

Before Asking for a Letter of Recommendation (Guidelines from the Faculty)

Whether you are registering with the College's Career Center, applying to graduate programs in political science or law school, or in search of a vocational position, you will undoubtedly be asked to furnish letters of recommendation from your major professors. Perhaps you will be given forms to have filled out, or perhaps the letter can be more individualistic. In any event, there is a protocol to be followed when requesting someone to serve as a referee.

Please do not underestimate how difficult it is to write strong letters of recommendation that will actually help you to gain admission to graduate school or law school or to receive a grant or scholarship.

► **Please visit us in person** before giving us the file described below. Do not rely on e-mail contacts—unless you live so far out of the area that you cannot come to campus.

To help us write stronger letters of recommendation, we strongly encourage you to complete the following steps:

- ___ 1. **Folder.** Assemble all your forms, envelopes, and supporting materials (that is, all the materials described below) in a single manila folder. Do *not* give this material to us piece-by-piece. Do *not* send it by e-mail.
- ___ 2. **Picture.** Include a picture in your file, particularly if you are not currently enrolled in a class with the faculty from who you are requesting a letter of recommendation. Nothing makes it harder to write a letter than trying to remember: “Now which student was this.” Nothing subverts a letter more than referring to a student incorrectly—for example, using the wrong gender—because it instantly signals that we haven’t the request recollection and our praise cannot be trusted.
- ___ 3. **Cover letter/note.** Remind the faculty member what the letter of recommendation is for and that we have already talked about this. Remind her/him of evidence—such as participation in class discussions—that are not documented in the file. Include deadline dates.
- ___ 4. **Forms.** Include all forms that must be sent with the letters of recommendation. Please READ these forms, FILL OUT the parts that must be completed by the student, and SIGN the form when appropriate. For example, some LSDAS forms say that their staff will return a letter to the faculty member if the student fails to complete the form properly.
- ___ 5. **Contact information.** Be sure that your address, telephone number(s), and email address are current. In the event that your letter writer has a question, s/he should be able to easily contact you.
- ___ 6. **Accomplishment resume.** An accomplishments resume is a summary that lists of all your accomplishments, both academic and extracurricular. You want to

include specific examples of success and overcoming hurdles in school. The accomplishment resume be helpful to refer to it as your complete applications, to ensure that you do not omit any relevant aspects of your background.

- ___7. **Academic information.** Be sure to supply the following information as a minimum: full name, major classes taken (also when and grade earned) from the referee and other classes taken in the department, relevant classes taken in other departments, special skills or talents, statement of career interests and goals, list of professionally relevant extracurricular and summer activities, honors, professional associations, formal research experience (papers written, read, submitted for publication), and anything else which would serve to identify you and your strengths. Look at a standard recommendation form to get an idea of the information asked for.
- ___8. **Statement of purpose.**
- ___9. **Unofficial transcript.** Please INDICATE on the transcript the courses you have taken with the faculty member who will write the letter.
- ___10. **Examples of writing.** Include a paper or two from one of the courses that you took with the faculty member. The best paper would show that you are a clever and industrious researcher, you have extraordinary analytic skills, you develop your own arguments logically and clearly, and you write like a professional-to-be.
- ___11. **Stamped and addressed envelopes** for each letter that you want sent. Provide the full name, title, and complete mailing address of the person to whom a letter should be written.

In assembling your file you are providing materials not only to remind us of your many qualities, but also to provide us supporting evidence that we can cite in our letters to give substance and credibility to our claims on your behalf. Please *be selective* when you include materials; we cannot legitimately comment on your many accomplishments in which we were not involved.

Asking for a Recommendation

Writing a letter of recommendation requires considerable effort. Don't just blurt out a request to a supervisor or instructor you see walking down the hallway. Choose your letter writers carefully, and plan out your timing and approach. Most importantly, don't procrastinate.

1. ASK SOMEONE WHO KNOWS YOU WELL

The purpose of the letter of recommendation is to provide the selection committee with third-party documentation and validation of your background. They want to read the opinion of someone who is familiar with your academic background and knows you well. It is even better if they can compare you with other students, especially students who have won the award previously.

Seek good letters of recommendation. Don't ask "Could you write a letter of reference for me?" Just about anyone can write a letter. The problem can be what they are going to write about. Rather ask, "Do you feel you know my work well enough to write me a good recommendation letter?" or "Do you feel you could give me a good enough reference?" That way, your reference writer has an easy out if they are not comfortable writing a letter and you can be assured that those who say "yes" will be enthusiastic about your performance and will write a positive letter.

When deciding on whom to ask for a letter of recommendation, don't simply think of those classes or projects in which you have done well: think of those instructors or supervisors who are most familiar with your work and achievements. Admissions readers look for evidence of the letter writer's familiarity with your work. Without this type of evidence, the letter lacks credibility and force. Therefore, choose people who are relevant to the sponsor's goals. For example, ask a science teacher to write a letter of recommendation for a science scholarship, not your English teacher. All else being equal, it is better to ask someone who has known you longer and who is more impressed by your qualifications. Never, however, ask a family member to write a letter on your behalf or someone who does not know you well.

College and Graduate School Applicants: If you are applying to an academic program, it's preferable to have letters of recommendation from upper-level course instructors.

Business School, Professional School, and Job Applicants: When applying to business schools, professional schools, and jobs, you should ideally have a letter from your current employer. If you have not been at your current job for very long, you might instead ask a former employer who is familiar with your work and achievements. The same rule of thumb described above applies here: although you might feel tempted to request a letter from your company's CEO, refrain from doing so unless that CEO is indeed knowledgeable about your accomplishments. Your direct supervisors will generally be far more familiar with your work history and style, drafting a far more effective letter.

2. ASK EARLY

College and Graduate School Applicants: Don't wait until the last minute. Instructors are invariably flooded with recommendation requests at the end of the semester (as well as near application deadlines), and you don't want your letter to end up just one more item in a long To Do list. Likewise, be sure to take into account foreseeable busy periods at work and common holidays such as end-of-the-year vacations.

If you approach your instructor a few months before the deadline, you will avoid putting him or her under undue pressure, and you give her/him plenty of time to ponder your performance. As the deadline approaches, you can always send the letter of recommendation writer a friendly reminder of the impending deadline. A quick email or phone call should do the trick -- but don't err on the side of pestering your letter writer.

A note on timing: it's never a bad idea to begin cultivating relationships with key instructors early on in your academic career. Participate in class discussions, visit your instructors during office hours, and show an active interest in their research. Catching your instructor's attention doesn't necessarily make you a pest, and standing out among your peers might prove very useful later on when you actually request letters of recommendation.

Whether you are in high school, college, or graduate school, don't wait until your last year to ask for letters. If you took a fascinating course your sophomore year and did particularly well in it, ask your professor for a letter at the end of the semester -- even if you don't plan on filling out applications until your senior year. Most professors keep copies of letters filed or saved for future reference; if you show up two years hence requesting a recommendation, that professor will already have a written record of your accomplishments.

Business School, Professional School, and Job Applicants: Whereas academic letter writers usually have a great deal of practice writing letters of recommendation, company employees -- even in the higher echelons -- vary widely in their experiences with recommendations. This is one among many great reasons to get the process started as early as you can.

In addition, it's a good idea to continuously build your recommendation portfolio. Ask your employer or supervisor to write you a letter whenever you leave a job, branch, or office (assuming you are leaving in good terms) where you have made a considerable contribution to the firm. A copy of the letter will prove invaluable later on if you ever decide to go for an MBA or apply for a position that requires such a letter, and it will help your by-then former employer to remember your specific qualities and accomplishments.

3. ASK PERSONALLY

When asking someone to write you a letter of recommendation, don't simply send an email or leave a voicemail message. It's to your advantage to ask the person face-to-face; not only does this allow you to clarify any doubts about the request, it automatically conveys to the recommendation writer just how important this letter is to you.

4. VOLUNTEER INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR PLANS

About yourself. Many instructors and supervisors deal with dozens of recommendation requests every year. Even if you are a stellar student or employee, they might not remember that smashing astute comment you made on Kant's Categorical Imperative back in March, or the speed with which you smoothed loan negotiations during that Korea project. Along with the letter of recommendation form and materials (see below), include a vivid reminder of your past accomplishments, particularly those with which your instructor or supervisor is already familiar. Include a resume, a pared-down version of your personal statement, and/or a relevant writing sample (preferably one written for that particular instructor, and one which earned you a high grade or evaluation).

About Your Plans. If you intend to study agronomy and your instructor is under the impression you are planning on pursuing astronomy, your admissions readers might end up with either a hysterical or quizzical letter of recommendation. Make sure that your letter of recommendation writer is aware of your plans, even if they seem hazy to you at this point. State your plans clearly: "Mr. Guzman, I am applying to Colby College." "Prof. Leary, I am applying to the PhD program in biochemistry at the University of Iowa." "Hank, I am applying to the Information Technology track of ISU's MBA program." Write down your plans somewhere; that way, Mr. Guzman, Prof. Leary, and Hank won't get confused.

At the time that you ask for a letter of recommendation, hand in a concise outline or summary of your personal statement as well as a copy of your resume.

5. PROVIDE THE LETTER WRITER WITH ALL THE NECESSARY MATERIALS

Most applications include specific forms for letter of recommendation writers. They often ask for both a written-out statement and a series of ranking or short questions. If you are asking your instructor for several versions of the letter -- for instance, if you are applying to a number of schools -- you might remind her/him that the statement need not be written directly on the sheet itself; it can simply be stapled to the form.

Always provide your letter of recommendation writer with stamped envelopes. If you are asking for multiple letters, it's a good idea to organize all the forms in one folder and include a cover sheet with a list of the schools for which you are requesting letters. Remember to include envelopes of the appropriate size, and overestimate the value of stamps (remember that the instructor might attach extra pages to the form).

Some applications require the instructor to return the letter to you in a sealed envelope. Don't forget to ask the writer to sign across the flap of the envelope.

Finally, you might consider providing the letter writer with a diskette for saving a copy of the letter. Chances are the letter writer saves these letters on his hard-drive anyway, but a new diskette might serve as a reminder of the importance of keeping a backfile. Letters, after all, have been lost in the mail before -- not to mention in admissions offices, which are flooded with mail around each application deadline -- and there's always a chance you might have to ask for a second copy to be sent out.

6. WAIVE YOUR RIGHT TO READ THE LETTER

Federal Law grants you access to your letters of recommendation, but many applications include a form where you can waive your rights to read the letter. We highly recommend that you waive your right to read the letter when given the option to do so. Waiving your right reassures the admissions readers that the instructor has written a candid letter -- that is, without the bothersome pressure of knowing that you might read it one day. Studies have shown that confidential letters carry far more weight with admissions readers.

In addition, letter of recommendation writers are far more comfortable writing a complete, candid letter when they know the applicant will not have access to the text. If you fear that the letter writer might not do justice to your achievements or might include negative information -- well, that's a good sign you should not be asking that person for a letter of recommendation.

7. SEND A THANK-YOU NOTE

Always send your letter of recommendation writer a thank-you note after you know the letter has been sent out -- whether or not you have heard from the school. Don't wait too long to do this: a week or two is a good timeline. Of course, if you are eventually admitted to that coveted program or land that sought-after job, you might want to call up your letter writer to share your good news and thank him/her once again. It never hurts to quietly share your success, especially with those who helped you to achieve it.