

Requesting a Letter of Recommendation Tip Sheet

Letters of recommendation are not simple tasks for letter writers, and it's very important for students who are requesting one to understand the difficulty of what they ask.

Choose the right person:

When deciding on whom to ask, remember that all letters are not equal. Think about who is going to give you the best letter for the situation.

You may want to consider:

- Request recommendations from those who know you, since they will be better equipped to write a compelling recommendation for you versus a generic form letter from someone who has had little contact with you.
- Ask people who have had recent interactions with you. Recommendations based on interactions you had with an individual two years ago will not be to your advantage.
- Identify what function your recommender should have. Who can write the best recommendation for you for *this particular* position/program/school/scholarship/etc.?
 - Ask a teacher, faculty member or academic advisor for a recommendation addressing your academic accomplishments and experiences.
 - If you need a reference for a non-academic position (i.e., a summer job), it is more appropriate to ask a student group advisor, current or former supervisor, RA/HA, church leader, volunteer coordinator, etc. for a reference.

How to ask for a letter:

When seeking letters of recommendation, don't send e-mails or leave voicemails. It's best to ask the person face-to-face. This conveys just how important this letter is to you.

You may want to consider:

- These individual are doing you a favor so don't demand or assume that they will write you a letter.
- Instead of asking, "Could you write a letter?" Ask your potential recommender, "Do you feel you know me well enough to write a letter of recommendation for me" for this particular position/program/school/scholarship/etc. Rather than saying, "Will you write me a recommendation", asking if they feel comfortable writing one is a better approach and gives them a way out if they don't. ***You don't need any old letter, you need a good letter.***
- Always ask before submitting an individual's name as a recommender as it is bad form for someone to get an online request to submit a letter before being asked if they are willing to write it.
- If you are unable to ask for a letter face to face. Be professional about the request. Do not ask in a quickly jotted, informal email and in all lower case!

Ask early

Don't wait until the last minute. Instructors, advisors and counselors are often flooded with request for letters and you don't want your letter to suffer as a result.

You may want to consider:

- How far in advance should I ask? The earlier the better - **at least six weeks to a month** before the due date is recommended. Try not to ask for a letter with fewer than two weeks until the deadline. *Planning ahead is key!!*
- If you approach your recommender a few months before the deadline, you will avoid putting them under pressure, and you give them plenty of time to ponder your performance. As the deadline approaches, you can always send the recommender a friendly reminder of the impending deadline.
- Ask to be notified by email once the recommendation has been sent, if possible/applicable

Provide all necessary materials

Often, recommenders will need some specific information from you in order to write an effective recommendation. **Help us help you.**

You may want to consider:

- Provide some or all of the following
 - The name of the position/program/school/scholarship/etc., a brief description and relevant information about what the letter is being written for (e.g., a Dean's scholarship, a paid internship, graduate/medical school admission.) The more information you can provide your recommenders about the audience, the more specific they can be.
 - The name and title of the person who will receive the completed letter, if known. "To Whom It May Concern" is impersonal, and the inappropriate use of Miss, Mrs., Ms, Mr.,Dr, etc. can be offensive.
 - The address or website
 - The date by which you need the recommendation, and if you will pick up the recommendation personally, or would like it to be mailed, emailed, faxed, or submitted online.
 - Consider a preemptive deadline. Tell your recommender when you want the letters to be completed by. Do NOT give them the actual deadline as you will want to leave plenty of time for the letter to be mailed, delivered, and processed before the final deadline.
 - If the recommendation needs to be mailed be sure to provide the recommender with stamped and addressed envelopes for all letters to be mailed.
 - Send them a friendly reminder by email a week before each recommendation letter is due just as a courtesy. You want to make the letter writing process as easy as possible for the recommender since they will be busy teaching courses, grading papers, and writing letters for other students too. You don't want to make them feel like they have to go out of their way to do you a huge favor. Another way of saying this is that they are responsible for writing the letter, and you are responsible for the rest.
 - 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 amount of postage (the instructor might attach extra pages to the form). Some applications require the recommender return the letter to you in a sealed envelope. Ask the writer to sign the flap of the envelope.
 - If applicable, fill out all reference forms with your information.
 - A Personal statement. Your complete statement of purpose (if possible), or a statement of why you are interested in *this particular* position/program/school/scholarship/etc. and how it *specifically* fits into your short or long-term goals
 - If recommenders have a copy of your personal statement, they will have a clear idea of what you're looking to get out of what you're applying to. They will therefore be able to tailor their recommendation letters to your statement of intent, for a more organized, overall application.
 - Talking points: Anything you want included in the letter.
 - Just because you did well in the teacher/professor's class doesn't mean that the teacher/professor *knows* you.
 - If you would like someone to highlight a particular area about you such as volunteer work etc. let them know.
 - Information about your experiences with the letter-writer (e.g., courses taken, class project topics, etc.)
 - If you have not been in recent contact with the letter writer, you should provide an update on what you have been up to recently. (Actually, in that case you should consider getting letters from others who know you better.)
 - Anything that makes you unique
 - Remind your references of any specific details that might be helpful or that are more appropriate for a letter of recommendation than for your personal statement. (It's easy to say in a letter that someone is a top performer, but specific details may convince the reader that it is actually true.)
 - Your up-to-date resume, which includes specific items (e.g., research experiences, leadership, courses taken, etc.)
 - Your most recent transcript and current GPA if you want it mentioned

- Some people will ask you to write the letter for them, and they will (possibly) modify and sign it. You should do so if requested.
- Beware of spam filters. Many schools and programs have online applications in which the recommender must upload the letter of recommendation. It is not uncommon for the email messages from these schools to get banished to the "junk" mailbox by spam filters. Make sure your recommender received the email from the school.
- Follow up. Your recommender may forget to write your letter. Don't be afraid to check in periodically with your recommender to see if the recommendation has been sent. Just be careful not to be a nag. Letters sometimes get lost, and people sometimes forget to write them. You should double-check that the letter has arrived, and if not, ask the writer to send another copy.

Waive your right to read the letter

Many letters of recommendation allow you to choose whether you waive or retain your rights to see the letter. You should always waive your rights. If you're nervous that the recommender won't write you a good letter of recommendation, then ask someone else!

You may want to consider:

- Studies have shown that confidential letters carry far more weight. In addition, recommenders are typically 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 recommender might not do justice to your achievements or might include negative information — well, that's a good sign they may not be the best choice to write you a letter.
- Don't read the letter. It is traditional for letters to be sent directly to the entity evaluating the application; when that isn't the case, the evaluation will be sealed before being given to you. Don't be paranoid about this: it is completely standard. (An ethical letter-writer should warn you before writing a negative recommendation, but then again, you should only be asking people with a good impression of you.) You may be asked on an application whether you waive your right to view the letters of recommendation. You should **always** agree to waive that right. There are two reasons. First, if you don't waive the right, then whoever is reading the letter will assume that the letter isn't being totally honest. (The recommender knows you can read the letter and thus might make it more positive or less complete.) Second, many recommenders by policy do not write letters unless that clause is waived.

Be Gracious: Send a thank-you note & update

Always send your writer a thank-you note after you know the letter has been sent out, whether or not you have received results. Don't wait too long to do this: a week or two is a good timeline.

You may want to consider:

- Make sure to send your recommender a thank you letter after they have already sent your recommendation letters in. Thank you gifts are optional and most recommenders do not expect anything more than a thank you. Do not send out any thank you gifts until all the recommendations letters are sent out though, or else it could be seen as a form of bribery.
- Make sure to keep in touch with your recommender throughout the entire process. Let them know if you get the job, internship, scholarship, admissions or the spot in the program. They'll appreciate it!

Begin now to create the contacts you will need.

Start to build your recommender pool now.

You may want to consider:

- Meet with teachers/professors, advisors etc. on a regular basis
- Consistently attend office hours
- Take more than one class from a teacher/faculty member whom you might want to write a recommendation on your behalf.
- Get involved and stay involved
- Volunteer and take on leadership roles

Last thought

Finally, have an alternate in mind. Sometimes, circumstances make it impossible for a recommender to complete the job. If you're following up, and something like this happens, you should have time to get an alternate letter for your application.