

## Requesting Letters of Recommendation - Advice from Beleaguered Educators

When asking for a letter of recommendation, there are a few tips to keep in mind. They can be summarized in the following six points:

1. Pick wisely and well
2. Ask early!
3. Provide instructions and deadlines
4. Specify content
5. Follow up
6. Say thanks

Now these may sound obvious, but there are nuances for each that can make a real difference in the quality of the letter, or whether you will be successful in getting the letter at all. Much of this can be boiled down to the following rule of thumb:

***Make things as easy as possible for the person writing your letter; don't make more work for them than is absolutely necessary!***

### 1. Pick Wisely & Well

The person with the most impressive title may not necessarily be the best person to write your letter. The letter should sound genuine and convey a sense that the person knows you well and is confident in his or her recommendation. Be strategic in thinking about who to ask, and ask yourself:

- a. Does this person know me well enough to write this letter?
- b. Is this person likely to remember me? (especially if it's been more than a semester since they have worked with you)
- c. Will this person have time to write a good letter on my behalf?

### 2. Ask EARLY!

Ideally, you should have a firm commitment to write the letter at least 2-3 weeks before the deadline. That means you need to ask at least a month ahead of time. If you are operating under a tighter deadline, give the person you're asking a polite "out" by saying, "If you think you may not have time to complete a letter for me by the deadline, I completely understand. Please let me know if that's the case so I can find someone else to write the letter."

### 3. Provide Instructions & Deadlines

- a. **DEADLINES:** When is it due? If it is a multiple stage process, note the key dates.
- b. **Format:** Is it a traditional letter, a form that needs to be filled out and mailed in, or a form to be filled out online? Is there a minimum or maximum page length or word count?

If it is an online recommendation process, provide the website address and instructions for the online process. Don't make the writer hunt through an organization's website to figure out how to submit the recommendation.

**c. Submittal Protocol:** Does the recommendation need to be sent directly to the review committee or given to the student to send in with his or her application? Will the reviewer have to set up an online account to submit the recommendation through a web site? Include this information in your request for the letter of recommendation.

**d. Address information:** Provide the name of the individual and/or the committee or organization to which the letter should be addressed. What is the actual address that it should be sent to if it is a letter that needs to be mailed or delivered.

#### 4. Specify content

**a. Instructions:** What instructions are provided for the letter writer? Make sure to direct the writer to this site or make sure they are aware of the directions. Otherwise they may have to rewrite the letter after they have begun or completed it, causing a delay or failure to submit the letter on time. Instructions often specify questions that need to be answered, topics to be addressed or avoided, or provide other guidance about the expectations of the reviewers.

**b. Your suggestions:** Indicate what you would like the person making the recommendation to highlight or emphasize about you. If you have not interacted with the writer in a while, update them about what you have done recently that may be relevant to the recommendation.

#### 5. Follow up!!!

Once someone has agreed to write a letter for you, do NOT assume that your part in that process is complete. If you have not received the recommendation or notification that it has been submitted one week prior to the deadline, follow up with the writer to ask if they have had a chance to do it. Continue to inquire no more than once every other day until you do receive confirmation.

#### 6. Say thanks

Follow up afterward with a verbal message of appreciation (by phone or in person) and a written thank you card or letter. **Don't wait** until you find out the outcome of the application process. If you are successful in winning the scholarship, admission, etc., be sure to let the recommender know they were a part of your success. Your conscientiousness will make them more willing to recommend you for jobs, graduate school programs, appointments, and other opportunities in the future.