

Requesting Letters of Recommendation

A Letter of Recommendation is an evaluation of your talents and abilities, and a statement about your maturity and personality. It is typically written by a faculty member or supervisor and is used by internship/research placement, graduate school, and scholarship committees to evaluate your potential. These committees seek a recent and informed appraisal of your scholarly ability, accomplishments, maturity, motivation level, and ability to work as part of a team. The content and quality of these letters are critical to the selection process as letters of recommendation are often the deciding factor in the selection process.

The Process for Obtaining Good Letters of Recommendation

The first step in securing a strong Letter of Recommendation is to **build a relationship with potential letter writers**. Letter writers must be knowledgeable of your skills, work ethic, talents, and future capacity. Ideally, you've worked with your letter writer in a class, research project, internship, or job directly related to the program you are applying to. You can also make strong connections with your letter writers through classes, volunteer opportunities, or by attending lectures and seminars if you engage in meaningful communication and follow-up. This process takes time and should start early in your academic career.

Next, **carefully choose your letter writers** for each application. Letter writers should be familiar with the position or program you are applying to, and be able to speak towards your specific qualifications. It is best to choose writers whose position will be respected by the reader (e.g. if applying to academic programs, letters from faculty will be best). Also consider which letter writers provide support for the rest of your application. For example, if you are highlighting specific experiences in your application statement or resume, use writers who can speak about those experiences. Finally, seek letter writers that can speak to different strengths or attributes, and whose combined letters give the most complete picture of your abilities. For example, if you have one letter writer who can comment on your academic abilities, choose another that can comment on your professional experiences and work ethic.

When you are ready to request a Letter of Recommendation, following these guidelines:

1. **Provide letter writers ample time.** Be considerate of your letter writers' time and workload. Approach them *at least one month* in advance of your request.
2. **Think about what your letter writer can speak to.** Before meeting with your letter writer, think about what aspect of your work, experience, or personal conduct they can speak to. Brainstorm specific examples that connect will enhance your application, and be prepared to give suggestions to your potential letter writer.

3. **Contact your letter writers.** If your letter writers are local, ask for an in-person meeting to discuss the program you are applying to. Take the following items to the meeting:
 - A copy of the program description or job announcement with deadlines.
 - A copy of your personal statement and application materials (a draft is okay at this point, but be sure it is clear, legible, and of professional quality).
 - Your Resume or Curriculum Vitae.
 - Transcripts from all academic institutions (unofficial is perfectly acceptable).
 - Samples of your work and/or a list of specific projects that will remind the letter writers about the quality of your work.

Tip: If your letter writer is not available for an in-person meeting, then make your request via email or phone. Also, send the above materials via email.
4. **Ask “The Question.”** Once you have met with your potential letter writer, ask: “Can you write me a *strong* letter of recommendation?” If the answer is “no”, or you sense any hesitancy, consider asking someone else.
5. **Provide the details.** Make sure to give your letter writer all of the necessary details:
 - To whom should the letter be addressed?
 - Will they need to submit the letter online, and if so, what are the exact instructions associated with this process?
 - Will they need to mail a hardcopy? If yes, make sure you provide them a stamped, addressed envelope for their use.
 - Is there a recommendation form that they need to fill out in addition to the letter they are providing?

Tip: Consider giving your letter writer a manila folder with this material for each of the programs that you are applying to as well as a summary sheet with program names and due dates.
6. **Check in.** Send them a friendly reminder *two weeks* out and then again *three days* before the letter is due.
7. **Give thanks.** Write a warm and sincere thank you note to your letter writers once the letters are complete. Whether the program accepts you or not, be sure to inform your letter writers and thank them again. They’ve spent a good deal of time crafting a letter for you and they are your strongest supporters. Show respect and courtesy by thanking them and keeping them informed.