

How to Obtain a Letter of Recommendation

In your academic and professional career, you may be asked to provide letters of recommendation for various reasons. A committee is usually assigned to review applications for an internship, employment, graduate school, etc. Often your letters of recommendation are reviewed critically and play a crucial role in their decision to select or reject your application. I have put together a few helpful hints to assist you in your future endeavors.

1. **Make sure they remember you!** Sometimes you will be asking for a letter from someone months or years after you have taken a class or worked. Keep in good contact with your professors in science and math courses so that you can build a good rapport. Go to office hours, ask questions in class, etc. Shoot out an email to your mentors each quarter to “catch up” and tell them how you’re doing and what’s new about your academic life. This will help them keep up on your life and they can continue to support you.
2. **Be Gracious!** You can be the biggest scholar with the best research skills and grades, but if you are a pain-in-the-you-know-what, you won’t get far. Have you ever heard the saying, “you catch more bees with honey?” If not, learn from it now. You don’t have to kiss-up to be gracious. Just remember to say please and thank you and always think twice when you are asking someone else to do something for you. Use phrases like, “what would work best for you?” and “I can work around your schedule.” End emails with, “thanks so much for your time” and “You’re really helping me out.”
3. **Choose the right person.** It is important to weigh out who the best people are to write your letters. A university faculty member is always good choice. The principle investigator of a group is better than one of their graduate student, (even if you feel that it is the grad student who knows you better!). If you transferred and you feel that a community college professor knows you well, you will need to look at what you are applying to. For instance, a scholarship that is leadership based, vs. merit based. Graduate school usually would like to know about your research experience and your ability to succeed in the graduate school environment. For the best all around advice, choose the person at the highest level that will be able to comment well on your performance (sometimes the high-level people don’t know you as well, so see #1).
4. **Timing is everything!** When you ask is crucial. Ask them with plenty of notice and when they aren’t at a stressful point in their job (ie: the beginning of a semester). Don’t be afraid to ask tell them first off when the deadline is and ask them how this would fit into their schedule.
5. If applying to many positions, **ask them to write them all at the same time**, if possible.
6. **Don’t be afraid to ask for a letter.** They probably write letters all the time. They are busy people, but faculty members know that they will be dedicating a certain amount of time to writing letters.

7. **Great letters vs. mediocre letters.** Sometimes there are multiple letters required and you've got two letters from folks you know will write you great letters, but you're not sure if you know a third faculty member well enough to get a really strong third letter...Ask them! Questions like, "would you feel comfortable writing me a strong letter of recommendation?" or "do support me going directly to graduate school and do you feel you can write a letter that reflects that based on what you know about me?" You should be able to tell from their answer if they really feel that they can.
8. **Make their job easy.** Provide them with a ready-made packet. Send it to them, bring it in person or email them all the materials they will need.

Include the following:
 - a. A brief description of what your applying for and to whom they should address the letter
 - b. Resume or CV
 - c. Personal statement
 - d. Your most current transcripts (unofficial from the student portal is fine)
 - e. Outline of major qualifications you feel you would like them to point out in their letter (they may chose not to write about all of them!).
 - f. Addressed and stamped envelope
9. **Email and call with a friendly reminder** about the deadline one-two weeks before and then again the day before the deadline.
10. **Get more letters** than you need for back up.