

What We Need to Write You a Thorough Letter of Recommendation

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The bottom line is that letters of recommendation are extremely important to your future, and the best letters are those with plenty of positive details about your successes. If all I can say about you is that I vaguely remember you in a course and that you were a “fine student,” you might as well kiss that graduate program, fellowship, and/or job goodbye. Therefore, it is in your best interest to provide recommenders with the ammunition to write a thorough and compelling letter. Do not assume that the recommender knows everything about you, your successes, and your future plans and ambitions; in fact, it’s best to assume that we know nothing about you. Remember that you are one of dozens of students who need letters of recommendation, and your letter-writer does not have all day to track down your transcript, grades, past papers, etc. Requests for letters of recommendation should accordingly be accompanied with the following packet of information:

(1) Provide details about where you are applying and why. Include any statements of intent or similar essays that reveal what you are planning to do with your fellowship, in the graduate program, and/or at the job for which you are applying. Information about the program is also useful, especially if it’s not one with which the recommender is familiar.

(2) Include a transcript showing your courses and grades. It helps if you provide a separate list of courses you took with your recommender, the grades you earned in the courses, and the topics of any papers you wrote—if they were outstanding papers, they might be worthy of mentioning in the letter.

(3) A resume or *curriculum vitae* is helpful. Your recommenders don’t know everything you do, so if you have *relevant* experiences, let us know! Show off! This is no time for modesty! Internships, papers written, collaborations with students and/or faculty, and even unusual obstacles that you had to overcome are important to tell recommenders so they can use them in their letters. Information about service or retail positions that you’ve held are not usually relevant for letters of recommendation for academic positions, programs, or fellowships. (A *curriculum vitae* is an academic resume.)

(4) Deadlines, addresses, forms, envelopes. Envelopes that are pre-addressed, forms that are already filled out with applicant information, and a list of deadlines for the letters are essential! Remember that you want recommenders to write letters about how mature, organized, and professional you are—the packet of information you give your letter writers should reflect that!

Submit your requests for letters of recommendation at least 2 weeks— and preferably a month—in advance of their due date!!

Note About Bad Letters and How to Avoid Them: If you ask someone to write a letter of recommendation, they will almost invariably say “yes” (for faculty, it’s one of our obligations). However, what you *really* are interested in is a *good* letter of recommendation. It is therefore legitimate for you to ask your potential recommender if he/she will write you a *good* letter. An honest recommender will tell you if they respect your past performance enough to write a positive letter; they should also tell you if they have reservations about your performance and/or abilities. Although it’s a bummer if you receive a negative response to your inquiry, it’s obviously better for your future plans if you get letters from recommenders who have a positive impression of you and can write a supportive letter!