

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate programs require that recommendation letters or forms be submitted for admission consideration. You will also likely ask for letters of recommendation as your graduate education concludes for future schooling or job opportunities. How you request a recommendation may influence the quality and the timeliness of the response. Below we have included some tips on who to approach, how to ask, and when to follow up.

Who to Ask

Choose faculty members, administrators, work supervisors or colleagues who know your academic achievements and think highly of your professional work. Ideally your candidate will know you by name, will have had conversations with you, has given you good grades or reviews, and has worked with you for an elongated period of time.

Ideally, recommendations should cover academic skills, research abilities and experiences, and applied experiences. No one writer can satisfy all these criteria, so aim for a set of letters that cover the range of your skills.

Your recommendations should be comprehensive, so it makes sense to ask professors for letters about your academic achievements and work supervisors for letters about your work experience.

The biggest mistake you can make is to settle for whoever is available to write your letter and not think about whom can best highlight your attributes. Everyone has at one time or another had to ask for a letter of recommendation, and if they are able to write you a positive review, will more than likely be willing to help. Make a list of all the points you would like highlighted in your letter. Then list the possibilities for who ask. Finally, consider only those who you are sure will give a positive recommendation in the achievements you want presented.

How to Ask

Ask potential recommenders in a respectful way whether they feel as if they can complete a recommendation in support of your specific effort. You don't need a recommendation—you need a good recommendation.

Give them enough time to write a good recommendation. Make sure to be clear about the due date and ask at least a month in advance in consideration of their busy schedules.

Be prepared to discuss with your recommender your specific goals including where you are applying, how you arrived at your choice, what your goals are, and why they are a good candidate to submit a recommendation on your behalf.

For example, "I chose to apply to this university because I was extremely excited about their tribal artifacts department."

And, "I had not considered going into research until I took your English class. That motivated me to get a part-time job in the writing center and now I'm excited about the possibility of studying writing center theory after grad school."

Let them know what achievements you think they would be able to highlight in comparison to your other recommenders. For example, "My other references will be able to talk about my academic ability, but you are the only one who really knows how hard I worked on my work projects and some of the obstacles I faced. I was hoping you could talk about how I handle stress and deal with setbacks, because those are qualities the selection committee wants to see."

Or, "I believe that you're aware through our conversations and my participation in your course that I'm dedicated to the field of archeology. I've completed my degree in Archeology as of June of this year. I was also able to intern at the museum under Dr. Marcus Brody, whom I believe you know. I also have extensive experience in cataloging items gained through my internship."

Make sure to include the specifics of what the institution you are applying requires including the address the letter needs to be sent to. What identifying information should they give when referring to you? Include a stamped envelope or any forms that need to be filled out.

Pay attention to signals that the recommender does not want to do it or cannot give you a positive recommendation. You do not want a lukewarm recommendation. Take no for an answer. If someone declines to write you a letter, don't push. They are doing you a favor by declining.

Let them know how you will follow-up. "I'll drop off the form and a stamped, addressed envelope in your faculty mailbox this week. I'll also send you an email reminder a week before the due date."

Thank them, whether or not they chose to write you a letter.

How to Follow Up

Make sure you do follow up, particularly if you tell them you are going to.

Check with the institution you applied to before the deadline to see if all recommendation letters were received. If not, send a brief reminder and offer to pay for overnight delivery if necessary. Ask if they need any additional information from you.

Thank them again. Send a hand-written thank you note. If you do get the position you were applying for, let your reference know the good news!