



Center for Writing and Speaking

C NO. 3 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

How to Ask Faculty for Letters of Recommendation

It's never too soon to begin thinking about securing letters of recommendation from faculty members who have taught you in class or who know you through other means. You may need such letters as an undergraduate when you apply for scholarships, study abroad, internships, etc. and you will definitely need them to apply to graduate or professional school. Most faculty members keep these letters on hand and can update them later on as your needs change. Here are some important tips for securing these letters.

Faculty members want to recommend you!

An important part of a faculty member's job is recommending students for graduate school, scholarships, jobs, etc. This is usually done by letter but can also be done over the telephone. Don't be nervous about asking for recommendations, but do think carefully about whom to ask and do provide all necessary information about what you are applying for well ahead of time.

Choosing your recommenders

Choose faculty who know you well and who will have good things to say about you—teachers, research directors, employers, or advisors, for whom you did your best work or who saw you at moments of transformation or other kinds of achievement. Most faculty are willing to speak frankly about the type of recommendation they could write and may ask you what you want them to cover. Make sure the person you've chosen is willing to write an enthusiastic letter on your behalf. You may want to select an array of letter writers who can capture your best sides: for example, someone with whom you did research, someone for whom you worked as a student aide, someone who had you in class. The choice of recommenders depends, of course, on what you are applying for and how you want to represent yourself.

Ask in advance and in person

Asking for a letter in person is more courteous and more useful since you and the faculty member can then discuss your plans and the letter's possible content. Try to give your recommenders at least one month notice regarding deadlines for recommendations—more time is also appreciated.

Materials for the letter of recommendation

Some faculty members have checklists for letters of recommendation; others need specific materials for certain types of letters. Ask each faculty member what he or she needs from you in order to write a letter, but be prepared to offer these items:

- ✓ a description of the program or scholarship or position for which you are applying;
- ✓ a list of the email/physical addresses to which recommendations should be mailed to and/or websites where they must be submitted;
- ✓ a current resumé;
- ✓ any forms required for the recommendation;
- ✓ a copy of your statement of purpose.

(continued on reverse)

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How to Ask Faculty for Letters of Recommendation, continued

Stamped, addressed envelopes or not?

Make sure you know if the recommendation must be mailed as a letter. If so, it is not always necessary to provide stamped, addressed envelopes for the letters. Many faculty recommenders prefer to send recommendations in their own stationery envelopes. Ask each of your recommenders what they want you to do about envelopes if you must submit a hard copy.

To waive or not to waive: waive!

Most graduate schools and scholarship programs require applicants to sign a form stating whether they do or do not waive access to the letter upon the completion of the application process. It is strongly recommended that students choose the “do waive” option, since confidential letters are viewed as more reliable.

Electronic references

When the letter recommendation is to be turned in electronically make sure to check whether your faculty recommender has received the email invitation with link, password, etc. or not, as sometimes these get lost in spam filters.

Email reminders

It is generally a good idea to send occasional email reminders to the faculty members who are writing letters for you. This is something you can arrange with each recommender when you present your materials. However, stay courteous and do not send frequent emails! Usually a single reminder a week before the due date should suffice.

Follow up with the institution to which you are applying

Well before the deadline, be sure to check with the institution to which you applied to make sure all letters have been received. A reminder marked “urgent” to the faculty recommender may be necessary if the letter has not been received.

Thank-you notes and results

A “thank you” note or email when the process is complete is always appreciated. You do NOT need to give thank-you gifts! Faculty members are eager to hear about acceptances (and rejections) and really appreciate hearing from you throughout your education, career, etc. Keep in touch!

Asking for recommendations more than once

Once you have asked a faculty member for a letter, that letter will be on file and can be updated for later requests, so it is not usually a problem for a faculty member to provide letters on more than one occasion and at a later date. Provide a narrative of your more recent activities and accomplishments so that the letter can be updated appropriately.

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