Better Letters of Recommendation

A handout for faculty or staff member (that was asked to write a recommendation)

1. Be sure you want to recommend this student.
   - Discuss a student's academic plans and preparation before agreeing to write a recommendation.
   - Help students choose grad programs that match interests, skills, and preparation.
   - Consider declining some so you can do a better job on others.

2. Get enough data to do your job.
   - Transcript and/or list of classes in major
   - Graded work sample: paper or lab
   - Resume or CV - list of honors and awards
   - Some idea of what the student would like you to focus on

3. Assemble a laundry list of basic skills; assume nothing. For example: "_____ has command of coherent wave optics, Fourier optics, laser physics, lens design, optical metrology, optics of thin films, paraxial optics, physical optics, and all related areas of physics."

4. Describe a particularly successful project.
   - The candidate needs to be special, out of the ordinary (or, presumably, you shouldn't be recommending him/her).
   - Find one or more "above and beyond" stories to focus on.
   - Mention student experience as proctor, TA, RA, tutor, other forms of departmental service.

5. Get personal when appropriate.
   - Has the student overcome adversity - work, first generation, health or family, special challenges? You can be the candidate's advocate on these issues, which is more sophisticated than having the student address them.
   - Do you enjoy having this student in your classes?

6. Close by predicting success, for example:
   - "One of the top students I've worked with in recent years."
   - "Razor-sharp mind with tremendous potential."
   - "I am confident that _____ will be an outstanding graduate student and go on to make major contributions in the field through both research and teaching."

7. Note when the student is going to apply, *not* the deadline.