

SO YOU'D LIKE A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

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basic outline of steps derived from Dawn O. Braithwaite, Ph.D. (1998)

Professors are often asked to write letters of recommendation for students. Therefore, to make our jobs much easier (and your letter much better!), here are some tips for getting the letter. The overall gist is that the student must take the initiative in the process. Each professor's preferences will differ, but at a bare minimum, here are the guidelines to follow:

FIRST STEP:

Asking the professor to write the letter...

1. *Ask in person.*
 - a. The key here is to ASK – no one owes you a letter. Make your *request* just that – as though you are asking a favor – because you are. In turn, also be willing to take “no” for an answer; it doesn't mean you're a bad person – it just means that (for whatever reason) they can't write you a letter.
 - b. The second key is IN PERSON – don't leave a request under a door, don't grab a professor after class or in the hallway. Sign up for an appointment with them and ask in person. It may be acceptable to make this appointment via email.
2. *Ask if they would be able to write you a favorable letter of recommendation.*
 - a. Of course we can agree to write you “a letter,” but you should probably check ahead of time (because we don't have to show it to you) if it will be positive. A professor will definitely tell you if they can do this or not. When I ask for letters, I always frame it as, “Do you think you would be able to write me a positive letter?” That way, I know if I need to go elsewhere to get the letters that will help me excel. Also, if they don't have anything particularly great to say about you, many professors will write “neutral” or not glowing letters. *You should know that when someone reads anything but a letter that praises you, it's code for “don't hire/accept/consider” this person. We don't have to say mean/negative things to write you a “bad” letter.* So check this first! ☺
3. *Ask if they can write you a specific letter.*
 - a. As mentioned (2a), lacking positive specifics will say to the reader that the recommender either doesn't know you well enough to be writing your letter and/or doesn't have anything positive to say about you in a specific context. Both could bode poorly for you if expressed (or unexpressed) in a letter.
 - b. If the professor tells you (remember, you asked them this) that they are unable to be specific, ask someone else. It's not a bad thing; you're just trying to get the best letter possible –from whomever.

SECOND STEP:

What YOU NEED TO DO for the professor to write a letter....

1. *Give us time!*
 - a. The standard is two weeks or more for a letter to be written – to get it in before a deadline. Asking us to do it quicker will indicate that you are a poor planner – something that will hurt your letter anyway – so don't bother asking if you need it under a week.
2. *Provide all relevant materials/instructions – we shouldn't have to ask for them!*
 - a. Again, if we have to ask you for info (that you didn't provide for us) to complete the letter, you look unorganized/unprepared, which can ultimately hurt your letter. Here is (at a minimum – *this means you send all these to us no matter what you've heard*) what to include (nowadays, email attachments are usually fine):
 - i. **Any forms** the organization requires completed out for the recommendation – these should be filled in by you *in advance* as much as possible. We shouldn't have to write in your address, phone, email, name, program to which you're applying, etc. YOU fill in this information before you get it to us.
 - ii. **Any specific instructions** (word-for-word) the organization provides for completing the letter. Knowing the exact phrasing they used in their admissions/hiring process helps us to tailor our letters to specific jobs/schools, making you look more qualified!
 - iii. **ALL their contact info:** The mailing address, email address, person/organization to address it. If it is online, still include this info in an email to us so we can put it in any attached “formal” letters we include with online forms.
 - iv. **Deadline** for submitting the letter.
 - v. Your resume, statement of goals, etc. Don't forget to include a list of what classes/involvements you've had with us. Even if we know *you* very well, we may have forgotten all of the individual experiences we've had with you in the past (courses, work projects, independent studies) – so list these to remind us so we include them in our letters.
3. *Again, fill out any information you can on your own.*
 - a. We don't know your personal info (DOB, address, phone, etc.), nor do we have time to fill it in ourselves. These are the things you should be completing before we even see forms.
4. *Provide us with your resume and everything we need to know (and might not) about you.*
 - a. To be specific and positive, we'll need to know the following:
 - i. Your major/minor, classes you took from us, when (term, year), grade received, any special info about your involvement in *our* classes (project/paper title, works)
 - ii. *Any* assistantships, internships, research projects, activities, awards, etc. in which you're involved (this may already be on your resume)
 - iii. **Your** career goals/plans, **reasons for wanting** this scholarship/job/gradschool/etc.
5. *If you don't receive a verification (probably via email or verbally in class), get one from us.*
 - a. Feel free to check in with us a few days before a deadline to verify your letter was completed and sent – do this politely! It's ok to ask us. We may have forgotten! As long as you remind us politely, it shows you're responsible.
6. *Follow up with a thank you.*
 - a. You may need this professor again in the future (for another letter, or just because they know someone who will affect you... never burn bridges). Send a brief note (e-mail or card/letter) expressing your appreciation for their letter-writing. I always appreciate (and remember) a quick “thank you” from the student. It's called being a professional, kind adult.

Should you get a copy?

Some professors provide students with a copy of the letter they sent. Some don't have the time. Ask ahead of time if you'd like a copy - to see if your professor is willing to provide it to you. Whatever the decision of the professor, respect it. If they'd prefer not to disclose the letter's contents to you, then don't push it. If you're sure they wrote you a positive letter anyway (because you checked ahead of time, remember?), then rest assured they did. No one will write a letter opposite from what they initially promised (unless you did something truly horrific ☺ in the meantime).