

Requesting a letter of reference/recommendation: a guide for students

Asking for a letter of recommendation is a very important part of a student's plan for educational success. Job references and recommendations for scholarships and graduate admissions play a significant role in how a student is represented. However, most students underestimate the time and resources needed to compose a well-crafted reference. The following guide provides students with some basic information that will help make the process of requesting a letter much more effective.

Select people that know your work and the quality of your efforts

Many students assume that asking letters from high-level administrators and "famous" people make your references appear more sophisticated. Unless high-visibility personalities actually know you, you're likely going to get a letter that doesn't say much about you. When selecting your references, be careful to select people that can highlight specific aspects of your education that will make a difference in your application. People who know you very well can make specific, passionate appeals on your behalf. Remember that you are seeking advocates for your future, and they should know you well enough to make your appeal look credible, not superficial.

Give your referees some direction

If you are submitting multiple letters, it is up to you to represent yourself properly. In some cases, you'll want your letters to represent a particular set of skills, repeatedly and consistently. Other times, you'll benefit from having references that express different aspects of your career. For example, one letter may attest to your community service record while another may emphasize your intellectual development. In any case, you should know your strategy, and in concise terms, you need to express that to your referee. This doesn't take much time. It only requires a sentence or two in your request that says: "I would like you to testify to my ..." Remember, you're in charge of your application, and knowing how you are being represented makes you more competitive and confident.

Give your professors enough time to write a good letter.

A good letter takes significant time to develop. In order to stand out from those competing for the same opportunity, you need to have references that are written with care. Never ask a professor for a reference a week before your opportunity is due. Asking for a letter at the last possible moment is a great sign of disrespect. It assumes that the person you are asking not busy or that your personal efforts are more important than their work.

A common phrase used in requests is: "I know you are a very busy person, but I would appreciate you taking the time to write a letter." Writing this only to give a professor a few days to write your letter comes off as insincere or worse yet dismissive. If you must ask for a reference and your time constraints are beyond your control, try to make your request in person, and make sure that you have done all the work needed to facilitate the letter writing process.

Ways to facilitate the letter writing process

Never make your referee search for information that you could have provided. Always be sure to give the following things:

1. **Give a short, concise description of the opportunity available.** If there is a web link to further information, make sure that you, at the very least, give a brief statement about the program/job/scholarship/opportunity and why you have applied to this particular opportunity.
2. **Always provide a mailing address, or heading information that can be added to a letter.** If a reference is being submitted online, please let the referee know to expect an online reference via email.
3. **Specify the delivery method.** Sometimes students will add letters to their packet; other times, the referee is expected to send the letter. In any case, you need to make sure you are providing the means of delivery. If you are picking up a letter, let the referee know where you will pick it up (i.e. at the front reception desk). If you need a letter mailed, you may consider providing an addressed, stamped envelope with your request.
4. **Don't send referees too much information.** Students sometimes send referees "the kitchen sink," meaning they send so much information that it deters referees from writing a good letter. A resume, a concise email/letter, and brief evidence of your work will suffice.

Be respectful. Represent yourself well.

Even if you know a professor/referee well doesn't mean that you shouldn't be courteous. Some students are cavalier when asking for a reference. Make sure that you use a tone and style that reflects the fact that you are asking for a very important thing. Make sure also that you proofread your request. You don't want to ask for a highly-competitive opportunity only to appear lazy, uninformed, and disrespectful to the people who can help you get those opportunities.

Say thank you. Give updates to your referees and the people who support you.

Some students ask for a letter and are never heard from again. This discourages referees and the many people who have given you support to continue to do so for future students. Keep in mind that referees and the people who support may wish (or in some cases need) to document the way they have supported students. If a student doesn't give updates, then vital information about professional development is lost. Ultimately, saying thank you is not merely a good strategy, it should be a sign of respect, not only for your referees but for the institution and the education that it represents.

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