

“Asking for Letters of Recommendation”

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Important Points

- The key to getting great letters of recommendation consists of four steps outlined below: whom to ask, what to ask, when to ask, and paying it forward.
- Scholarship and alumni advisors make great recommenders, but also think about managers, commanding officers (if military), professors, etc.
- Ask the recommender to send you their letter as a PDF, which you will upload with the application.

Step #1: Whom to Ask

A good letter of recommendation consists of content that paints a holistic picture of the applicant. Whoever reads it should have a general idea of who you are after reading it because the letter is also tailored (or should be) to the specific opportunity a student has been presented with. Acquiring the necessary materials, such as student-produced work or a student’s resume, can go a long way in ensuring that the recommender’s letter is effective. A common mistake shared by students and faculty members is not having enough information to make the recommendation letter as effective as possible, which fills a potential gap of not speaking to the student’s full potential. The best letters must include an opening statement on the exact nature of the relationship between the recommender and recommended and then move on to concrete examples of supervised work. This usually includes something related to a class, but there can be more: research and writing collaborations, on- and off-campus leadership, and volunteering.

Professors are the most popular options when it comes to selecting who a student wants to write their letter of recommendation. This popularity should not be confused with necessity. **College students should always look towards individuals who know them both in and out of the classroom.** A powerful letter of recommendation will highlight who a student is outside the confines of a classroom. For instance, writing about what a student is passionate about outside of class or what they are involved in can make for a more personable and effective letter.

A student should reflect on their college experience and specifically reflect on substantive relationships. **Think about who knows you best and can speak to your skills and personality.** Depending on the letter’s goals, it is important to ensure that whoever someone asks to write a letter for them has the knowledge necessary to speak to them being an ideal candidate for what they are applying for. Someone applying for a job at an amusement park versus applying for a legal internship requires different letters and perhaps, different letter writers. For a legal internship, look for someone who can speak to work ethic, collegiality, and why the applicant should thrive in the legal field.

Step #2: What to Ask

One mistake that students make immediately is the ask. Make an in-person appointment (if possible) with the person from whom you would like a letter and ask, “Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation?” If the answer is not a firm commitment, thank them for their time, and move on. One of the dirty secrets of academia is how often professors reuse and rehash

old letters with too little variation. While these letters may serve their purpose, you want a recommendation from someone who knows you and can craft something original that can connect with an individual or committee. That letter may fill the gaps in your resume. For example, a medical school admissions committee may wonder why your GPA dropped during senior year, but a strong letter might explain that the applicant experienced the suicides of two friends, which derailed academic progress (which did happen to one of the authors).

What students often get wrong about applications is not thinking about the big picture.

What are your short- and long-term goals and does a potential recommender share in that vision? Can the referee speak to how your unique skills and qualifications have prepared you for the dream job or dream school? Students may often see internships specifically as one-off job opportunities needed to graduate. An internship can be a steppingstone for growth within a specific company who like to see loyalty and a willingness to grow in your role.

Step #3: When to Ask

After asking for a strong letter, the next question must be, “Can you submit the letter by _____?”

Give professors at least two months’ notice for letter deadlines; more time is always appreciated. Students also forget to be clear about submission instructions; is this an online portal like the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) or does it need to be emailed to someone specifically? Be clear if the letter will only be read by the person or institution requesting it and if the applicant has waived the right to read the letter of recommendation. This is a very significant facet that is often obscured by the application process. Professors write very different letters on behalf of recommenders if the former knows the latter will have access to its contents.

Professors and students should keep track of letter requests and deadlines (and reminders to send thank-you notes). Create a digital database on Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets where one can list the names of employer/graduate schools; specific positions or graduate programs; potential referees (and backups); deadlines; fees; etc. Students *must* have backups in case recommenders cannot meet deadlines due to family and personal emergencies. Some instructors also ask students to submit letter requests via a customizable Google Form.

Step #4: Paying it Forward

The challenge is building relationships with key stakeholders in your journey – professors, coaches, supervisors, managers, mentors, etc. Too often, employees and students (ab)use recommenders and then literally ghost the people who wrote letters. **Did you thank the person who wrote that letter of recommendation?** Did you update them about what happened (good or bad)? Do you write to them at least once a year about what is going on in your life? How can someone invest in your success if you are not invested in the relationship? One of the authors has maintained a 25-year relationship with a former professor that has grown into a friendship.

We believe that **most applicants are just one strong letter of recommendation from achieving their career goals** and landing a great job, a coveted fellowship, a place on a study abroad program, or a competitive internship. But strong letters are the product of mutual effort between the person who *needs* assistance and someone who can *provide* that assistance.