

How to get a great letter of recommendation

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It's job-hunting and grad-school admissions season. As a professor, that means it's time to write recommendation letters. Professors enjoy writing letters for excellent students, in part to "pay it back" for all those letters we've had to ask for (and still ask for). But, one issue that's become painfully apparent to me is that most students don't know how to get the best possible letter of recommendation.

About half of all the recommendation letters I read look like this:

Dear X,
meh
Prof Y

In other words, the letter is unenthusiastic and uninformative, and provides no real reason to recommend the candidate.

If you want good recommendation letters, you will need to plan at least a semester (and preferably a year or two) in advance. If the first time you think about getting a letter of recommendation is when you're applying to a job or grad school, then I must be honest, and I can offer only unpleasant news: you will probably not get a great letter. (But, you can still avoid getting a bad one.)

Getting great letters requires preparation. In short, you will have had to engage your letter-writer in some meaningful capacity beyond just taking his or her class and getting an A.

Ask early!: Do not wait until right before the deadline. Ask at least three weeks in advance, and perhaps six.

Don't be shy: Do not be shy about asking for letters. Remember that everyone you ask for a letter once had to ask for letters themselves. We remember what it was like. I hated asking for letters because it seemed like such an imposition, and I hate to impose. So, I'd often end up waiting to ask. Sitting on the other side of the desk, I realize that writing letters is something we sign up for with the job. Asking a professor to write a letter is asking a professor to do his or her job. Personally, I don't mind writing letters, and for good students, I enjoy it.

Pick your letter-writers well!: If you're applying to grad school, you should seek letters from strong names in the field in which you wish to do research.

You can get a sense of strength from recent publications: Are they publishing frequently or recently in top venues for their field? If you're applying to a job, the names are almost certainly going to be meaningless to employers, so you'll want letters from the best writers. Writing quality and lecturing ability are roughly correlated.

Don't get n letters: Too often, students need n letter-writers, so they ask any n previous professors for a letter. This will get a student an " n -th" letter. Professors don't mind writing these letters, because they take about ten seconds. But, deep down, we know we're doing the student a disservice. We have templates where we drop in the applicant's name and grade, and coded pleasantries signalling that we have no substantial knowledge of the applicant other than their grade.

These letters won't hurt you, but they won't distinguish you. Your letters should not rehearse your transcript in long form. If all your letters read like this, it guarantees rejection. The message is: "This is a student that did well, but never took the time to go above and beyond."

How to get a good letter: The more I know about an applicant, the better the letter. When you take a class from someone that you want to be a letter-writer, distinguish yourself with your level of effort, your helpfulness to other students, your interaction inside and outside the classroom, and your enthusiasm for the subject.

At a minimum, provide a recommender with some context: a capsule summary of your interests/accomplishments, your resume/CV, any application materials you are submitting and a list of places to which you plan to apply.

*How to get a **great** letter:* If you want a great letter, do independent study or research with the letter-writer for a semester or two before asking for the letter. Those one-on-ones will give the letter-writer valuable insight into your character, and if the projects succeed (yielding a publication), then your letter-writer will be able to write an enthusiastic endorsement.

Research is always risky, so if you want a publication with your letter-writer, start working with them at least a year (and probably two) in advance. Beyond netting a great letter, doing one-on-one work grants indirect access to the professor's network of personal contacts at other universities.

How to ask for a letter: There is a debate about whether you should ask for a letter in person or over email. Personally, I don't think it matters that much. Whether over email or in person, what you should ask is, "Would you be comfortable writing me a strong letter of recommendation?"

Almost no professor will turn down a request for a letter, but if you ask for a strong letter, you might hear back, "I don't think I can write the strongest letter - who else are you asking to write letters?" When I turn down such requests, I then help the student find who their strongest letter writers would be.

Over email, include a brief capsule summary of interests and accomplishments, as well as a link to your resume/CV and application materials. If a letter

must be mailed, include a pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelope and any other materials required.

How to follow up: Professors generally won't forget to write a letter, but we are never annoyed by a brief reminder (or two) from the applicant. Do send reminder emails a week before each deadline. Lately, I've asked applicants to create a shared Google spreadsheet with organizations and deadlines that I can update when I submit letters. Feel free to offer this up front. This will give you peace of mind, in that you can verify whether or not a professor has submitted a letter. It also gives you a polite way to ask a follow-up: "I see that you haven't checked off the spreadsheet for X and it's due in three days. Did you forget to check that off?"

It's been a while, can I still ask?: It's best to get a letter from a professor at the end of a class, or a successful project, or in any case while you are still fresh in their memory. But if you've graduated and gone to industry, you can still ask for a letter. When you email the professor, include a short, bulleted update with what you've done since graduating.

Emphasize how the specific techniques learned in their class or in independent study have been invaluable in your career. Include examples. If you don't hear back, don't give up. Email again after a week. Most professors have hopelessly swollen inboxes, and expect to be re-emailed with anything critical.

Should I draft my own letter?: If the professor requests a draft, yes. Do not offer to write the letter up front, but if you know the professor is particularly busy, you can append "Please let me know if there's anything else I can do to help you draft the letter" to your request."

Typically, what the professor is looking for is a list of bullet points about interests and accomplishments that they can massage into a letter. To expedite the letter, be sure to ask in what format they want the draft, e.g., Word, LaTeX or plaintext.

For other information about graduate school, academic talks, the PhD thesis, and job hunting, see my blog at matt.might.net/articles