

Asking for Letters of Recommendation

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When it comes to letters of recommendation (whether for graduate schools, jobs, professional schools, internships, or otherwise) it's easy to imagine that you have no power over how strong the letters will be. Students often think, "I'm not the one writing the letter, after all!" However, there is a lot that can be done to ensure that your letters of recommendation represent you in the best possible light.

This document will guide you through the steps you're encouraged to take when requesting letters of recommendation. While it was written with academic recommendations in mind, the principles outlined can certainly be used for other types of recommendations as well.

1. Plan in advance

Try to request recommendation letters at least 5-6 weeks before your deadline, and provide the professors with all the information they need, as described below. Don't wait until the last minute to make a request. Professors lead extremely busy lives, and you don't want them rushing through your recommendation, or telling you they won't be able to write one. If you will need to have letters sent to several institutions, try to request them all at once. It's much easier for a professor to do all of them at one go, and there's less likelihood of letters being forgotten.

2. Choose an appropriate professor

Ask yourself:

- Does this professor know me well?
- Do I often communicate with this professor outside of class?
- Did I earn or am I earning a good grade in this professor's course?
- Have I taken more than one course with this professor, and preferably one at the advanced level?

The more you can answer "yes" to the questions above, the greater the likelihood of a strong and detailed recommendation. It's unlikely that you would want to request a letter of recommendation from a professor of an introductory level course in which there are over 100 students, unless you have distinguished yourself in some extremely unusual way in the class.

3. Provide the necessary facts

These would include items such as:

- Your full name
- Year in school
- Major
- Exactly which course or courses you took with this professor, when, and what grade you earned
- What you're applying for and why
- When the recommendation letter is due (be sure to send a reminder 1-2 weeks before the deadline)

4. Provide the necessary details

Include a short paragraph outlining exactly in what context the professor knows you. This may seem obvious, but keep in mind that your professors work with literally hundreds of students and constantly have various projects on the go. It's likely your professor may also be writing recommendation letters for other students at the time of your request. You should probably provide the professors with:

- A transcript of your courses and grades, including your GPA
- Copies of an assignment or assignments on which you've performed particularly well in the professor's class and/or a short explanation of why you are proud of an assignment
- A CV that includes information such as your hobbies, work experience, special skills such as knowledge of a second language, volunteer activities, etc.
- Your draft proposal if you are applying to a graduate school

5. Be aware of what you're requesting

Throughout this process, always be cognizant that you are asking for a favor. A thoughtful, detailed and well-written letter of recommendation can take many hours for a professor to prepare. Experienced admissions committees and employers can easily spot a letter that has been hastily written or is insincere. In general, professors will prefer when letters are confidential and sent directly to the graduate school or professional school. Some will refuse to write a recommendation otherwise. Dedicated professors want to help their students to succeed and will put in the effort to do so. Be considerate. When you hear the result of your application, whether positive or negative, be sure to send a note to inform those who have taken time to

write for you. Remember, a thank you note speaks volumes about you as a person, and will leave a positive impression on your recommender.

Good luck!

6. Additional Resources

This document was compiled by Abida Kassam and other Dream Team students. The following websites were found useful and should be referred to for additional information:

<http://www.wikihow.com/Ask-Your-Professor-for-a-Letter-of-Recommendation-Via-Email>

http://smysp.stanford.edu/family/request_letter_rec.html

- The Stanford School of Medicine provides a great sample letter a requester can send to the person writing the recommendation letter:

<http://blogs.hbr.org/glickman/2010/04/how-to-ask-for-a-reference-let-1.html>

- Three important tips about the letter of recommendation process from the Harvard Business Review.

<http://www.yale.edu/yalecol/academics/fellowships/application/letters.html>

- Yale outlines the process to request a strong letter of recommendation:

<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/how-to-ask-for-a-reference-letter.aspx>

- Further general advice for requesting a reference letter from University Affairs Canada.