REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
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Frequently, students are not aware of the conventions they should adhere to when asking for a letter of recommendation, and they approach faculty members either too nervously or in too pushy a manner. To be sure you are approaching the process professionally, follow these seven principles.

1. Think Through the Application Process First

Before you approach anyone for a letter of reference, identify the number of people that you will need and the type of materials that you have to prepare. Many references will expect you to know this before they agree to write a letter.

2. Use the Application Materials to Help You Choose Letter Writers

Application materials are your best ally in choosing the best letter writers. Some applications, for instance, encourage you to choose individuals who can speak to your teaching ability or character rather than those with the highest stature. Take this advice seriously and follow it, seeking a best fit rather than a big name.

3. Seek a Mix of Letter Writers, and Identify Their Roles for Them

Collectively, your letters should reflect a balanced picture of you. A recent national scholarship winner obtained support letters from a university program coordinator, an assistant professor of political science, and a Red Cross volunteer. If appropriate, invite your recommenders to comment from a certain angle.

4. Choose People Who Know You Well and Help Them to Know You Better

Avoid abruptly asking someone for a recommendation letter after class, in the hallway, or via e-mail. Instead, make an appointment to discuss your needs. Offer the letter writer any materials that might help him or her write a more detailed letter, such as your resume or a draft of a research proposal that you prepared.

5. Respect a "No"

If someone you ask for a letter seems to be saying "no" to you, seek someone else. The person may be too busy or may not write you a positive letter.

6. Waive Your Access Rights and Invite the Letter Writer to Discuss Your Grades

On an application form, you will usually be asked if you wish to waive, i.e., give up your right to see the letter of reference. Do so. The letter writer will then be more comfortable and probably more genuine too, and the selection committee will expect and respect this. Also, invite the professor to discuss your grades, either to applaud them or to help explain any inconsistencies.

7. Provide the Letter Writer with a Deadline and a Stamped Addressed Envelope

Be sure you know to whom the letter is to be addressed, and give the writer a stamped addressed envelope to mail it in. Provide an exact deadline for the letter’s completion and gently remind the letter writer of it later if necessary.

The above is adapted from Joe Schall’s Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook, with the author’s permission. The second edition of this handbook is available from Outernet Publishing (http://www.outernetpublishing.com/writing.htm). Questions and detailed ordering information requests can be
directed to Joe Schall (schall@ems.psu.edu).