

# On Getting Great Letters of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation can mean the difference between landing that dream job or dream school... or not.

Understanding letters of rec in this way and taking care to communicate as well as you can with your letter writers will help insure that you'll get the most effective, focused letters you need to give you the edge among competitive applicants. In short, the letter of recommendation is a critical component of your job or grad school application process.

## Whom should you ask?

Developing relationships is important for all sorts of professional reasons. Feeling comfortable enough with someone to ask if they would be willing to write a letter is one of many positive outcomes of solid professional and academic relationship development. In general, the people to ask are people who have a positive opinion of you and your abilities and who:

- >Have worked with you closely
- >Have known you long enough to write with authority about your pertinent capabilities or character
- >Have relevant expertise
- >Are senior or highly regarded in their field
- >Have worked with you in the past 1-3 years

## How should you ask?

Having a personal relationship is important, but knowing that your potential letter writer thinks highly of you and your abilities matters, too. Therefore, don't simply ask for a letter, ask if they would feel able to write you a strong letter. A tepid or mild letter could communicate a lack of enthusiasm for you.

Thus, when asking for letters, ask to meet with the potential writers to share information. Tell them what you are applying for and which of your strengths are important to highlight. Make sure the writer feels comfortable and prepared to advocate in ways that are most helpful. Often, examples of experiences that would illustrate particular skills or qualities are useful. Having a conversation about your experiences associated with your work and relationship with the writer could help them craft a detailed, more convincing case for your abilities and fitness for the position you seek.

## Setting your writers up for your success

Whenever possible, give them three to four weeks.

Give your writers an opportunity to carve out time that is convenient for their schedules. Asking too late in the game will likely produce a generic letter that doesn't hit all the specific highlights of your abilities and potential. Your lack of attention or procrastination will result in a mediocre letter. Mediocre is never good enough.

Provide writers with great reference and source material.

Even though you've met with your writers to talk about the position you seek and your experiences and abilities, also provide them with written materials to remind and inspire. These could include:

- >A copy of your most recent academic transcript
- >An up-to-date résumé or vita
- >Pre-addressed envelopes with postage (where paper letters are expected)
- >Where there are forms that must be submitted with letters, be sure to have completed all non-evaluative information you possibly can, including the evaluator's name, contact information, etc.
- >A cover note listing:
  - \*Your contact information in case the letter writer needs to reach you
  - \*A list of deadlines for all the letters that you need
  - \*Your career aspirations and the type of position you're applying for
  - \*Information or points you would like your letter writer to emphasize
  - \*Summary of work/projects you did with your writer (including dates)
  - \*Any other information you deem relevant
- >Finally, ask your letter writers if they would like to be reminded of the deadlines for your letters of reference.