

Etiquette and Tips for Requesting Letters of Recommendation

1. Whom should I ask to write a letter of recommendation?

Start with faculty (professors, not teaching assistants or adjunct lecturers) that you have taken multiple classes from where you have gotten good grades. If you have taken a directed study course or have done any lengthy written projects in a course these would also be good places to start.

Usually, professors can write the most persuasive letters for students whose academic ability and writing they have personally come to know from work in their courses. By "work" they usually mean both your writing for the course and your active participation in class discussions. Getting a good grade in a course alone is not usually enough for a professor to write a really good letter of recommendation. The best letters of recommendation; the ones that will really bolster your case for being accepted to the program you are applying for come from faculty who know a lot about you and your abilities.

For example, a letter from a professor who writes about your unique skills, research abilities, and motivation is more influential than a letter from a professor who says that you received an "A" in his/her class are pleasant to be around.

Keep in mind that you will likely need to waive your rights to view letters written on your behalf. It is quite standard to do this but it means that you won't have a chance to review the letter after it has been written. If you approach someone about writing a letter for you and they seem reluctant to do so, they are likely trying to politely tell you that they can't write a strong letter for you. Accept this and consider others you might ask. Having a poor or lukewarm letter of recommendation as part of an application can be potentially damaging to your chances of being accepted.

2. When do I start asking for letters?

As far in advance of your application deadline as possible. Do not wait until the last minute. This is practical as well as courteous; if you wait too long to make your request, the person may not have the time to write a letter or complete a form. You can keep letters on file with L&S Career Services (more information below) so it is actually possible to get a letter prior to knowing exactly where you will apply.

Ideally, you should start thinking about letters of recommendation early in your academic career. As you take courses, particularly in your major, make a point of getting to know some of the faculty. The most obvious ways of doing this are to participate in class and go to office hours with questions. Whether you're applying for graduate school, a job, or a summer internship, chances are you will need letters of recommendation from professors who know you at some point. Thinking about developing relationships with faculty who will be able to write about your strengths will help you when it comes time to ask for recommendation letters, it will also enhance your education!

3. How do I go about asking for a reference?

See the professor in person. Only send an e-mail message if you are writing from out of town – never just send them your materials before getting confirmation that they will write you a letter or

request letters on short notice. If your schedule doesn't allow you to stop by during their office hours, you should e-mail them to arrange for an appointment. If you are writing, be formal and well-spoken -- and unless the professor knows you well, mention the course(s) you took with them (don't assume that they remember you by name.) If you wrote a paper for the course, it would help to bring a copy to your meeting, or if writing, mention the paper's topic.

4. What do I give the professor when I ask for a reference?

As much information as you can. Consider including the following in a packet you provide to them well in advance of the application deadline:

- A description of each position or program for which you are applying with the **application deadlines** for each program/position.
- Any forms or specific instructions or questions requested by the program/position for the letter of recommendation.
- a cover letter to the professor indicating any pertinent information you especially wish him/her to emphasize in the letter of recommendation. Be honest and respectful but assertive. If you feel that your oral skills were especially evident in the professor's class, remind him/her of them; if you feel your research paper for her/his course provides a notably positive sense of your aptitude, please refresh his/her memory of it.
- A statement of your interest in the program/position (if applying to a graduate program, you will probably be required to write such a statement anyway)
- Your transcript (an unofficial copy is fine, you can request this through My UW)
- Your resume
- Your phone-number and email address (make sure that you check both regularly) should your letter writer need to reach you
- Photocopies of course material that have been graded and handed back to you (papers, exams, etc.). Don't send professors new printouts or the originals; they usually like to see the marked and graded copy you got back from them but you don't want to give them anything that you expect to have returned to you.
- A stamped, addressed envelope for **each** letter of reference -- in the case of graduate applications, they should be **addressed to the program(s) you are applying to**. For reasons of confidentiality, most professors prefer to send recommendations directly to the program, rather than let the student collect them and send them with their application package. Do not put a return address on the envelope. Many programs now have a means of entering recommendations online. In these cases, please provide the URL or email address for submission of the letter.

If you are planning to go to graduate school, you may find it helpful to open a file with the Reference Letter Center, a service offered (for a fee) by the L&S Career Services Office. Visit their website [link: <http://www.lssaa.wisc.edu/careers/reference.html>] for more information about setting up a file. Having a reference letter file means that you need to ask your recommenders for one letter rather than several.

5. After the letter has been written, what should I do?

Let the professor know when you hear about your application, whether or not you were accepted. They will appreciate knowing the outcome, and knowing how it all turned out will help them with future letters that they may write for you or other students.