

Requesting a Letter of Recommendation

*Are you planning on going to a graduate school or professional school after you graduate?
Are you applying for a special program for which you will need a letter of recommendation?
Do you know who you are going to ask for your letters?*

Most people will need to request a formal recommendation at some point in their college career. Start now to cultivate strong relationships with people who can help you. These tips can help guide you through the process of soliciting recommendations.

Starting a relationship

Talk with your research mentor or a professor in whose class you have done well and left a good impression. If you haven't yet built a relationship with this teacher, talk with him or her either after class or during office hours. This professor should be from a class relevant to your specific goals. Discuss your career aspirations and ask for advice or insights. After the course is completed, maintain your relationship by stopping by to talk when it is convenient for the professor. Do all this before you need a letter of recommendation.

Selecting a recommender

The professor you choose should know you relatively well. He or she needs to be able to speak about you both personally and academically. In some, but not all, cases the official rank (lecturer, assistant professor, professor, etc.) will matter. More often, it is more important that the recommender be someone who knows you relatively well and can speak about your academic strengths. It can also be helpful to ask someone who has experience writing recommendations.

Making the request

Make your request in person, not through e-mail. If possible, make an appointment. Explain the opportunity you are applying for and ask if the professor *has time and would feel comfortable* writing a *strong* letter of recommendation. If the professor says yes, ask what materials he or she would like from you to make this easier. If the answer is no, take it as a good faith gesture that the professor wants to avoid writing an unflattering or unconvincing letter, or perhaps he or she just doesn't have the time. Thank the professor for his or her time and do not press the issue.

Communicate clearly the deadline for recommendation. Make sure you give your professor as much time as you can; two weeks is an absolute minimum and at least four weeks is best. For a major scholarship, start lining up recommenders months in advance.

Provide the professor with a pre-addressed, stamped envelope and any additional forms that need to be submitted with his or her letter. If the professor must complete a form, fill in as much information as possible in advance—your name, address, etc. Provide the professor with

information about you that will help him or her, such as your resume, personal statement, and transcript. Bring all materials to the professor together, organized in a folder or envelope.

These materials are to help your recommender. If the application also requires a resume or transcript, send these out yourself separately. Do not ask that your recommender include them with his or her materials.

Waiving your request to see the letter is a standard practice. It assures the recipient of the recommendation that the letter is candid. This also lets the professor know that you trust his or her evaluation of you.

Sharing key information

The letter of recommendation allows your professor to express what a wonderful person you are in the context of the opportunity for which you are applying. Some programs are looking for specific characteristics in those they accept. If you know the selection criteria, expectations, or biases of the program to which you are applying, share this information with your recommender.

The person who writes your letter should be able to share anecdotes about your interactions and speak about your dedication to your field of interest and your leadership ability. He or she needs to be able to elaborate on skills and strengths that are not shown on your resume or transcript. Make sure the professor knows enough about you to present an accurate and positive picture of who you are and how you could grow through the specific experience. If you have a good rapport with the professor you've chosen but haven't had enough classroom time together, share your thoughts on why you are qualified for the position you're seeking, experiences the professor might not be aware of, and any accomplishments not listed in your resume or transcript. Feel free to describe some accomplishments, anecdotes or themes you hope he or she will consider including. Generally professors welcome this kind of input. Provide this information verbally in a conversation with your recommender and in a cover note to the packet of recommendation materials.

After delivering the packet, follow up with an e-mail thanking the professor for agreeing to write the letter. Restate the deadline and submission process. Provide a way to contact you if the professor has questions during the process.

Everyone needs recommendations

Do not feel that you are imposing on the professor. If you ask well in advance, have a strong academic record, and ask politely, you have nothing to feel guilty about. Recommendations are an essential part of the academic system. Your professor has asked for many letters of recommendation in his or her career. Now it is your turn.