

## How to Request a Letter of Recommendation

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First, please realize that writing letters of recommendation is one of the best things a professor does. However, it can also quickly get out of control—not just the time spent crafting the letters themselves, but the correspondence back and forth to negotiate all the details and information. So, if you ask for a letter...

1. **Ask for a favorable letter of recommendation:** Most faculty will not agree to write a letter of recommendation if they do not plan on writing positive things – but you should always be sure! Please also keep in my mind that the person you ask can be or will be writing letters for other people potentially for the same position (e.g., residency). Will your letter be the strongest of the five the person will write?
2. **Ask those individuals that know you best.** While getting letters from Deans or Chairs is impressive, they write a lot of letters – consider if one of three recommendations letters from the chair/associate dean, etc. will really have more impact than a heartfelt, thoughtful recommendation from faculty that really know you and work with you (also consider that one of the other 3 letters might be for someone they work more closely with and with thus be a better recommendation – the selection committee will likely have both and be able to compare). With that said, get to know individuals who may write you letters in the future and let them get to know you!
3. **Please respect their decision if they say no:** Professors will only write for students they feel they can endorse strongly, and trust us, you don't want a letter that will be lukewarm at best. Remember, asking for a letter means you are asking that person to use their reputation to position you so if they are not comfortable in doing that, they should say no.
4. **Please give the person at least two weeks of notice:** If you don't, they may not be able to produce the letter. Three or four weeks would be even better.
5. **Please give them a due date:** Yep, here's your chance to give a professor a due date.
6. **Many professors prefer not to let students read the letters of recommendation they write for them;** and a letter that has not been reviewed by a student will carry more weight with the person or people who are reading it. Again, don't worry, most faculty will not agree to write a letter of recommendation if they do not plan on writing positive things.
7. **Please give all the details about where the letter needs to go,**
  1. either an email address or web address if it is to be submitted electronically—double-check that these are correct—
  2. or a stamped, pre-addressed envelope if it is to go out in the post. If there's a particular person to whom the letter should be addressed tell me that too. Forms, envelopes, and other paperwork can either be brought to their office or left with an administrative assistant.
  3. If the person you are asking for a letter has an assistant (e.g., Dean, Division Chair), CC them on all correspondences since these are the folks that will keep track of things and make sure the deadline is met.
8. **Please tell the person something about why you are pursuing the object of the recommendation:** why are you applying for this program or award or honor or opportunity? The more you can tell them the better, and the more generous and enthusiastic you are with your own prose the more likely they are to be with theirs. A personal statement, if you have one, is a big help

in this regard – this can also describe in detail your skills/strengths and SPECIFICALLY how the faculty members observed them. e.g. good presentation skills - you gave a presentation in class. Also provide copies of the application or any background information about the program.

9. **When in doubt, write your own:** Write a draft letter and offer it to the faculty. RAVE about yourself in this draft. Many students have trouble “bragging” about themselves. The faculty member can always tone it down if they don’t agree, but students should aim high. Also faculty may not know about good works done, organizations lead, awards received as an undergrad, etc. and that information can help make a stronger case.
10. **Please email an electronic copy of your CV with GPA.** It is also helpful to describe all the ways that you have interacted with the professor e.g., in a class (provide course name, grade you received, semester you took the course), as an advisee, on rotation, worked in a lab, etc. We have many students and trainees and may not remember all the ways we know you.
11. **Please send an email reminder a couple of days before the recommendation is due, just to make sure.**
12. **Finally, please let your letter writers know how it turns out!**