

Tips for Requesting Letters of Recommendation

First and foremost, think carefully about whom you will ask for recommendations. The letters that help applicants the most tend to be substantive, individualized, and positive. In other words, you want a detailed recommendation letter for you personally, rather than a general reference letter for a student at UMass. Hopefully, you will develop strong relationships with your professors, research mentors, and employers that will allow them to write good recommendation letters for you.

Second, but also importantly, remember that the people you will be asking to write recommendations are busy. Writing recommendation letters is only one of the many things your professors do. Plus, recommendation requests tend to come in waves, with many students asking for letters at once. To help ensure that your request is not swept away in a tidal wave of other responsibilities, make the writing and submission process as easy as possible for your recommenders.

Here are some practical tips for requesting recommendations:

- 1. Follow the directions.** Although this may seem obvious, read and follow the directions for each application. If a position requires a recommendation from someone familiar with your academic performance, a professor who knows you well is a good choice. In this case, your supervisor at work is less likely to be able to help. Paying attention to the directions conveys the message that you think the application is important.
- 2. Match the recommender to the application.** This tip complements “Follow the directions.” Depending on the program or position to which you are applying, you might ask different people for recommendations. Among the people who know you well and can write positive letters for you, consider who is best qualified to comment on the specific skills and qualities sought in the program or job announcement.
- 3. Consider the position of the recommender.** Rank matters, as does the context in which the recommender knows you. While you may have learned a lot from a graduate TA, you should request a recommendation from the faculty instructor for the class. The faculty member will be better able to provide an overview and to comment on your performance in the context of the curriculum, the department, the success of other students who have held similar positions, *etc.*
- 4. Always ask for consent.** Do not assume that anyone can or is willing to be a reference for you. Ask to be sure. Even if someone has provided a recommendation before, it is wise to request permission to list a person as a reference for each new application. If nothing else, recommenders are likely to be interested in what you are doing.
- 5. Ask early.** Allow time for your recommender to write a thoughtful letter. Often, faculty members need at least two weeks’ notice (and sometimes more!) in order to be able to write a letter for you. Writing a recommendation with a week’s notice or less may not be possible.
- 6. Be organized.** Provide a list of positions to which you are applying, the corresponding company/program/scholarship names, the deadlines, and any special requirements. Even if you are applying to only one position, an Excel table can be very helpful. Note that, if an online recommendation is required, an institution may send an e-mail directing a recommender to an online submission link. However, these e-mails rarely indicate deadlines or identify the department or

program to which you are applying. Therefore, be sure you include all this information in your Excel table.

- 7. Plan ahead.** If you will be applying to more than one position, group your requests for letters, or include a schedule of when letters will be needed. It is most efficient for a letter writer to work on all your recommendations in one sitting. If your requests trickle in continuously over a long period of time, your recommender is more likely to miss one.
- 8. Clearly note all required forms and instructions.** Inform the recommender whether completion of a specific form is necessary and how the recommendation should be submitted. For example, is a signed hard copy in a sealed envelope necessary? Can the recommendation be sent by e-mail? Will the program be in touch directly to request an online recommendation? What is the contact information for the program or company (e-mail, postal address, phone number, *etc.*)? Should the letter be addressed in a specific way or to a specific person?
- 9. Provide a current résumé or *curriculum vitae* (c.v.).** This information helps your recommender tailor the letter to reflect you as an individual.
- 10. Provide a program description.** Give the recommender information about the program or position to which you are applying. The recommender can then highlight your strengths in a way that matches the demands of the position. For example, some scholarships emphasize leadership or community service. If your recommender does not know about these selection criteria, the letter might only focus on your outstanding GPA, causing you to miss an opportunity.
- 11. Consider providing additional information.** You might write a few sentences explaining why you are applying for a particular position, what interests you, and what you hope to gain. If a research statement is required for an internship application, you might send a draft to your recommender. Likewise, include a draft of your personal statement if one is part of the application (as is often the case for medical and veterinary programs). The more depth you provide, the easier it is for your recommender to write a detailed letter.
- 12. Offer to meet in person.** Express your willingness to discuss the position and your interests in more detail, at the recommender's convenience. Do not be disappointed if a faculty member does not have time to meet; he or she probably just has a hectic schedule. However, a personal meeting can be particularly important in cases where you do not have a close relationship with the recommender, or it has been awhile since you have interacted with the recommender. Letter writers might want and/or need to reacquaint themselves with you, in order to provide an informed recommendation.
- 13. Send polite reminders about deadlines.** Two or three days before a recommendation deadline, contact your recommender with a gentle reminder. If you are sending an e-mail, putting the due date in the subject line can help to ensure that your e-mail gets prompt attention. Keep track of your deadlines, so your recommenders do not have to.
- 14. Follow up.** Whether you got the position or not, your recommenders would probably appreciate knowing the outcome. This is also a nice way to stay in touch with people whom you may want to ask for future recommendations or professional advice.