

How to Request a Reference Letter

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Letters of reference are important components of most applications for graduate schools, jobs, and even internships or fellowships. Most people can obtain a few supportive letters. To stand out, a letter must offer substantial praise in significant, documented detail.

Few things are more satisfying to a faculty member than to be able to write a glowing, detailed letter for a student. A few simple steps on your part will help faculty members to provide the strongest letters for you that they can. It is never too early to think about the letters you will eventually need.

If you were on an admissions committee or hiring a new employee, what characteristics would you seek? Intelligence sure, but what else? Honesty? Attitude? Initiative? Perseverance?

1. Who should you ask to write your reference letters?

Most letters praise applicants but not all letters have much influence. Detailed letters carry much more weight, while superficial letters are ineffective. Each letter should make clear that that writer knows the candidate well and that the writer knows the candidate's future goals. Therefore, it is important that you request letters from the faculty members who know you best.

If you request a letter from a particular individual, s/he may inquire why you are not requesting the letter from someone else. Be prepared to answer this question. If the faculty member is hesitant, this may be a gentle way of indicating that the letter writer is not comfortable and may not be able to write a stand out letter. If you are strongly encouraged to request a letter from someone else, do so.

2. How can you enable faculty members to write the strongest letters that they can?

- Make sure whenever possible to request letters well in advance, (preferably at least 2-3 weeks before they are due). Make the process as easy for the letter writer as you can (See point 3 below). If it is not possible to give advance notice, request the letter anyway, but be apologetic and understanding, and certainly do not make short notice a habit.
- When possible, ask your letter writers in person, rather than via email, to make sure they understand your future goals and why you plan to submit particular applications. This is especially important if you have not previously discussed these items at length with your letter writer, or if your thoughts and plans have changed since you last discussed them. But have a follow up email already prepared with additional resources or information (see below).
- Provide letter writers with all of the necessary information in writing in one package (on paper or electronically). The necessary information includes:
 - a. The deadline(s) for the letter(s).
 - b. The name and title of the individual, committee, or program to whom the letter should be written.
 - c. Whether the letter is to be printed on paper or submitted electronically.
 - d. If the letter is to be printed, the address to which the letter should be sent. (If the letter is to be delivered to you and mailed with your other application materials, expect to receive it in an envelope that the faculty member has signed across the seal.)
 - e. If the reference is to be submitted electronically, any web addresses necessary for accessing the appropriate forms, etc. Many electronic submissions directly email links

- to faculty so it is important that you verify the faculty member has received the email. Know the policies of the application service. For example, some of these sites will not email until your application is complete, so if you wait to complete your application to the last minute, your letter writer may not have enough time to submit your letter.
- f. A copy of any form provided by the prospective school, funding organization, or employer. Be sure to complete any entries that are to be completed by the applicant, including any section on waiving your right of access to the letter. (If you do not waive your right of access, the letter will not be taken seriously.)
 - g. A copy of any essays, personal statements, etc. that you will include in your application. If a final copy is not available, a draft is better than nothing. This material will help the letter writer demonstrate that they know you and your plans well.
 - h. A copy of your transcript if your writer does not have electronic or other easy access to it.
 - i. A list of the courses you have taken from the letter writer with the years and semesters that you took the courses.
 - j. A copy of your résumé or CV. Highlight any items that you would like the letter writer to consider mentioning.
 - k. Any special situation that the letter writer could address better than you. For example, if you had a bad semester due to a family emergency, a letter writer who knows you well can address this sort of issue in ways that you may not be able to or may not wish to in your own application.

Notes:

It is not necessary to provide stamped, addressed envelopes. Faculty will prefer to submit letters on College letterhead in College envelopes.

If you request multiple letters from the same individual (e.g. to multiple graduate programs), you need only provide one copy of your résumé and one copy of any essay that will be sent with multiple applications.

3. How can you ensure that your letters have been submitted on time?

Send a gentle reminder via email that your part of the application has now been submitted, approximately one week before the letter is due. If you have not heard that the letter has been sent a couple of days before it is due, check with the faculty member in person to make sure they have not forgotten about it.

A final general note:

Your application will undoubtedly include a transcript. Therefore, to be informative, your letters need to go beyond the information available on a transcript. Try to imagine the situation from the perspective of a letter writer. What might impress them besides your performance on exams, labs, papers, and talks. A's and B's for these assignments are great. But frankly, lots of people make A's and B's, so your letter writer will be thinking about other ways you stand out in the classroom, laboratory, or even the community. Do you ask questions during class? Are you inquisitive? Do you ask questions of speakers? Do you attend voluntary activities or co-curricular activities in your department? Do you appreciate constructive criticism? Does your interest in subjects go beyond that necessary to make high grades? Are you helpful in situations that provide opportunities to be so? Do you volunteer when a volunteer is needed? How do you interact with your peers? Do you appreciate effort extended on your behalf? Do you respect people's time? Do you constantly ask for extensions or special considerations? Are you whiny? Do you express disappointment when, for example, a lab takes a long time to complete or some problem arises, or do you roll with it

and maintain a good attitude? Do you routinely disrupt classes by walking in late, talking, using your cell phone, giggling, or otherwise being unprofessional? Do you wear clothes that suggest a lack of maturity due to derogatory or obscene messages?

Letters often conclude with summary statements. If you are fortunate, your writers will be able to end their letters with statements like the following:

- "... makes the most of every opportunity."
- "...has carefully considered her options and is deeply committed to ..."
- "Knowing what I know, if I were in your position, I would be delighted to accept/hire/fund ..."
- "If I were at a university with a graduate program in ... I would be delighted to take on ... as a graduate student."
- "In summary, ... has my highest recommendation, one that I can offer with no reservation whatsoever."
- "...is among the top X% of students I have known."