain your credibility as a writer. Sample Format for a Character Letter If you have been asked to write a character letter, this simple template may be a useful guide. Name of Person Making Recommendation Title of Person Making Recommendation [If Applicable] Address Phone Number Email Address To Whom It May Concern: First Paragraph: Explain who you are. Next, explain how you know the person that you are writing the character letter for, including how long and how well you have known them. Second Paragraph: Explain why you are writing the letter. State that you respect that the defendant has been found guilty or pled guilty to a crime, and that you are writing the letter to offer a fuller picture of him or her as a person. Include specific examples of how the person has helped you or someone else, or how he or she has been a leader or an inspiration. Third Paragraph: Thank the court, and make your "ask." State that you are available to confirm the facts in this letter as necessary. Sincerely, Signature How a Lexington Criminal Defense Attorney Can Help If your friend, family member or colleague is being sentenced for a crime, you may feel overwhelmed with anxiety. Fortunately, there are resources to help — and the skilled Lexington criminal defense attorneys of the Baldani Law Group are here to assist your loved one through each step of the process. We represent clients throughout Kentucky on a range of criminal charges. We offer aggressive legal representation to each of our clients, from the initial arraignment to sentencing and any appeals. Contact us today by phone at 859-259-0727 or online to schedule a consultation. how to write a personal character reference letter for court. how to write a personal character reference letter for a friend for court. how to write a personal reference for court. how to write a good character reference for court

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