

# How to Improve Your Chance of Getting a Great Letter of Recommendation

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Asking for and obtaining letters of recommendation can be anxiety provoking and at times even a bit intimidating. Often, the hopes and dreams of the letter seeker depend on putting together a strong dossier that includes several excellent letters of recommendation. But, within this context, one wonders... who should be approached for a letter? Should the letters come from professors, practica or internship supervisors, bosses, colleagues, church leaders, or even family friends? And, who can be trusted to write strong, descriptive letters in a timely manner? In our years as faculty members, we have written hundreds of letters of recommendation for undergraduate and graduate students and colleagues. The letters have been for grants, fellowships, graduate school, postdoctoral positions, awards, honors, internships, professional positions, promotions, and tenure. Each letter typically takes hours to write, proofread, and revise. Writing a good letter requires careful thought, the ability to synthesize information from several sources, highlight important features of the candidates' background and present status, abilities, and talents, gear the letter to particulars of the audience and position, all of which takes time and care.

Many times we have seen highly talented students miss out on opportunities to get good letters of recommendation because they have not given their letter writers enough time to write the letter or they haven't provided relevant or sufficient information to their letter writer. Because of those experiences, we've developed the following advice that we've shared with our students over the years. We do so now with a wider audience in the hopes it will help improve the experience for both the letter seeker and letter writer.

1. Request letters a month in advance of their due dates. Although people may be able to prepare them in two weeks or less, the extra time can make the difference between not being able to write a letter, or doing so and making it really thorough and strong. It is a good idea to avoid making last-minute requests for letters. Writers will want to help you but it is a real strain when they do not have adequate time to devote to this important activity.
2. Check with each person you wish to write a letter and make sure that they'll be able to do so before you publicly announce that they'll be a reference for you. Your letter writers will want to reserve the right to refuse your request if they don't have the time, don't think they are the best person to write the letter, or simply cannot provide a strong supportive letter.
3. When completing applications, it is often the case that you will be given the option to waive your right to see the letter. Be aware that some view letters identified as 'confidential' more seriously than those not so identified.
4. Send all supporting materials in one file/packet and at the same time to the letter writer. Include the following documents: a) a copy of your transcripts, b) your vita/resume, c) bulleted points of what you consider to be your strengths, d) a personal statement (which includes a statement about why you are applying for the position/scholarship/whatever, 3) a statement that says what you think needs to be highlighted/addressed in the reference letter), and f) any special instructions about forms that need to be completed. If the letter writer has written letters for you in the past, also send g) a list of any changes and accomplishments that need to be addressed in the revised letter. If sending the request by email, make sure each file is labeled/saved/titled with your full name, the date, and what it is. Also include a h)

detailed list of the contact person(s) the letters need to be addressed to, i) their address(es), j) their complete contact information, and k) the due date for each letter. Be organized as sending these materials separately will create an organizational nightmare for your letter writer, which will diminish the amount of time they have to actually write your letter(s) for you!

5. If you are requesting that hard copies of the letters be sent, provide stamped, pre-addressed envelopes. Also include a pre-addressed, stamped postcard with your name/address that the letter writer can mail to you to signal that the letters are en route.
6. Send your letter writer a friendly and gentle reminder email one week before the due date and then again, one day beforehand.
7. Avoid requesting and using "To whom it may concern" letters. Personalized letters are always preferred as they convey a special interest in you and a willingness to devote the extra time needed to hand-tailor and craft the message.
8. Once you have applied and have learned the outcome of the application, touch base with your letter writer to keep them abreast of any new developments. They'll be curious and want to be informed.

We hope you find these suggestions helpful. We are wishing you worlds of luck, grace, and whatever else you need to secure the positions, honors, and posts of your dreams. Happy applying and letter writing to all!

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