

Asking Faculty for Recommendation Letters

There is a big difference between asking faculty to be a reference for you (for a job) and writing a recommendation letter for an internship, scholarship, or graduate school.

References

Most of the time, we would be happy to be a reference for you, but you definitely need to ask us each time you are including our name as a reference for something you are applying for. This way, we know who might be calling us “out-of-the-blue” to ask questions about you, and we can be prepared to answer them. Keep in mind that each faculty member tracks between 25-100 students every quarter, and so it can be hard to immediately recall information about one student we may have worked with 1-2 years prior. If possible, send information about the job/opportunity AND an updated resume each time you write an email asking someone to be a reference for you.

Recommendation Letters

If the opportunity you are applying for requires recommendation letters, there is a process involved that takes some time. Please be very accommodating to the faculty you are requesting letters from. Write a very respectful letter requesting a recommendation letter – faculty are under no obligation to write you one, and may say “no” for a variety of reasons: 1) they may not have time to write the letter, 2) they may not think you are qualified for the experience, 3) they may not appreciate the way you are asking!

Recommendations in academia are based on a system of honest review and many faculty will not provide students with copies of the letters they have written on their behalf. It is best if you do not request one. Most faculty will write a letter in confidence and send it to the institution or hiring authority themselves. Sending letters written by others yourself is often not seen as authentic or ethical.

Often recommendation letter systems will ask you a question like “Do you waive your right to view the recommendation?” Note that your letter writers will be notified about your answer to this question and that some faculty may not write a letter for you if you do not waive your right to view the letter.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Write a very respectful letter requesting a recommendation letter. Pull out all the stops – address your faculty as “Dr. _____” or “Professor _____.” Do not be presumptive. Recognize that you are asking a favor, and so ask nicely!
2. Try to ask for the letter 6 weeks ahead of the deadline when possible.
3. In the first email, just ask for the letter, but include this note at the end of your letter:
“If you are willing to write a recommendation letter for this opportunity, I will send you the following in a follow-up email: 1) an updated CV, 2) my application essay, 3) a link to information about the job/internship/scholarship/graduate program, 4) information about how to send the letter, and 5) the deadline.”
4. This statement lets your letter writer know that YOU KNOW exactly what is required of you and of them. You should not send all of this information in the initial request because that makes the presumption that the letter writer is willing to write the letter!
5. Should they say “no,” please write back thanking them for their time.
6. Should they say “yes,” follow up with those things you promised!
 - a. an updated CV
 - b. any essays or statements you are writing to the scholarship committee – rough drafts are okay
 - c. a link to information about the job/internship/scholarship/graduate program
 - d. information about how to send the letter (email, physical address, etc).
 - e. the deadline
7. Finally, if you notice they have not sent the letter yet, it is okay to send a friendly reminder 1-2 weeks prior to the deadline.