

Etiquette in Asking for a Letter of Recommendation

Who Should Write a Letter of Recommendation?

Letters of recommendation should come from professors, or non-academic individuals who can write about significant contributions you are making to society outside of the classroom. Professors will be able to comment on your academic performance to date, future goals, and research experience he/she has supervised. It is advisable to select professors who know you the best, particularly those who are from your field of study. If you select a non-academic individual to write a letter of recommendation, be sure to select someone who is directly related to your contributions outside of the classroom. For example, if you are volunteering with a non-profit organization, it would be advisable to ask the director of the organization to write a letter of recommendation provided that the director can make first-hand comments about your activities and experiences. Other non-academic individuals who are generally acceptable to use may include athletic coaches, religious leaders (ministers, rabbis, imams, etc.), or others who can speak to your qualification for the scholarship. Letters of recommendation should not be from a family member or personal friend.

Here are a few tips for how to get to know individuals that can serve as a recommender:

- Consistently attend office hours
- Get involved in research
- Take more than one class from a faculty member whom you might want to write a recommendation on your behalf
- Keep in contact with your instructor, so he or she stays current with what you are doing
- Attend events and volunteer
- Join clubs and organizations, and take a leadership position

1. Request letters early: Although professors may have their own individual policies, students should ideally request letters of recommendation 4-6 weeks prior to their being due and should provide their writers with information about the program, job, or scholarship to which they are applying. If a letter of recommendation must be mailed, please provide your professor with any printed forms and a stamped envelope. Rushing them might lead to a recommendation that is not as polished or as positive as it could be.

2. Choose your recommender wisely: Request recommendations from those who know you, since they will be better equipped to write a compelling recommendation for you. Ask the potential recommenders “do you feel you know me well enough to write a scholarship recommendation for me?”, and, more importantly “would you be able to provide me with a positive letter of recommendation?” This allows a person who feels they don’t know you well enough to decline to write a letter and potentially suggest a different individual, which is better than having someone write a generic letter. Also, be prepared that they may say no.

3. Provide helpful information: If possible, meet with your potential recommender(s) in person and provide some information to them. Specifically, provide information about the scholarship or the broad goals of the program, why you are applying and what you hope to accomplish through your education and career, your resume and/or curriculum vitae (CV), and a copy of your transcript (with your gpa). An essay included with your application and/or a personal statement is also helpful, as well as a list of any areas of strength you would like your recommender to highlight. It is imperative that you provide accurate deadlines and procedures for how the potential recommender will submit his or her letter of recommendation. Follow up at least one week before the letter is due to check in and see if your recommender needs any additional information from you.

4. Be gracious: Follow up with your recommender(s) to thank them for their time and willingness to write letters on your behalf. This will let them know that you appreciate their efforts and will increase the likelihood that they will write another letter of recommendation in the future. Get permission if the letter will be used for anything other than its original purpose. Make sure to follow up with your recommender, and ask them each time you would like to reuse the letter of recommendation. If you would like an updated letter (typically if the letter is more than 1-2 years old), it is helpful to provide your recommender with a copy (preferably electronic) of the original letter in case they have not retained a copy. Also, follow up with your professor with any good news!

Adapted from:

http://ugs.utah.edu/scholarships/Recomm_Letter_Steps.pdf (accessed 11.11.14) and

<http://financialaid.ucdavis.edu/scholarships/tips/recommendations.html> (accessed 11.11.14)