

FREE RESOURCE FOR H-1B PROFESSIONALS ON THE EB-1A / NIW PATH

The Recommendation Letter Blueprint Checklist

Everything your letters must include — and the red-flag phrases that get petitions denied — so you can walk into any attorney consultation fully prepared.

Prepared by [Your Firm Name] · Immigration Law



Prepared by Immigration Vision | Immigration Law



USCIS denies thousands of EB-1A and NIW petitions every year due to weak or improperly structured recommendation letters — not lack of qualification.

If you're exploring EB-1A (Extraordinary Ability) or NIW (National Interest Waiver) as a path to a Green Card, your recommendation letters are not a formality — they are the backbone of your entire petition.

USCIS adjudicators are trained to spot boilerplate, templated, or improperly sourced letters in under 60 seconds. Use this checklist to audit every letter before your attorney files — or before you even approach a recommender.

1 Recommender Qualifications

WHO IS WRITING MATTERS AS MUCH AS WHAT THEY WRITE



Senior Credentials Confirmed

Recommender holds a title that signals authority: professor, principal engineer, director, VP, chief scientist, or equivalent. USCIS weighs the recommender's standing in the field.

**Institutional Affiliation Listed**

They are affiliated with a recognized university, research lab, government body, or well-known company. Anonymous or obscure affiliations raise flags.

**Their Own Track Record Is Citable**

Recommender has published research, holds patents, led major projects, or has other verifiable credentials. Their accomplishments lend weight to their assessment of yours.

**No Undisclosed Personal Relationships**

Avoid personal friends or family members, even if professionally qualified. USCIS looks for objective expert assessment.

 **PRO TIP**

Aim for at least 5–6 recommendation letters total. The general best practice is a mix weighted toward independent recommenders — those who know your work but have never been your direct employer, manager, or collaborator on a shared project.

2**Independent vs. Dependent Recommenders****THE RATIO USCIS SCRUTINIZES MOST CLOSELY****Majority Are Independent Recommenders**

Independent = someone who knows your work from the outside: they cited your papers, used your open-source tools, implemented your methodology, or evaluated your contributions without a direct professional relationship.

**Each Independent Recommender Explains HOW They Know Your Work**

The letter must state explicitly: "I became aware of Dr. [Name]'s work through..." A letter that doesn't explain the connection reads as potentially fabricated.

**✗ Direct Manager / Current Employer Is NOT Your Primary Recommender**

Letters from current supervisors are treated as dependent and carry significantly less evidentiary weight. Use them sparingly — 1 maximum — and never as the lead letter.

**✗ Co-Authors on Shared Papers Are Limited**

Someone you published with is a dependent recommender. They may have relevant things to say, but they cannot speak to your independent contribution without bias.

Letter Structure & Required Elements

WHAT EVERY LETTER MUST CONTAIN TO MEET USCIS STANDARDS

Recommender's Full Bio in Opening Paragraph

Title, institution, years of experience, their own area of expertise. This establishes they are qualified to evaluate you.

Explicit Statement of How They Know Your Work

Must state whether they cited your work, attended your presentation, implemented your method, evaluated your project, or another concrete touchpoint.

Specific Contributions Named and Described

Not "she is an excellent engineer." Specifically: "Her algorithm reduced our processing latency by 40% and has been adopted by three Fortune 500 companies."

National or International Scope Language

For EB-1A: language establishing impact beyond one company or city. For NIW: language connecting your work to a national interest – healthcare, defense, energy, infrastructure, AI safety, etc.

Comparison to Peers in the Field

"Among the top 5% of professionals I have evaluated in 20 years" carries evidentiary weight. Comparisons establish "extraordinary" or "exceptional" standing.

Future Impact Statement

USCIS wants to know why the U.S. benefits from your continued presence. The letter should include a forward-looking statement about your ongoing contributions.

Signed on Official Letterhead with Contact Information

USCIS may contact recommenders. Missing letterhead or contact details is an easy RFE trigger that slows your case by months.

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EB-1A vs. NIW — Language That Must Differ

ONE PETITION TRACK REQUIRES DIFFERENT FRAMING THAN THE OTHER



[EB-1A] Letters Reference at Least One of the 10 USCIS Criteria

Awards, memberships, press, judging, high salary, critical role, published material, original contributions, scholarly articles, or commercial success. Each letter should map to one or more criteria explicitly.



[EB-1A] "Extraordinary" or "Sustained National/International Acclaim" Language Present

These exact statutory terms should appear in at least some letters. Adjudicators look for echo of the legal standard in the evidentiary record.



[NIW] Letters Address All Three Dhanasar Prongs

(1) Your work is in a field of substantial merit and national importance. (2) You are well-positioned to advance it. (3) Waiving the job offer requirement benefits the U.S. Letters need not cover all three, but collectively your set should.



[NIW] "National Interest" Is Defined Specifically — Not Generically

"This benefits the U.S." is too vague. Strong NIW letters name the sector (e.g., semiconductor supply chain, cancer research, grid infrastructure) and explain why the U.S. specifically needs this work advanced.

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Red-Flag Language to Remove Immediately

PHRASES THAT SIGNAL BOILERPLATE TO ADJUDICATORS

WARNING

If any of the phrases below appear in your letters, request a revision. These are the exact phrases that immigration officers are trained to treat as attorney-drafted boilerplate — they dramatically lower evidentiary weight.



"I have known [Name] for X years and he/she is one of the best..."

Generic opening that signals a template. Replace with: how the recommender encountered your specific work and what it meant to their field.

✗ "I highly recommend [Name] for a Green Card / permanent residency."

Recommenders should attest to your extraordinary ability or national importance — not to the immigration outcome. This phrasing reads as advocate, not expert witness.

✗ "She is a hardworking, dedicated professional..."

Character praise is irrelevant to EB-1A / NIW. USCIS is assessing impact and standing, not work ethic.

✗ Vague Superlatives Without Evidence

"World-class," "top-tier," "exceptional talent" with no citation, metric, or comparison. Every superlative must be backed by a specific example or data point.

✗ Letters That Read Identically Across Multiple Recommenders

If USCIS compares your letters and finds the same sentence structure throughout, it signals that the petitioner (or attorney) wrote all letters. Each must have a distinct voice and vantage point.

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Final Pre-Submission Audit

RUN THIS CHECK ON EVERY LETTER BEFORE YOUR ATTORNEY FILES

All recommenders have been confirmed as willing and available

USCIS may contact them. A recommender who is unreachable or disavows the letter can damage your case after filing.

Each letter is 1.5 – 3 pages in length

Too short suggests superficiality. Too long dilutes focus. The sweet spot is substantive but tight.

Your name is spelled consistently throughout all letters

Name discrepancies are an easy RFE trigger and create unnecessary delays.

Each letter references at least one piece of verifiable evidence

A publication, patent, award, project, or media mention that appears elsewhere in your petition package — creating a corroborating evidence trail.

You have backup recommenders identified

If a recommender withdraws after filing starts, you need alternatives ready. Identify 2 backups now.



Letters are ordered strategically in your petition package

Lead with your strongest independent recommender. Your attorney should review this ordering before submission.

How Did Your Letters Score?

20-24 ✓

Strong Foundation

Your letters are well-positioned. Schedule a strategy session to refine your full petition package.

12-19 ✓

Gaps to Address

You have a base to work from, but specific items need strengthening before you file. Don't skip this step.

0-11 ✓

High RFE Risk

Filing now significantly increases your risk of a Request for Evidence or denial. Consult an attorney first.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Know Where You Stand Before You Spend a Dollar on Filing Fees

This checklist gives you clarity — but turning that clarity into an approved petition requires a strategy built around your specific background, employer situation, and priority date. Our attorneys have helped hundreds of H-1B professionals in the EB-1A and NIW pipeline understand their options in a single focused consultation.

→ Schedule Your Free 30-Minute Strategy Call

No commitment. No pressure. Just answers specific to your situation.



This checklist is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice.

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