

## Tips on requesting letters of recommendation

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Letters of recommendation are required for many aspects of graduate school, from your initial application to graduate programs to fellowships and grants to job applications in your final year of graduate school (and beyond). Some applications (most graduate programs, many grants and fellowships) may have a specific form that you should give each of your letter writers, while other applications simply ask for a letter. In addition, some applications require letters to be submitted electronically, others require them to be submitted by the applicant together with the other application materials (sealed, with the faculty member's signature across the flap), and still others require them to be sent directly by the letter writer. The following suggestions will help you get strong letters into your application file on time.

**Start early.** Give your letter writers ample time and enough information to write you a strong letter. Sometimes it's necessary to ask for a letter at the last minute, but do all you can to avoid it; you're on much safer ground doing so if the same person has written similar letters for you before, but a good letter takes time to write, so make sure you ensure that your letter writers have the time they need. Ideally request the letter at least a month beforehand, but don't ask so early (more than two months or so) that your letter writers will forget or lose your materials. It's advisable to give your letter writers an early heads-up that you'll be requesting a letter, just to confirm their willingness and availability. At that time, you should also let them know what information you'll provide (see below) and ask them whether they want any additional information from you. You should find out as well whether they prefer to receive your materials electronically or in hard copy.

**Choose the right letter writers.** Unless there's some strong reason to do otherwise, your advisor or the faculty member who has worked most closely with you should always be one of your letter writers. If you need more than one letter, choose letter writers that will best show off your strengths: for a grant/fellowship proposal, this usually means showing your scholarly abilities and depth in your area of specialization rather than your breadth (unless breadth is important to your proposal), while for a job application it can mean showing your range as a scholar and teacher. If you're applying to graduate school or for a job or fellowship in a different field from your own, a letter from a professor in that field will be helpful but isn't crucial. Letters from faculty in totally unrelated departments are less valuable, but if the professor thinks highly of you and can write about your general academic abilities, this can still be useful. If at all possible, letter writers should be faculty members (preferably tenured or tenure-track), not TAs, staff members, or work supervisors in positions unrelated to your application. Never send a letter from a family friend or anyone else who doesn't know you in an academic or professional context. And don't bother requesting letters from high-status or famous people (including famous professors) who know you only slightly or only in a nonacademic context. Application committees will see right through this strategy.

The number of letters you submit depends on the type of application. Occasionally it may be appropriate to request more than the required number of letters, if you think it will be very

helpful to your application—for example, if professors in your field don't know you well and you want to supplement their letters with recommendations from people who know you better, or if you have very interdisciplinary interests that you want to showcase. But only solicit additional letters if you're reasonably confident they'll be strong.

**Waive your access to the letter.** Typically recommendation letters are confidential. In general, if the recommendation guidelines indicate that you have the option of waiving your right to read the letter, you should do so, since confidential letters are seen as more honest and therefore will carry more weight with the application committee. Rest assured that most letter writers will only agree to write a letter for you if they feel they can offer a positive evaluation. (That doesn't mean that if you approach someone and they decline to write for you that they don't think well of you; they may simply be too busy, or they may have a conflict of interest of some kind.)

**Provide all the information your letter writers need.** The more clearly you can lay out the information your letter writers need to have, the stronger your letter will be. Include the information in a single email message or in one packet of hard-copy materials so your letter writers don't have to track down multiple items when they sit down to write your letter. The following items are useful to include:

1. *The deadline.* Note this clearly in your correspondence with your letter writers. Send a follow-up email reminder to your letter writers a week before the letter is due.
2. *An unofficial transcript, or a list of the courses you took with the professor, when you took them, and your grade in each.* If you did a project or paper for the class, you might also list the topics or titles; some professors want to see a copy of the paper itself, so offer to make it available. This information is especially important for undergraduates applying to graduate school, although if you're in a large graduate program or have other reasons to think your letter writers might not remember the details of your academic performance, it's likewise useful to supply these details.
3. *Your statement of purpose (for graduate school and fellowships), proposal (for grants and some fellowships), or application cover letter (for jobs).* It's better to provide this earlier in draft form than the day before it's due when it's in final, polished form. If you're having a lot of trouble drafting this document, provide your letter writers with a list of bullet points you plan to highlight in it. **Be sure to specify exactly what you're applying for and what you plan to do;** don't assume your letter writers will remember this information. Added bonus: if you give your letter writers a draft early enough in the process, they may be willing to give you feedback on it.
4. *Your current resume or CV.* Don't assume your letter writers already have a copy, and make sure it's up to date. If you don't have a resume or CV, create one, or if you're short on time at least list the relevant highlights of your career for your letter writers.
5. *Any standard recommendation form required for the application.* Don't forget to sign the form to waive your access to the letter.
6. *A stamped, addressed envelope,* if the letter writer needs to mail the letter to you or to the application committee. Not all letter writers require this, so you should check with them first to see if they have a preference. You should in any case provide the full address of the application committee so the letter writers can include it in their letters (even if these are submitted electronically).