

## Asking for Letters of Recommendation and/or References

Potential employers, scholarship and grant selection committees, and graduate school admissions offices depend heavily on recommendation letters or references to gain insight into applicants' personal strengths, weaknesses and accomplishments. This kind of information cannot be readily gleaned from transcripts and test scores. So it is in your best interest to help your recommenders write the most accurate and detailed letters possible.

**Begin by cultivating close working relationships with faculty early in your graduate career.** Once you're acquainted with faculty members through coursework, research, and other ways, consider stopping by their offices once a quarter to discuss your interests and keep in touch. Do the same with past bosses, colleagues, internship supervisors and other mentors. Keep in touch with them by LinkedIn, phone, email or in person if possible, and build positive relationships, remembering to help them when needed as well. This is why it's so important to stay in touch and not to burn bridges. It's also why you need to guard your reputation, your most valuable asset.

Once you've established a relationship, you'll feel more comfortable requesting a recommendation. Refer to the following guidelines for managing your letter requests.

**Choose the people who know you best.** Many students wonder whether to ask a "big name" professor who knows only their face and final grade or a lesser-known professor who knows them better. Letters by famous people or well-known scholars only carry more weight if the famous person knows you well and can write a substantial, convincing recommendation. The more detailed, personalized a letter is, the more likely it is to make a strong impression on a selection committee. So ask your instructors with the most extensive, personal knowledge of you and your work. Similarly, ask supervisors who know your work best.

**Ask early.** It is common courtesy to allow recommenders at least three weeks to prepare and submit their letters. We highly recommend involving them in the early stages of your application process, while you are deciding how to present yourself in the application materials. Their insights will prove invaluable and they will be well informed of your interests when they write their recommendations.

Begin your request with a substantial conversation about your interests and goals and then ask them if they can write a strong letter of recommendation. Most likely they will say yes. However, in some cases the faculty member may say no or that he or she can only write a recommendation citing certain qualifiers or weaknesses. In this case, you should accept his or her judgment graciously and consider asking for more feedback about your goals and plan for study.

Sources:

<https://undergrad.stanford.edu/academic-planning/engage-faculty/asking-letters-recommendation>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creativityrulz/200908/its-small-world-dont-burn-bridges>

**Provide materials.** Once a faculty member or former supervisor has agreed to write a letter of recommendation or be a reference, provide them with copies of your application materials or a description of the job/internship to which you are applying. The following items will help them write accurate and purposeful letters or be a well-prepared reference for you:

Copies of key pages from the application brochure, describing the nature and purpose of the scholarship, internship, graduate program or other opportunity

A copy (or a draft) of your application essays, or a summary of your career and educational goals

A copy of your resume/LinkedIn URL

A copy of the job description (if applicable)

A list of your activities (sports, organizations, leadership and volunteer positions)

A description of pertinent work or research experiences

A copy of your transcript

If a number of quarters passed since you worked with a recommender, also provide a copy of your paper or class project

**Write out all submission instructions and deadlines.** There should be no question as to when and where to submit the finished letters. Provide properly addressed, typed, stamped envelopes.

**Keep in touch with your recommenders.** After submitting your application, send recommenders a thank-you note expressing your appreciation for their guidance and support. Update them on your progress throughout the stages of the competition and inform them whether you are selected for the award or not. Should you need a recommendation in the future, this kind of follow-up communication will continue to foster a close, positive relationship with your faculty sponsors and former bosses, colleagues, and other mentors.

Sources:

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