

## Letters of recommendation:

### Everything you always wanted to know but were afraid to ask!

If you would like to hear a podcast about letters of recommendation, please go here: <https://shows.acast.com/triton-tools-tidbits/episodes/rec-letters>. Below is more detailed information.

#### Why to ask for letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation are a requirement for various research, scholarship, and employment opportunities. These letters—generally written by teachers, mentors, and employers—detail your unique skills and fit for a particular opportunity. Letters of recommendation can seem to be an intimidating obstacle, especially if it is your first time requesting such support. However, **it is important to recognize that letters of recommendation are simply one part of any given application process, and that your recommenders will likely be enthusiastic to support your success.**

Try to avoid thinking about letters of recommendation as inherently burdensome for your recommenders. **By providing your recommenders with plenty of advance notice, maintaining clear & professional communication, and following the other guidelines detailed below, you can make the process a meaningful experience that strengthens your mentoring relationships.** Keep in mind that while your recommenders have many prior commitments, they are also deeply committed to you and are eager to support your success. Writing letters of recommendation is an inherent aspect of many jobs, and in most cases a potential recommender will be delighted to support a worthy candidate.

During remote learning, navigating this process can present unique challenges, particularly in terms of maintaining clear communication. However, requesting letters of recommendation can be a wonderful opportunity to build and strengthen your mentoring relationships. By following the guidelines listed here, you will make this process a positive one for all involved.

#### Whom to ask for letters of recommendation

When considering whom to ask for letters of recommendation, the most important thing is to carefully **read the requirements for a particular application.** Some opportunities may require a recommender who can attest to your general academic achievements and promise, and allow any person who has served an educational role in your life to support your application (e.g. a high school teacher, guidance counselor, teaching assistant, college professor, and/or administrator). Other opportunities—especially research fellowships and graduate school applications—will likely require that you solicit recommendations from college professors who can speak about your specific qualifications and

aspirations regarding research. Furthermore, certain opportunities might prefer that your recommender be a scholar and/or a professional within a particular field or discipline.

A common scenario: you know a teaching assistant who you think would be willing and able to write you a strong letter of recommendation, but the opportunity for which you are applying requires a letter from a professor. In this case, you can ask whether the teaching assistant and primary professor for the course would be willing to co-author a letter a recommendation to support your application.

It is perfectly acceptable—and rather common—to ask the same people to submit multiple letters of recommendation on your behalf for different opportunities. In most cases, recommenders will keep a copy of the most recent letter(s) they have written for you, and make the appropriate updates and revisions before submitting to a subsequent opportunity.

Keeping all of this in mind, you might consider developing your own team of 2-4 recommenders—depending upon your field of study and your future plans—who can speak to various aspects of you and your skills. For example, you might have a dynamic mentoring relationship with one mentor that spans several years, and this person can therefore attest to your growth over time. You might have another mentor with whom you have worked closely on a specific research project, who can thus speak in a detailed way about your qualifications in a certain field. You might have yet another mentor with whom you have collaborated to organize social events on campus, who can accordingly testify to your leadership qualities. There is no single, correct way to approach developing these relationships and building your team of potential recommenders. The most important thing is to remember the positive impact that multiple mentors will have upon your journey.

## **How to ask for letters of recommendation**

Once you have an idea of who would be able to write letters of recommendation for you, you will want to reach out to ask whether they would be able to do so. It is important to keep some general ideas in mind when asking people to write a letter of recommendation:

- Send a professionally worded email. Emails provide the recipient with the opportunity to consider the request and look at their other commitments prior to responding. If you have the opportunity to interact with potential letter writers in person or via Zoom, you can also ask then. In any case, be sure that the interaction has a professional tone.
- Ask well in advance of when the letters are due. Ideally you want to provide the potential letter writer(s) with at least a month's notice, although there may be times when it is not possible to do so. The more time letter writers have, the more flexibility they will have to work writing the letters into their schedule.
- Ask if they would be able to write a letter that is both strong (provides detailed information) and positive. There may be several reasons why people would not be able to write a strong letter for you. For instance, they may feel that they do not know you well enough to write an informative letter. Alternatively, their schedule might be such that they would not be able to spend adequate time to write a strong letter by the deadline. You should ask explicitly whether they would be able to write a strong letter.

- Frame the wording as a request, rather than as an assumption that the recipient will be willing to write on your behalf. It can be helpful to acknowledge that due to schedule constraints or other issues, they may need to decline your request. In general, if someone indicates they would not be able to write a strong letter for you, thank them for considering it and move on to someone else (rather than trying to convince them to write you one anyway). If you have had discussions with potential letter writers about the fact that they will support you in this way, it is possible that their schedules have changed so you still should approach the situation as a request. In a case like this, when you reach out with the specific request you can say something along the lines of “You and I had previously discussed the fact that you might be able to support my applications to [xxx], and I wanted to update you and let you know that I am now in the process of applying. Would it still work with your schedule to write letters of recommendation for me?” Do not provide potential letter writers’ names or contact information to the places where you are applying until you have received confirmation that they are able to write a letter for you.
- Include a brief indication of the types of opportunities to which you’ll be applying. Let the potential letter writer know whether you are applying to graduate school, an internship, a summer research opportunity, a job, or some other endeavor. This can be conveyed with just a few words (e.g., “I am in the process of applying to graduate school, and I was wondering whether you would be able to support me by writing a strong letter of recommendation”).
- Include information about the next step(s). Indicate that if they are able to write a strong letter for you, you will provide them with additional information (see below). Ask if there are any materials that would be particularly helpful for them to receive. Most programs will ask you to provide them with your letter writers’ names and contact information; the programs will then contact the letter writers directly. Again, it is very important that you do not provide potential letter writers’ names and contact information until they have agreed to write a letter for you.

## What to provide to letter writers

Once people have agreed to write letters of recommendation for you, you want to make it as easy as possible for them to write strong letters. Below are some materials that you should provide to your letter writers. As noted above, ask if there are any materials that they would like, as there may be additional resources that they find helpful.

- An overview of the types of programs to which you are applying and an indication as to why you are doing so. For instance, if you are applying to summer research opportunities, let your letter writers know why you feel that participating in such a program would help you grow as a researcher and allow you to explore your passion for research. You want to make sure that your letter writers have an accurate understanding of why you are applying so that they do not inadvertently say something that would not be helpful to the admission committee in determining whether you are a good fit.
- Information about strengths that the letter writer would be in a good position to address. As noted above, it is likely that your interactions with different letter writers have provided each of them with unique insights as the qualities that make a strong candidate. It is fine to let a letter

writers know that there are particular things you hope they might be able to address in their letters.

- A spreadsheet with information about the places to which you are applying. It is tremendously helpful for letter writers to have a list of the places to which you will be applying, and a spreadsheet can be a wonderful way to organize this information. Include the following fields:
  - ◇ The name of the institution to which you are applying.
  - ◇ The name of the specific program to which you are applying. This can be particularly useful so that letter writers can tailor the beginning of their letter to the specific program, rather than saying “To whom it may concern:”
  - ◇ The type of program. You may be applying to a variety of programs in several fields; for instance, you might be applying both to programs in cognitive science and programs in neurosciences. For any given opportunity, it is helpful for the letter writer to know these specifics (a letter to a masters program might include different information than a letter to a Ph.D. program). If the opportunities to which you are applying vary on several dimensions, you might want to have a column for each (e.g., one column that specifies field, one that specifies degree). It is likely, however, that between the name of the specific program and a general column for “type” of program, you will be able to capture all the relevant information. Depending on how different the programs are, it may be worth noting elsewhere as well (such as in the email to the letter writers). Information which is supportive of an application to one type of program may not be as supportive of an application to another type of program. For instance, you may be applying both to medical school and to Ph.D. programs. A letter to a medical school might focus on evidence that demonstrates you would be a good clinician, whereas a letter to a Ph.D. program would be more likely to focus on your passion for research.
  - ◇ Due date(s) for the letter(s)
  - ◇ Any notes about the opportunity which you would like the letter writer to know. For instance, you might indicate that you are particularly interested in the training model available through this program, or that the multidisciplinary perspective offered by the program is appealing to you.
- Your personal statement and/or research statement. If you have completed portions of your application by the time you are sending the information to your letter writers, it can be helpful for them to have. However, do not delay in sending other information to your letter writers.
- Letter of Recommendation Release Form. UC San Diego now requests that letter writers have a Letter of Recommendation Release Form from anyone for whom they are writing a letter ([https://evc.ucsd.edu/\\_files/UCSD-Letter-of-Recommendation-Release-Form.pdf](https://evc.ucsd.edu/_files/UCSD-Letter-of-Recommendation-Release-Form.pdf)). Complete this form and provide it to your letter writers.

In addition to providing your letter writers’ names and contact information, you will most likely be asked whether you waive your right to see the letters written on your behalf. Essentially, in some instances you may have the option of indicating that you would like to be able to have access to your letters of recommendation. **It is best to WAIVE this right**, which means you would not have access to the letters. Although it is human nature to be curious about what is in your letters, when review committees are reading your letters they tend to feel that letter writers are more likely to

provide honest and accurate information if they feel they can do so candidly. If a review committee receives a very positive letter, but the applicant decided to not waive their right to see the letter, the committee might think that the letter writer was influenced to write a more positive letter than otherwise would have been the case. In other words, the positive letter might not be given as much weight as it otherwise would.

## How to follow up with recommenders

One of the most seemingly uncomfortable aspects of this process can following up with somebody who has agreed to write you a letter of recommendation, but has not yet done so with a deadline fast approaching. Please be assured: this does not need to be an awkward or unpleasant experience. By navigating this process with courtesy and professionalism, you will generally have a successful outcome.

Above all, lead with gratitude. Although writing letters of recommendation is an inherent aspect of many academic and professional jobs, you of course want to express your appreciation to the people who have agreed to support you in this way. Gratitude is exhibited not only by saying “thank you,” but also through clear and prompt communication at every step.

Here are a couple tips for reminding your recommenders that a deadline is approaching:

-Write and deliver them a thank-you note, either by email or—preferably if possible—by hand. In any scenario, you want to thank your recommenders properly and express your appreciation for their time and support. If you plan ahead, you can deliver your thank-you notes several weeks *after* making the initial request, but also several weeks *before* the approaching deadline. This is a great way to simultaneously show your gratitude and provide a gentle reminder.

-If the submission deadline is approaching quickly and you are unsure of the status of your recommendation, consider sending a polite and brief reminder message to your recommender. They will appreciate your kindness and your brevity, which will make both responding to your message and submitting your letter of recommendation as easy as possible. Consider adapting the following template:

*Dear Dr./Professor/Other Title [Name],*

*Thank you again for agreeing to write me a letter of recommendation in support of my application to [opportunity]. I know you have a busy schedule, and I greatly appreciate your making time for me.*

*As a friendly reminder, all pieces of my application are due [date] by [time] at the following link [include link if applicable]. Please let me know if you have any remaining questions or if there is any additional information you need to proceed with submitting your letter of recommendation.*

*Sincerely,*

*[Your name]*

Again, the most important aspect of this process is to plan ahead, which will make each of these steps as enjoyable as possible.

## **Additional Resources**

There are a number of resources available online which contain advice about letters of recommendation. Links to some of these resources are included below. Keep in mind that these sites contain general information and may not be applicable to every application or opportunity. Be sure to review the expectations for any specific opportunity to which you are applying.

Finally, if you have additional questions about letters of recommendation, please reach out to us at the Academic Enrichment Programs (AEP) office. We are happy to help!

Information about how to request a letter of recommendation and how to write a letter of recommendation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nCY6kvC480>

Information about applying to NIH internships; much of the information generalizes to other settings (e.g., applying to graduate school or summer research programs):

[https://www.training.nih.gov/assets/Writing\\_Successful\\_NIH\\_Applications.pdf](https://www.training.nih.gov/assets/Writing_Successful_NIH_Applications.pdf)

Information about a number of elements of applying to grad school, including letters of recommendation. This site gives an overview and includes links to more detailed information about specific components (e.g., how to select someone to write a letter, best way to request a letter of recommendation):

<http://gradschool.about.com/od/admissionsadvice/a/overview.htm>

Information about letters of recommendation. Includes links to additional articles and resources:

<https://www.gradschools.com/get-informed/applying-graduate-school/recommendation-letters>

Information about letters of recommendation. Includes links to additional articles and resources:

<https://www.accepted.com/grad/letter-of-recommendation>

Webinars from the 2020 NIH Virtual Summer Enrichment Program curriculum:

[https://www.training.nih.gov/2020\\_nih\\_virtual\\_summer\\_enrichment\\_program\\_curriculum](https://www.training.nih.gov/2020_nih_virtual_summer_enrichment_program_curriculum)