

So you need a letter of recommendation: An FAQ

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Why a letter? So what is the purpose of a letter of recommendation, anyway? Well, potential employers, graduate programs, and fellowship committees can find out information about you in exactly two different ways: they can either ask *you* for the information about yourself, or they can ask *other people*. Most applications will gather information both ways. They'll ask you for a personal statement, a resume, a transcript, portfolio, or some other artifact that you've had a hand in making. Don't worry, you'll get a chance to represent yourself. (Be sure to edit your Facebook profile so that you don't over-represent yourself, though.) And many times they'll ask for one or more letters of recommendation. Consider the effect that a statement's source has on its credibility. Read the following, nearly identical sentences and think about how each sounds.

From the applicant: I am awesome and capable and smart and dependable and mature. You should hire me.

From a recommender: This student is awesome and capable and smart and dependable and mature. You should hire her.

Coming from the applicant, the claims sound unaware, self-possessed, and a little dubious. Would you trust someone who wrote that about herself? On the other hand, when the recommender says the same thing, the sentence sounds inspired.

What does a letter of recommendation say? Applicants should strive to be informative and thankful in their part of the application—though it really depends on what you're applying for. (Fellowship applications should be written differently than graduate school personal statements, for example.) Recommenders should write like proud parents talk. Because letters of recommendation automatically sound more legitimate because of their source, they can include information that is never appropriate in a personal statement. When I agree to write a letter for someone, I always ask them, "What thing would you like to brag about but know you can't say yourself?" And in return I expect a specific, detailed answer, ideally supported with a short story or anecdote.

People respond to concrete details. That's a fact. It's one thing to simply state, "This student is a leader." It's another thing to say, "This student has demonstrated his leadership as the co-director of his student group for the past three years. During that time, he expanded membership, successfully restructured the organization to encourage increased participation, and brought in outside corporate financial support, which more than tripled the group's operating budget." The force of a recommendation lies largely in the recommender's ability to write down details about you. Remember that your application already includes a personal statement and resume that you wrote. In a perfect world, your recommender will be able to say things that you didn't already submit with your application. Recommenders should tell your reviewers the things that you can't. So please, help out your recommenders: give them the details.

Who should write a letter of recommendation? Now that you understand the mechanics of a letter of recommendation, it's time to ask someone to write one for you. But who? The short answer: someone who knows

you well. The long answer: someone who knows you well and is well-known to your reviewers. But if you're trying to decide between that graduate student who led your three-person sophomore tutorial or some big-name professor who taught your social analysis core in Sanders, pick the graduate student. Remember that details are the most important part of a letter of recommendation. You want someone who knows you and your details to write your letters.

Unless the application asks for one, avoid peer recommendations.

**When, what, and how
do I ask someone to
write for me?**

Courtesy counts. Writing a letter of recommendation is hard work. So be polite. Give your recommender *a lot* of warning. Ask *at least three weeks* before the deadline. I think that it's a good idea to ask your recommender in person, but an email works, too. If you do write an email, be concise, courteous, and specific. Here's an example email to a professor I know well:

Dear Professor Smarts,

I am applying for the NSF this fall. I really enjoyed the final paper I wrote on mechanical patterning for your developmental biology class this spring, and I'd like to use it as a basis for my research proposal. If you have the time and desire, I was wondering if you would write a useful letter of recommendation for my application. The deadline for submission is December 19. I would be very grateful.

Thank you very much,
Josh

→ Even if you don't have an application to fill out right now, it's *still* appropriate to ask for a letter that you can use in the future. The House acts as a permanent, free dossier service. We can keep the letters in your file for later! In this case, ask for a general letter of recommendation. In most cases, a general letter will suffice, so you can reuse them. By the end of your senior year you should have *at least three* letters on file. Be sure to get a waiver form from the House office. Fill it out, sign it, and bring it to your recommender to sign, as well. You'll thank yourself later.

Sometimes a potential recommender will decline to write for you. That's fine. In fact, it's a good thing. You want quality, detail-packed letters. Often recommenders will want to meet with you before they write. If they don't ask, offer to meet. This gives you an opportunity to politely tell your recommender the things you'd like her to say in her letter. Above all, maintain decorum.

**How do I access my
letters of
recommendation?**

The House office stores all the letters you give them in a file forever. That's right, forever. To retrieve them, go to the House office and fill out the form to request a copy of your letter. Be sure to give yourself *at least one week* lead time before the deadline. Also bring a self-addressed, stamped envelope for every letter you wish to send out. If you want a copy to include with the rest of your application materials, bring a plain, unstamped envelope instead. Always bring an envelope. The House office will return the envelope with a copy of your letter, and the envelope itself will be signed and sealed to prove authenticity.

What next? Congratulations! Your application is in. Courtesy doesn't stop now. Write a thank

you note to everyone who helped you during the application process. If someone was particularly heroic, send flowers or candies. Your job is always to be informative and thankful. Don't skimp on thanks. You want people to feel good that they wrote you a letter of recommendation. So give them a reason to feel good.