

Guide to Obtaining Letters of Recommendation

Recommendation letters are now a standard accompaniment to applications for employment, graduate school, study abroad programs, and summer internships. A strong, personal, and detailed letter is an invaluable asset that can make all the difference in a competitive world. But getting one takes knowledge, skill, and planning.

1. Who to ask? Professors, employers, or others who can attest to your accomplishments, aptitude, and character. The better your recommender knows you the more specific and effective will be your letters. Build relationships with potential recommenders early, so asking for letters is less awkward later.

2. Letters are a courtesy! Most accomplished people owe their success partly to those who were willing to write them recommendation letters. They understand recommendation letters as a way to support students in pursuit of their educational and employment goals. Don't hesitate to ask someone to write for you, but know that *no one is required to do so!* Make your first contact *in person* and always ask recommenders if they are able to write a good (strong, supportive, etc.) recommendation. If someone says no, don't push the matter and move on to someone who can.

3. When to ask? Professors and other recommenders are *very* busy people and you cannot expect them to produce a letter on short notice. *Three weeks is the minimum acceptable notice; one to two months is appreciated.* Insufficient notice is a common reason that recommenders decline to write for students!

4. What to submit? In order to write a strong letter, a writer needs to have a full understanding of your application. Once you have been assured that a prospective recommender will write for you, requests for letters are typically submitted on paper with the following (ask recommender which are required):

- the *deadline/due date* clearly indicated!
- information about the employer/program* to which you are applying
- the *contact name and address* of the employer/program
- your *current contact information*
- your *current resume or c.v.* with a description of your professional goals
- the *cover letter, research proposal, or statement of intent* from your application
- any *required forms* (recommendation form, confidentiality waiver, etc.)
- a signed statement indicating if you are *waiving your right to access* letter (see below)
- a reminder of *how you and the recommender* know each other, classes taken, grades in classes, paper topics worked on, etc. Copies of successful work can be helpful reminders.
- stamps, address labels, and envelopes (if requested)
- whether the letter is to be *mailed* or *picked up* (if the latter, envelope will be signed across seal)
- optional* self-addressed postcard (to be sent to you when letter is mailed/ready for pick up)

5. Waive right of access? The Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 gives you the right to view your educational records, including letters of recommendation. However, employers and admissions committees give more weight to confidential letters. Indicate on memo (above) if you intend to waive your right of access.

6. Keep in touch! Recommenders like to know how their 'recommendees' fared. A 'thank you' note or postcard from an exotic locale is always appreciated. While not required, flowers and chocolates are rarely refused...