

Letters of Recommendation: A Guide for Students

Letters of Recommendation: A 4-Step Guide for Students

Quality letters of recommendation do not just happen. It takes strategy, relationship building, and professionalism in order to gain letters that demonstrate who you are as a student and a person. When considering the process of asking for and obtaining letters of recommendation, follow these steps.

Step 1: Select who to ask for a letter

You will likely have to provide several letters of recommendation. As you consider who is appropriate to ask for a letter of recommendation, think about:

- How well does this person know you? Have your experiences with them been positive?
- What perspective will they provide for the admission committee that is valuable?
- Will they say something meaningful about you that is different from others writing letters?

Step 2: Set up a meeting, phone call or email in which you ask for a letter of recommendation

- Let them know why you are asking them in particular. Example: “Because we worked together this summer on research, I feel you can speak to my critical thinking skills and resilience”.
- Remember: letters of recommendation are a privilege, not a right. Understand faculty members may choose to say no to your request.
 - Provide the individual with the option of a few days to consider the request. Do not force an immediate decision. If that person knows they will be too busy, or does not feel able to write you a positive letter, you WANT them to say no. A “No” now is much better than a weak or negative letter later that lowers your chance of admittance.

Step 3: Once an individual accepts your request, set guidelines and provide tools

- Agree on a timeframe for completion of the letter. Allow a minimum of three weeks for letter writing. Establish the process for submitting to letter and discuss when/how you can follow-up about the letter.
- Generic letters fade into the background of the admissions process and do not help your chances of admission. A great letter provides positive specifics. To supplement their writing, provide your recommenders with a digital copy of the following:
 - Your personal statement
 - Resume
 - A short note thanking them, reminding them of the specific reason they are writing a letter, the deadline you mutually established and if necessary, and information providing context. The context you provide should be about when you first met them, the classes you took with them and any additional information regarding your interactions.
- Additional information that could be helpful to share with your letter writers:
 - Any experiences you had that prepared you for your educational and career goals
 - Any unique circumstances or hardships you have overcome while pursuing your goal (share only to your comfort level)

Step 4: Follow-up and say “Thank you”

- A few days before the agreed upon deadline for the letter, email the letter writer with a friendly reminder of the approaching date and the submission process.
- Once you receive confirmation of a submitted letter, send a “Thank you” note or email to each letter writer.



Questions? Contact the Knowlton Center for Career Exploration!
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