

Letters of Recommendation: A Guide for Students

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Part of my job as a professor is to write letters of recommendations for students, and I'm happy to do it. Here's what you need to know to make sure the process is pleasant and effective for both of us.

Should you ask me?

A letter of recommendation that says "So-and-so took my course in X and got a grade of Y" is not a powerful letter. In most cases, you will be sending a transcript along with your application anyway, so the committee reading your application will know what grades you got in different classes. You want a letter that can say more than that.

Most selection committees will want to know something about your character and potential from someone who knows you well. Some of the things they might be interested in include your intellectual curiosity, integrity, responsibility, work ethic, how you work with others, your academic potential in a specific area, and so on.

If you and I have not had a working relationship where I might know some of these things about you, I can probably only write the sort of letter that says "they took my course X and got a grade of Y". If that's the case, you might want to think about whether there's a better person to ask.

How might I know these things? Ideally, you and I have had a one-on-one relationship, say, through an independent study, research project, or extracurricular activity. You might have visited me often in office hours. You might have distinguished yourself in class or lab by asking good questions and going above and beyond expectations on assignments.

Sometimes, you need a letter of recommendation and there's no one better to ask, in which case I'm happy to write you the letter I can, even if it's not that strong. Everyone has to start somewhere.

What should you do?

The process works best if you do the following:

- Ask me early enough. A few weeks is usually sufficient, but the earlier the better.
- Tell me what they're looking for or what you would like me to emphasize. For example, perhaps the selection committee is primarily

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concerned with intellectual curiosity; or maybe you'd like me to emphasize your research aptitude.

- Provide me with useful information for the letter. Even if I know you well, I may forget things. Remind me of interactions we've had and experiences that may illustrate the qualities you'd like me to bring out in the letter.
- Now is not the time to be modest! Provide me with accomplishments or skills that you'd like my letter to mention. If for some reason I don't feel qualified to talk about some of them, I'll leave those out.
- A resume or transcript can occasionally be helpful, but it's even better if you can draw my attention to particular items on your resume or transcript that I might be able to speak to.
- Tell me the deadline for each letter.
- Tell me how to submit each letter. This could be an online submission website, an e-mail address, or a physical mailing address. The more specific the instructions, the better. For example, "Please send the letter as a PDF attachment to xyz@company.com", or "You should get an email from online system ABC with instructions on how to log in and upload the letter."
- Whenever possible, I prefer to send my letter directly to the selection committee, rather than giving it to you.
- Also, I prefer to write letters where you have waived your right to read it. I don't intend to write letters where I have negative things to say, but I think the letter is taken more seriously when the selection committee knows that you are not reading it as well.

After you've asked

As happy as I am to write letters of recommendation, they take time, which is always a scarce resource. I will feel awful if I miss your deadline, but you will feel much worse! You should feel free to nag me:

- Email me a few days before the deadline, reminding me that it's coming up.
- Make sure you get an email from me saying that I've sent it.
- If you don't get that email, keep asking!

Of course, it's never pleasant to nag, but with a little effort you can do it kindly and politely, especially since I have explicitly asked you to do so. For example, you could send an email saying something like:

Hi Dr. Yorgey, I just wanted to remind you that the letter of recommendation to the Committee on Giving People Money for Being Awesome is due this Friday. The letter can be sent electronically to committee@gpmfba.org. Thanks!

Asking for a letter without a specific target

Take note of the lists of things that selection committees are usually interested in finding out about. Arrange your college career to build up a portfolio of professors, supervisors and mentors who can speak to those qualities. Try to create one-on-one relationships where someone can get to know you and your work well.

If you have built such a relationship, and you know that person would be able to write a strong letter of recommendation, but you don't have a specific current need, it is a good idea to ask them to write you a letter anyway. I personally welcome such requests, and will write a generic letter for you and file it away. It will be much easier for me to write a good letter when our relationship is current and fresh in my mind. Then, if, say, you decide to apply to law school two years after graduation, you can email me and ask me to write you a letter; I can take the generic letter I wrote previously and easily modify it to fit the specific occasion.